

# Motivating Employees Without Carrots and Sticks

Try these motivators instead.

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**C**arrot-and-stick management is an old approach to motivating others that relies on the promise of rewards and punishments. It is a simple, straightforward strategy that has been used to motivate employees, but also to motivate children to eat their vegetables and puppies not to have potty accidents in the house. In limited ways, carrots and sticks continue to be used in some workplaces today. But does this mean that carrot-and-stick management is the tool that healthcare leaders should use to motivate their employees? As the title of this article suggests, probably not. There are better ways to motivate healthcare employees than to dangle carrots in front of them and threaten them with sticks. But before we get into those, let's explore how carrot-and-stick management works and what's potentially wrong with it.

## What Is Carrot-and-Stick Management?

Carrot-and-stick management is an employee motivation strategy that involves offering a "carrot" (a reward for a desired behavior) or a "stick" (a negative consequence for an undesired behavior). It is based on the belief that employees will be motivated by hope and fear—hope of earning

rewards and fear of being punished. As Robinson<sup>1</sup> explains, "The carrot and stick approach has long referred to how we motivate people at work, with the assumption being that people are like donkeys who love carrots and hate getting smacked on their behind by a stick." Rewards alone are not sufficient in carrot-and-stick management; the threat of punishment also is necessary. As Mehta<sup>2</sup> says, "If people fail to respond to carrots in a desired manner, sticks

can be administered to do the trick." In fact, in the business world, carrot-and-stick management is sometimes called "velvet glove" and "iron fist" management, suggesting that leaders must have both a soft and hard strategy in their toolkit and that they must know when and with whom to use each one.

For carrot-and-stick management to work, both the reward and the punishment must be compelling. As *A Lean Journey*<sup>3</sup> suggests, "Reward and punishment are significant motivators only if the reward is large enough or the punishment sufficiently severe." That means that employees will not be motivated by inconse-

quential rewards, rewards they don't personally value, punishments that lead to mild inconveniences, and demerits that have no consequences. However, as Indeed<sup>4</sup> argues, "As long as your reward is attractive enough and your consequence is undesirable, this method can help motivate employees to achieve your preferred outcomes."

Carrot-and-stick management often is used in learning and behavior modification. For example, B.F. Skinner famously demonstrated a carrot-and-stick approach to learning in his experiments with rats. Skinner found that a laboratory rat will learn

*Continued on page 126*



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*Motivating Employees (from page 125)*

to press a bar to receive a food pellet (carrot), but it will also learn to press a bar to stop an unpleasant electrical current (stick). Skinner's approach, called operant conditioning, suggests that behavior that is reinforced (rewarded) will likely be repeated, and behavior that is punished will occur

In fact, carrots and sticks can thwart self-motivation and discourage the very higher-order thinking and behaviors we desire in employees. The approach offers extrinsic reasons for behavior change, rather than encouraging intrinsic motivators. As Price<sup>6</sup> suggests, carrots and sticks don't trigger the "true motivator" of an individual. This can lead

the approach in the American workplace and consider what has changed since then. Arguably, rewards and punishments have been used to motivate people's behaviors since the beginnings of human history. However, carrot-and-stick management became highly popular in the American workplace during the Industrial Revolution, when it was used to motivate faster, higher, and more accurate outputs in factories and on assembly lines. Carrots and sticks were effective in motivating better performance for limited, specific, and often repetitive tasks. As *A Lean Journey* explains, they motivated better performance for typical tasks of the early 20th century that were "routine, unchallenging, and highly controlled."

For these tasks, where the process is straightforward and lateral thinking is not required, rewards and punishments provided a small motivational boost without harmful side effects, *A Lean Journey* argues. However, jobs, workplaces, and employees in the later 20th and early 21st centuries have changed dramatically. Many jobs today, and certainly those in healthcare, require employees in many cases to work with intangibles and to deal with great complexity. Healthcare employees need to see the

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less frequently. As McLeod<sup>5</sup> explains, "Operant conditioning can be used to explain a wide variety of behaviors, from the process of learning, to addiction, to language acquisition." It also has practical applications that can be used in classrooms, prisons, and psychiatric hospitals, McLeod says.

