



Motivating your employees: lessons from the movies

By Martin Pollins

You don't have to be rocket scientist to know that motivation of employees has been a key issue in business for a long time. It's because:

- a) as business competition has become tougher both in domestic and international markets, companies have looked for new ways to increase their bottom line results;
- b) downsizing and other "leaner-company" methods means that corporations must achieve more with less resources;
- c) an obvious, yet typically underused, corporate asset is its human resources - employee motivation is important since it's one of the factors

Self-motivation Vs "couldn't care less" attitude

Different people have different personalities. For example, some people are self-motivated whilst others display a "couldn't care less" attitude to life and its challenges. Coming from a humble background myself, I suppose you could say I've achieved quite a lot in my life so far. But, strangely, I don't see it that way at all. In fact, I really believe that I could have done more. My mother was a driving force. I never gave her the credit for that. She did influence me a lot. But so did my father - he had certain simple values but they were strong values. Like honesty and integrity. He probably wouldn't have admitted to owning them - but that's how I see it. The culture in our household was a challenging one. There was no room for whingers and if you adopted a "couldn't care less attitude" you'd probably get a whack round the head. So maybe personality can be taught - or is it a genetic thing (or both)?

The effects of positive motivation

Some 12 years ago, I attended a seminar at Roffey Park Management Institute in Sussex. The topics were wide and varied and offered an opportunity to think about management issues in a new light. One interesting idea concerned the role of music to enhance the effects of positive emotion - in other words, motivation. Because of direct connections with the brain, when information is linked to music there's a good chance that the brain will encode it in its long-term storage system. Recollection of happy times and circumstances act as a stimulus for motivation. At the other end of the scale, absence of music can retard child brain development. One of the reasons that music affects learners is that the processing of music involves both sides of the brain.

Messages from the silver screen

Many feature films arouse emotions and contain profound messages of motivation. They provide stories about characters with specific motivational needs. Revenge is often used as the protagonist's motivation in many films. It's a powerful emotional force fixing direction towards a clear goal to achieve justice to counter an earlier injustice (often in the opening scene) which generates audience empathy for the character. This incident, along with the protagonist's attempts to bring the perpetrators to justice, forms the foundation of his motivation.

For example, the desire for security is one of the primary motivations of characters in popular films, as Judy Garland's Dorothy showed in The

Wizard of Oz. Dorothy's feelings of insecurity create her motivation to find somewhere without problems but, when she finds that Oz is a dangerous place, she is motivated to return to the safety of her home.

When there's love and belonging, there's the need for self-esteem and the need for esteem from others. These motivations are displayed by Michael J Fox playing Marty in Back to the Future - his humiliation and lack of self-esteem is based on his need to belong to a family he can be proud of.

In Raiders of the Lost Ark, Indiana Jones (Harrison Ford) obtains ancient and rare objects of historical value for his museum, a selfless act of motivation that produces good for the community.

In Star Wars, the search by Luke Skywalker (played by Mark Hamill) for self-esteem and a father figure to provide him with a sense of security motivates much of his behaviour.

Revenge plays a role in the motivations of Bruce Wayne (Michael Keaton) in Batman - Bruce Wayne needs to overcome his feelings of helplessness that he experienced as he watched his parents being murdered when he was only a young child. The Joker wants esteem from others: he wants his "face on the one-dollar bill".

In Ghost, Sam (Patrick Swayze) needs to save the life of the woman he loves (Molly, played by Demi Moore) and the friend that has helped him (Oda Mae Brown, played by Whoopi Goldberg). Molly needs Sam's love

and doesn't want to let him go.

In *Beverly Hills Cops*, Eddie Murphy (as Axel Foley) is motivated to find who murdered his friend, Mike Tandino.

In *Home Alone*, Kevin McCallister (played by Macaulay Culkin) needs his family to love him. But he also needs self-esteem because of his inability to take care of himself, and he needs to safeguard his home against the burglars.

Revenge was the motivation for Andy Dufrene (Tim Robbins) in *The Shawshank Redemption* - wrongly imprisoned for the murder he didn't commit of his wife and her golf-club lover. Prison Warden Norton used Andy to run his financial scam empire but Andy gets his own back - the Warden's money, shoes and respect disappeared down the dank hole Andy used to escape to Mexico. Red Redding (Morgan Freeman), another *Shawshank* inmate, achieved self-actualisation in being able to survive on the outside with Andy's help - even after 40 years of imprisonment.

The role of management in motivation

Talking about 40 years, this year is the 40th anniversary of Mario Puzo's *The Godfather* - one of the most unexpected books on management practice and corporate governance ever to be published. In between the violence, murder and decapitated horses, it describes the establishment of the business empire of Don Vito Corleone (played by Marlon Brando), a poor Sicilian immigrant in New York. Don Corleone uses strong man management skills - and a little boardroom bullying - to build the biggest olive oil company in the US, with interests in gambling, racketeering and corruption off-balance sheet. To facilitate a culture of change, he motivates his most senior managers to explore any new business opportunities that arise. The March 2004 edition of *Finance Director* included an outstanding article on this and it's well worth reading it (http://images.vnunet.com/bif_static/pdf/fd_march_p28_32_mafia.pdf)

So, if you are to motivate your employees, what emotions are the most likely to trigger a response from them? One thing is for sure, money alone isn't the answer.

Maslow and Motivation

Abraham Harold Maslow was an American psychologist. He is noted for his conceptualisation of a "hierarchy of human needs", and is considered the founder of humanistic psychology.

Maslow's hierarchy of needs focuses ultimately on the person striving to attain "self-actualisation" (reaching their full potential). He acknowledged that there are lower, yet stronger, needs that must be satisfied before needs higher on the hierarchy are activated.

After the basic physiological needs of hunger, thirst and sex, humans have a terrific need for personal safety.

Next on the Maslow's hierarchy is the need for love and the feeling of belonging to a person or group. A good example of this is Elliott's need to be accepted by Michael's (played by Robert Macnaughton) friends in *E.T.*, Elliott (played by Henry Thomas), a lonely child, was abandoned by his father and has been excluded by his brother's friends. It's his need for friends that motivates his relationship with *E.T.*

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