

## **What Motivates your Project Team?**

### **What you think might just be Wrong! <sup>1, 2</sup>**

**David L. Pells**

#### **Introduction**

It has now been well established that leadership skills can be key to project management success. Most project management bodies of knowledge, standards, textbooks and training courses now highlight leadership as one of the most important aspects of managing projects or project teams. In other words, leadership is a critical success factor for project managers.

Leadership involves many things, but clearly understanding motivation is an important aspect of project leadership. Program and project managers need to understand what will motivate their teams, individually and collectively, to higher performance. Executives need to understand employee motivation in order to implement policies and actions to stimulate performance and increase program, project and organizational success. And we all need to understand what motivates ourselves, often the first step in knowing what might motivate others.

Motivation is an important factor for leaders of all types of organizations, but especially project-oriented organizations, and even more so for program and project managers for whom positive performance is so critical.

But what are the leading motivators for project managers and project management professionals (and team members)? Is it recognition, more rewards (e.g. more money), happy workplace, less stress, or what? We all have our ideas and opinions, perhaps based on our own experiences, theories or books we have read. Maybe motivation varies by project type, industry, location, culture or other factors. In all likelihood, if you are an executive, program manager or project leader, you have made some decisions in order to motivate others and in order to move your program or project forward (or to avoid disruption, problems or for other reasons).

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<sup>1</sup> *Editor's note: Second Editions are previously published papers that have continued relevance in today's project management world, or which were originally published in conference proceedings or in a language other than English. Original publication acknowledged; authors retain copyright. This paper was originally published in the March 2010 edition of PM World Today. It is republished here with the author's permission.*

<sup>2</sup> How to cite this paper: Pells, D. L. (2023, 2010). What Motivates your Project Team? What you think might just be Wrong! originally published in the March 2010 edition of PM World Today; republished in the *PM World Journal*, Vol. XII, Issue III, March.

As a student and teacher of project management, the importance of both leadership and motivation has been clear to me for many years. I was therefore drawn to a fascinating article on this very topic in the January-February edition of the Harvard Business Review (HBR) by Amabile and Kramer. The conclusions and message were, on the surface, somewhat surprising; but they also carry an important message for project managers. [1]

### **The HBR Article on Leadership**

According to the authors, “in a recent survey we invited more than 600 managers from dozens of companies to rank the impact on employee motivation and emotions of five workplace factors commonly considered significant: recognition, incentives, interpersonal support, support for making progress, and clear goals. Recognition for good work (either public or private) came out number one.” [1]

This should not be surprising. How many times have we seen or heard authors, educators, consultants or experts extol the importance of rewarding our project managers or recognizing project team members as key to motivating them to higher performance?

Well, again according to Amabile and Kramer, the managers in their survey “were dead wrong.”

The authors describe their recently completed multiyear study “tracking the day-to-day activities, emotions and motivation levels of hundreds of knowledge workers in a wide variety of settings.” What they found was that the number one motivator for workers is the very item that most managers ranked last – **progress**.

“On days when workers have the sense they are making headway in their jobs, or when they receive support that helps them overcome obstacles, their emotions are most positive and their drive to succeed is at its peak.” [1]

This is very good news for project managers, and very significant. When I read these few paragraphs, I thought, “Wow, this is great! This is directly related to program and project management.” Think about it. If the number one motivator is helping your team make progress, then this is something you can easily act upon. You can set policies, establish procedures and take actions that help move the project forward. You can help remove obstacles. If you actually help your project teams make progress, that success might even be multiplied.

### **Look to ourselves**

It makes sense to me. I love the feeling of making progress, finishing an activity, completing a project. Rewards are good, but not if I am behind schedule, have not completed an objective, run out of money, or end up with an unsatisfactory result at the end of the day.

## **Breakthrough Idea**

This article was included in a section of the January-February HBR entitled “Breakthrough Ideas for 2010”. It was breakthrough idea number 1.

Other good points in the article:

- “The key to motivation turns out to be largely within your control. What’s more, it doesn’t depend on elaborate incentive systems. (In fact, people in our study rarely mentioned incentives ...)”
- “Managers have powerful influence over events that facilitate or undermine progress. They can provide meaningful goals, resources, and encouragement, and they can protect their people from irrelevant demands. Or they can fail to do so.”
- “Scrupulously avoid impeding progress by changing goals..., being indecisive, or holding up resources...”
- “Negative events generally have a greater effect on people’s emotions, perceptions and motivation than positive ones, and nothing is more demotivating than a setback...”

## **Conclusion**

This is all extremely relevant for project management, and good news for program/project managers and executives in project-oriented organizations. Help your project managers and teams make progress. Establish a culture of teamwork and helpfulness. And if there is more work to do, pitch in, roll up your sleeves, join the team. Not only will your co-workers appreciate it, the work will get done faster.

Of course, after the project is complete, celebrate! Reward your team! A little recognition is still appreciated.

## **References**

[1] Amabile, Teresa M. and Kramer, Steven J.; “What Really Motivates Workers: Understanding the power of progress,” *Harvard Business Review*, January-February 2010, pp. 44-45.

## About the Author



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**David L. Pells**, PMI Fellow, HonFAPM, ISIPM, PMA, is Managing Editor and publisher of the *PM World Journal* ([www.peworldjournal.com](http://www.peworldjournal.com)) and Managing Director of the PM World Library ([www.peworldlibrary.net](http://www.peworldlibrary.net)). David is an internationally recognized leader in the field of professional project management with more than 40 years of experience on a variety of programs and projects, including engineering, construction, energy, defense, transit, technology and nuclear security, and project sizes ranging from thousands to billions of dollars. He occasionally acts as project management advisor for U.S. national laboratories and international programs, and currently serves as an independent advisor for a major U.S. national security program.

David Pells has been an active professional leader in the United States since the 1980s, as founder and president of several PMI chapters, founder of PMI's first SIG (Project Earth), and member of the PMI board of directors twice. He was founder and chair of the Global Project Management Forum (1995-2000), an annual meeting of leaders of PM associations from around the world. David was awarded PMI's Person of the Year award in 1998 and Fellow Award, PMI's highest honor, in 1999. He is also an Honorary Fellow of the Association for Project Management (APM) in the UK; the Instituto Italiano di Project Management (ISIMP) in Italy; and Project Management Associates (PMA) in India.

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