#### **What's Wrong with Carrot-and-Stick Management?**

If carrot-and-stick management can motivate desired behaviors, why would healthcare executives choose not to dangle carrots and threaten sticks when trying to motivate their employees? Unfortunately, operant conditioning fails to take into account the role of inherited and other factors in human behavior. The use of carrots and sticks in a laboratory with rats fails to provide a complete explanation of what we can predict will work best in the real world with human beings. As McLeod says, "Some psychologists argue that we cannot generalize from studies on animals to humans as their anatomy and physiology is different from humans, and they cannot think about their experiences and invoke reason, patience, memory, or self-comfort." But even if carrots and sticks can motivate employees to behave as we like, there is a serious downside to carrot-and-stick management; it doesn't work when we want employees to use their problem-solving, creativity, critical thinking, and analytical skills.

to myriad issues and often, "the motivation method is not sustainable," Price says. And this is not just an opinion. As Pollack<sup>7</sup> reports, "Recent studies indicate that this approach simply does not work," citing several research findings to support this assertion. As Pollack concludes from her survey of research, "While this approach [carrot-and-stick management] may work temporarily, it will not have lasting effect and may make things worse."

Marciano<sup>8</sup> paints an even grimmer picture. Marciano says, "Forty

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years' worth of research tells us not only that traditional reward and recognition programs aren't effective; they actually decrease the overall morale of a workforce. And yet companies continue to spend their money and time investing in the worst." The absolute worst recognition strategy, in Marciano's opinion, is employee-of-the-month programs. "If you really want to do something to demotivate your team, go ahead and put that one into place," Marciano says.

There is good reason that carrot-and-stick management may demotivate employees. To understand, we must go back to the origins of

bigger picture, anticipate and head off myriad problems, juggle multiple tasks and stakeholders, and think on their feet to solve problems they've never encountered before. They work in the arena of human services, with all its complexities and challenges, not the production and assembly of consumer goods.

Managers cannot watch healthcare employees all the time the way floor managers watched factory workers a hundred years ago. In healthcare today, we want and need employees who are self-motivated to do what is best or right even when

*Continued on page 127*

*Motivating Employees (from page 126)*

no one is watching them or measuring their minute-by-minute output. Unfortunately, carrots and sticks can be a turnoff to the best and brightest employees who do not need or want to submit to a bean-counting reward and punishment strategy.

Another drawback of carrots and sticks is that they shine a spotlight only on what is being measured, rewarded, and punished, not on the full job. They can encourage your employees to hyperfocus on the one thing that will get them their reward or avoid punishment, to the detriment of other important aspects of their jobs. As *A Lean Journey* warns, carrots and sticks “reduce creativity and foster very short-term thinking at the expense of long-term results. They extinguish intrinsic motivation; diminish performance; crush creativity; crowd out good behavior; encourage cheating, shortcuts and unethical behavior; become addictive; and foster short-term thinking.” The bottom line is that carrot-and-stick management doesn’t work unless it’s applied to simple tasks with simple outcomes, *A Lean Journey* says. The more complex the task, the less successful the carrot-and-stick method becomes. Today’s problems in health-care organizations are certainly complex and many of them have multiple solutions, some better than others. *A Lean Journey* adds, “Rewards [and punishments] will narrow our focus and limit our possibilities and aren’t effective with today’s problems.”

Much has changed since carrot-and-stick management arrived on the management scene. Today, we believe that motivation can be fostered, but that it comes from within. We also believe that leaders can help their employees to become and stay motivated by creating and sustaining the conditions that help their employees to bring their best selves to work every day. Respect, proactive communication, feedback, and capable and engaged leadership work far better than narrowly focused punishments and rewards. For these reasons, carrot-and-stick management cannot and should not be the primary or sole tool healthcare leaders use to

motivate their employees, if they use it at all. Fortunately, there are better strategies.

