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EMPLOYEE MOTIVATION AND OFFICE SPACE

By Meghan Koransky

For anyone who has ever worked in an office, the movie *Office Space* is relatable. Set in the 1990s, the movie centers around Peter Gibbons (played by Ron Livingston), who works as a programmer at a tech company named “Initech.” Peter hates his job and his condescending boss, Bill Lumbergh (played by Gary Cole).

Despite changes to technology, management strategies and work environments, *Office Space* remains relevant to the experiences employees encounter at work. This article explores takeaways about motivation from some of the movie’s most quotable moments.



“My only real motivation is not to be hassled; that, and the fear of losing my job. But you know, Bob, that will only make someone work just hard enough not to get fired.” – Peter

Motivation can be extrinsic (external) or intrinsic (internal). Extrinsic motivation is driven by outside rewards and risks, such as money, praise, or not wanting to get fired. When employees are mainly motivated by extrinsic factors, they tend to work just hard enough to achieve a reward or avoid a risk.



“What if—and believe me this is a hypothetical—but what if you were offered some kind of a stock option equity sharing program. Would that do anything for you?” – Bob

“I don’t know, I guess.” – Peter

Carrot-and-stick approaches to performance management rely on extrinsic motivators, such as praise, financial incentives, and fear of reputational damage. Initially they are effective. Their efficacy fades with time as employees determine a particular risk or reward is no longer worth the effort.

Burnout happens when extrinsic rewards are the main motivators. Over-reliance on extrinsic rewards shifts employees’ attention away from what matters most, such as becoming a top-notch brief writer. Performance goals are no longer worthy of pursuing on their own; they are boxes to check and get a reward, such as ramping up billable hours for a bonus.



"I Believe You Have My Stapler." – Milton

Intrinsic motivation, on the other hand, is an internal drive that empowers employees to perform at their very best. It is fueled by passion, genuine interest, and personal satisfaction. Intrinsically motivated employees are more dedicated and persistent because the task itself creates joy. For example, an intrinsically motivated employee may lose track of time researching a legal area because of interest or enjoyment. High performers are often intrinsically motivated; they tend to be creative, productive, and engaged.

The key to increasing intrinsic motivation is helping employees fulfill three basic human needs — autonomy, mastery, and purpose.

Autonomy. Employees want control over their professional journey. Compressed deadlines, back-to-back meetings, and micromanaging behaviors erode trust and productivity. Leaders can strengthen autonomy by:

- Entrusting employees to decide when, where, and how they work.
- Delegating decision-making authority so employees determine how to perform tasks and set priorities.
- Prioritizing open communication and acting on employee feedback, such as suggestions for streamlining intake.
- Equipping managers with coaching skills so they guide employees rather than always providing answers.



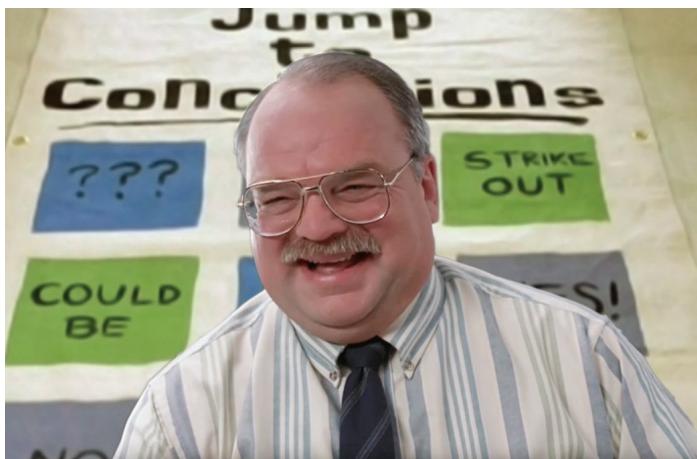
"I have people skills. I am good at dealing with people! Can't you understand that? What the hell is wrong with you people?" – Milton

Mastery. To be motivated, employees do not need to be experts. They do need to have the skills and training necessary to do their jobs. Managers can help by allowing employees to share where they are struggling, without fear of reprisal.

Level of difficulty matters. Assignments that are overly demanding are demotivating; so are assignments that require little effort. Stretch assignments with the right amount of challenge help employees feel focused and engaged.



"Hello Peter, what's happening? I'm gonna need you to go ahead come in tomorrow. So if you could be here around 9 that would be great.... I'm also gonna need you to go ahead and come in on Sunday too, kay. We ahh lost some people this week and ah, we sorta need to play catch up." – Bill



"It was a "Jump to Conclusions" mat. You see, it would be this mat that you would put on the floor .. and would have different CONCLUSIONS written on it that you could JUMP TO." - Tom

For many high-performers, opportunities for training and advancement outweigh compensation. Leaders can energize employees by:

- Encouraging mastery in areas employees already enjoy. Instead of mainly concentrating on skill gaps, help employees play to their strengths.
- Discussing performance with intention. Schedule one-on-one sessions each month or quarter, interspersed with feedback in real time. Carve out a separate time to discuss compensation so conversations stay focused on performance.
- Offering continuous learning opportunities. Overlay on-the-job learning with additional training, such as lunch n' learns, skill development workshops, mentoring, online resources, conferences, and coaching.
- Celebrating skill development with team recognition. Acknowledging employees' hard work to develop skills inspires everyone to continue learning.



"Human beings were not meant to sit in little cubicles staring at computer screens all day, filling out useless forms and listening to eight different bosses drone on about mission statements." - Peter

Purpose. Managers need a call-to-action beyond, *"What is good for the firm?"* Meaningful work and feelings of appreciation inspire employees to contribute to their team's success. Opportunities to strengthen purpose include:

- Clearly articulating the firm's vision and values, highlighting how each employee supports its overall success.
- Understanding what drives employees and connecting this (e.g., finding creative and practical solutions) to the firm's *raison d'être* (e.g., helping lawyers make the right decisions for themselves and their clients).
- Entrusting employees to customize job descriptions so roles are better aligned with individual strengths and interests.
- Making every employee feel included and valued, such as organizing happy hours to welcome new colleagues or staying late to pitch in with time-sensitive matters.