### **Twelve Motivators That Work Better Than Carrots and Sticks**

Leaders usually have good reasons for asking employees to change their behavior. However, most employees will do what they do for their own reasons, not for ours. This is true even when our reasons are logical, our arguments are well sup-

ported, and our intentions are good. As long as employees have free will and do not feel coerced, they must be self-motivated before they will do what we ask of them.

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ported, and our intentions are good. As long as employees have free will and do not feel coerced, they must be self-motivated before they will do what we ask of them.

Leaders can motivate their employees by talking with them about the relevance of the work they do every day. They can be proactive in identifying and solving problems for their employees and recognize employee contributions in meaningful ways. They also can share their own sources of motivation with their employees. These and other strategies can help healthcare leaders to find out what motivates their employees and to foster, reinforce, and remove obstacles to their employees’ motivation. If you’re looking for ways to create an environment where your employees are highly motivated to do their best work, the 12 strategies in the following section will work far better than rewards and punishments. As Lai<sup>9</sup> suggests, “Put away the carrots and sticks and have meaningful conversations instead. You’ll be well on your way to leading a highly motivated team.”

#### **1) Focus on your own motivation.**

A good place to begin is to explore what motivates you to excel in your own work. Obviously, you are in your leadership position today for a reason. What is that reason? What motivated you to do what you did

#### **2) Model and talk about your sources of motivation.**

Employees are highly attuned to whether leaders have a genuine connection to the work. As Lai suggests, “Employees feel motivated when their leaders are motivated.”

Share with them: What aspects of your role do you enjoy? What makes you proud to lead your team? What impact can you and your team have on others both inside and outside the organization? How can you adapt your role to increase your energy and enthusiasm?

#### **3) Find out what makes your employees tick.**

Consider that not everyone is going to be like you. Some of your employees may be looking for recognition, work-life balance, and respect. Others may be seeking opportunities for personal growth and learning, increased responsibility, promotions, and raises. Still others may be looking for ways to exercise their creativity, have fun at work, feel part of a team, or spend their time and energy helping others. And, of course, there will be employees who are motivated by a combination of these desires, or others.

Once you’ve considered your own motivations, create opportunities that allow you to learn more about what motivates each of your employees. One-on-one conversations and surveys can help. So, too, can well-designed team-building exercises that get employees to share with you and with one another what’s most important to them. Don’t assume that you know what will motivate your

*Continued on page 128*

### *Motivating Employees (from page 127)*

employees. Spend time with them and create opportunities for them to tell you.

As Lai says, “I’d like to suggest a new dialogue that embraces the key concept that motivation is less about employees doing great work and more about employees feeling great about their work. The better employees feel about their work, the more motivated they remain over time.” Ask your employees: What makes you feel great about your work right now? What would make you

feel even better about it? Then remember that there is no one right answer to these questions. As Marr<sup>10</sup> suggests, “One size does not fit all when it comes to workplace motivation.” For one employee, getting to leave early for a job well done is a motivator, but for another, it’s simply a handshake with a genuine, “Thank you! Your contribution was essential to our success,” Marr says.

#### **4) Listen to your employees with your ears, eyes, and gut.**

Pay attention to what your employees tell you, how they tell you,

what they don’t say, and how you feel both emotionally and physically while you’re listening to them. Ask your employees follow-up questions to draw them out and to get them to elaborate. Explore your employees’ ideas and consider their suggestions carefully, as they may provide additional clues about what motivates them.

#### **5) Check your own biases.**

If you find yourself resisting or negatively judging employees who tell you what motivates them, take

*Continued on page 130*

## How to Motivate Generation Z and Millennial Employees

**R**ecognition at work is an effective motivator for employees of every generation, including those who are the youngest members of your team. As Jenkins<sup>11</sup> suggests, “Even though Millennials and Generation Z may expect a different pace and medium for recognition than other generations, recognition is still universally expected across generations.” Yet employee recognition is not universally practiced, at least not sufficiently for Generation Z and Millennial employees, Jenkins says. In fact, there is often a disconnect between how often leaders believe they are recognizing their employees and how often employees believe that they are being recognized. Jenkins says, citing a survey of research studies, “More than 80 percent of supervisors claim they frequently express appreciation to their subordinates, while less than 20 percent of the employees report that their supervisors express appreciation more than occasionally.”

Jenkins refers to this disconnect as a “recognition gap” and warns that it is likely to widen especially as more and more Generation Z employees enter the workforce. These younger employees have new appetites and expectations for how, when, and why their managers should recognize their efforts, Jenkins says.

In the past, employees’ expectations for recognition were yearly, quarterly, or at best monthly. However, thanks to the convergence of mobile technology and on-demand information, Generation Z employees expect their recognition to be more personal, helpful, and frequent, putting it closer to weekly. Generation Z employees more so than older employees are likely to measure their success based upon the recognition they receive from managers and their co-workers, Jenkins says. Frequent and specific recognition is very import-

ant to their motivation, performance, and loyalty.

Considering the influx of more and more Generation Z employees into the workforce, leaders will want to be mindful of how often they recognize their employees and beef up their efforts. Jenkins suggests that leaders “fill the air” of their organizations with gratitude and appreciation and that they reward their employees frequently for their loyalty and high performance. Then, when they do recognize their employees, Jenkins suggests, they will want to be sure to communicate the following three things, which will resonate especially well with Generation Z and Millennial employees:

**1) I recognize your good work.** Employees want to know that you see what they are doing. Don’t assume that they know that you see them. Tell them. Be very specific about what you are recognizing.

**2) I value you.** Of course, you can communicate that your organization values the employee’s contributions. However, as a leader, valuing the employee personally can help him or her to feel more of a connection, which is very important. Jenkins reports that Generation Z employees are more likely to work harder and stay longer at an organization if they have a supportive manager to whom they feel a connection.

**3) We’re going places together.** Help the employee to feel that he or she is working well with you, and that he’s also part of a team that has an exciting, bright future ahead. That feeling of going to worthwhile places together may be the single most important key to unlocking Generation Z and Millennial loyalty and performance, Jenkins says. **PM**

## *Motivating Employees (from page 128)*

time to figure out what’s going on. Do you trust that the employees are telling you the truth, or could they just be telling you what they think you want to hear? Do you feel that their motivators are inherently petty, selfish, shallow, unrealistic, or just plain wrong? You will find it very hard to motivate your employees if they are keeping the truth from you or if you are biased against what motivates them. Work through this until you feel that your employees are being sincere about what motivates them, and you can think about their motivators without negativity and bias.

### **6) Help your employees to understand how their work matters.**

It’s sometimes hard for an employee to see that the quality of one’s work makes a difference. As well, an employee may feel that anyone could do his job, or that s(h)e has nothing special or unique to contribute. Share the context of each job and help your employees to see and appreciate the relevance of their roles and what they bring to them. As Lai suggests, “There is no stronger motivation for employees than an understanding that their work matters and is relevant to someone or something other than a financial statement.”

To motivate your employees, start by sharing context about the work you’re asking them to do. Why do you do what you do? What is the employee doing as a member of your

organization and team that others rely upon? Who benefits from the work and, specifically, how? What does success look like and mean for your team and for each employee? What role does the employee play in delivering on that promise? What do you see in this employee that is special and valuable? Stories, even hypothetical ones, can help you to illustrate the importance of how much the work matters, or who would suffer if the work were not done well. As Marr suggests, “People with a pur-

pose are more resilient and focused, so it’s important for companies to be sure their employees understand how the work they do improves people’s lives.”



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ly encounter roadblocks and challenges whenever you undertake bold new initiatives or ask anything of them that will be significant, scary, and difficult. That’s when their motivation can wane. As Lai explains, “Employees are motivated when they can make progress without unnecessary interruption and undue burdens.” Recognize that challenges can materially impact their motivation. Then be proactive in identifying and addressing them. Talk with your employees about what they believe may make their work difficult, frustrating, or cumbersome. Ask them: What can we do to ease the burden? What roadblocks may surface? How can you/I/we knock them down? How can I help you to see trouble coming and pave the way for your success, without my becoming a nuisance or interfering with your work?

### **7) Build or rebuild trust.**

Trust is a foundational component to any relationship, one that is essential for employees to be motivated. As Marr explains, “When employees feel that they aren’t trusted to do the jobs they are getting paid to do because they continue to be micromanaged, it squelches any motivation they have.” Likewise, employees who do feel trusted to do their jobs and who believe they can trust their leaders are likely to be much more highly motivated, Marr says. If you

### **8) Anticipate roadblocks.**

Your employees will undoubtedly

### **9) Create a healthy, collaborative work culture.**

Employees who feel that they are part of a team and who get to build collaborative working relationships with others are likely to feel highly motivated. As Marr explains, “This sense of belonging to a tribe where you depend on others, and they depend on you, keeps the motivation high.” Spend time, energy, and resources to foster teamwork and

*Continued on page 131*

## Motivating Employees (from page 130)

to reinforce excellent, collaborative work. In addition, foster a culture of self-care. Organizations that have the personal health and well-being of their employees at the top of their list attract self-motivated job applicants, Marr says.

### 10) Provide supportive feedback.

Employees are often motivated by the quest to be the best versions of themselves. As Marr says, “They don’t want to be complacent, but want to continually grow and face new challenges.” Their motivation is likely to increase when they receive helpful and supportive feedback that will help them improve. As Marr explains, “Most employees want to get better and progress in their careers, and when a supervisor shows interest and shares ideas on how to improve, most are highly motivated.” Become masterful at highlighting both your employees’ excellent work and what they can do better. It will also be important for your employees to see a path to career advancement within your organization, and to have your feedback and guidance about what they can do to position themselves well on that path. However, don’t overplay that card. Doing so will turn the possibility of a promotion into just another carrot. As Marr says, “If they view their job as a pit stop on the road to another opportunity elsewhere, their motivation will deflate for the job they’re doing now.” Talk about the future, but don’t let that be the employee’s only source of motivation. Focus also on the positives of the position the employee has today.

### 11) Recognize and appreciate contributions.

Nearly everyone likes to be recognized and praised. Nonetheless, Lai says, leaders consistently underestimate the power of acknowledgment to bring forth employees’ best efforts. Lai says, “Far more powerful [than carrots and sticks] is your commitment to recognizing and acknowledging contributions so that employees feel appreciated and valued.” What milestones have been achieved? What unexpected or exceptional re-

sults have been realized? Who has gone beyond the call of duty to help a colleague or to meet a deadline? Who has provided great service or support to a patient in crisis? Who “walked the talk” on your values in a way that sets an example for others and warrants recognition? As Lai suggests, “Employees are motivated when they feel appreciated and recognized for their contributions.” Don’t gush, and don’t overuse praise and recognition or it will lose its sincerity and punch. Be selective and appropriately highlight great work that merits the spotlight.

### 12) Be curious.

Being curious about your employees will be the most powerful tool you have to keep them highly motivated. This is especially the case when you disagree with the employee, when you have disagreed in the past, or when you feel that the employee has not lived up to expectations or let you down. As Marciano suggests, “It’s one thing to say, ‘Hey, you should actively listen.’ But if you take it to the point of, ‘I’m curious about the next words coming out of this person’s mouth,’ this really changes the way you listen to others.” Let your curiosity take you to wherever the employee wants to go. If you can remain curious and keep your biases and prejudices in check, you will have the best chance possible of uncovering and resolving problems, teasing out nuances of meaning, and finding the most effective ways to heighten the employee’s motivation. In fact, curiosity may even help you to turn a lackluster, jaded, turned off employee into one who is highly motivated to excel. **PM**

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