

# Learning Tree Management Insights

Expert Advice from Today's Top Professionals

## Five Steps for Motivating Technical Teams

- Anita Caputo, author, and authentic management and work-change resiliency expert

If you want your team to be motivated, then you have to motivate the individuals, as Paul discovered when he inherited three new team members, each with different needs.

Returning from a two-week vacation, Paul discovered that his company had reorganized the IT division, and he had just inherited three additional team members—all of whom were known for not being team players. A seasoned and well-respected manager, **Paul knew that if he wanted a motivated team, it was his job to find ways to motivate the individual members of the team in ways that were meaningful to each employee.** In order to find out what was important to his three new team members, he arranged a time to meet privately with each one—Martin, Tyler and Ambra—to learn more about their personal needs.

### Motivating Individual Team Members: Martin, Tyler and Ambra

During a conversation with Martin, who is in his fifties, Paul discovered that until the tech bust, Martin had dreamt about retiring at age 55. Now, Martin will be grateful to retire by age 65. Paul also discovered that Martin isn't interested in learning leading-edge technologies, when Martin stated "What's the point in learning something that you won't get to use much?" But Martin had other assets. His age and experience with the company had given him a perspective and knowledge that

younger team members didn't yet have. Paul learned that Martin would find coaching some of the junior people on the team not only motivating and fun, but also an honor. Paul decided to offer Martin a coaching role, mentoring junior people like Tyler, for example.

Tyler had recently graduated from the local university with a degree in computer science and was anxious to advance in his career. As Paul got to know Tyler, he discovered that Tyler never felt valued for his good ideas. If given the right opportunity, Tyler wouldn't hesitate to leave the company and find a more rewarding position elsewhere. So Paul decided he needed to offer learning opportunities to Tyler to keep him motivated. Other team players thought Tyler was naive, entitled to advancement but not willing to do the hard work to earn it. By contrast, Tyler believed his previous manager was a slave driver, and didn't respect Tyler's desire to balance work with his personal life. Paul recognized Tyler as a generation Y worker who, unlike Martin, wanted recognition and opportunities to grow his skill set. Paul also learned that Tyler wished for a more acceptable "work/life" balance. So, Paul decided to extend some flexible hours to Tyler—and also to Ambra.

Ambra is in her thirties and married with two young children. Paul learned that she does an excellent job and is committed to doing her job well. Because she shares responsibility for dropping off her children in the morning and picking them up at the end of the day, flexibility is important to her. She usually arrives for work at 8:00 a.m., but on days when she has to drop off the kids, she doesn't arrive until 9:00. Normally, she's able to work late, but if it's her turn to pick up the kids, she leaves at 4:30. Matters that involve her children are Ambra's priority, even if they fall during work

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hours. Paul knows that Ambra's work ethic means she will work extra time when required, if Paul is flexible and gives Ambra the time she needs to care for her family. Paul decided to work with Human Resources to give Ambra the flexibility she needs to do her job well, and ensure that a good employee is retained.

Paul knows that building his plans to motivate each individual is only the beginning of having a motivated team. Keeping his team motivated and getting the results he expects in the long term requires maintaining both open lines of communication and a work environment that is free from bureaucracy and petty politics. Begin to build a motivated team at your workplace by reading about the following five steps you can take to motivate the individuals on your team.

Motivating a technical team means finding out what motivates the individuals that make up the team—and the easiest way to find that out is to ask them. However, there are five key steps that are true when motivating any technical employee.

### 1. Assign fun work.

... But recognize that what's fun for one individual (you) isn't fun for everyone. Fun work means having to meet reasonable expectations that are challenging but not overwhelming or unachievable. Being challenged makes work fun and interesting instead of dull and monotonous, because fun work usually means that employees are learning on the job. Challenging work makes them think and stretch their skills in ways they may not have tried before. Your employees may be working on the edge of their comfort zone or even outside it—the key is that they have the confidence to achieve what they set out to do.

### 2. Keep skills sharp.

Technical workers need to feel competent doing their jobs. Many (but not all) want to stay current and be marketable so they can continue to make good money and be attractive job candidates—they want to continue to stay in demand. This is a win-win scenario for the organization, because valued employees have current skills, and current skills make employees value their jobs. Some individuals, closer to retirement, may feel they have given the organization a lot of blood, sweat and tears over the years and have earned the right to be more particular about what they do. In addition, older employees may have less energy now than when they were younger. The skills they want to advance may not be in the latest technology but may be more general skills that will carry over to their "post-work" life.

### 3. Give recognition—always.

People need to feel good about themselves and their work. They want to demonstrate their skills and know that their skills are contributing to the team and organization's success. Gen Y workers (those born in the 1980s and 1990s) have especially high expectations for their careers; they are known for wanting high-paying, higher-status jobs. Providing recognition for work well done can address those status issues. Tell your workers specifically how they, personally, are doing good jobs. Help individuals feel valued for their contribution. Providing flexibility in a job to support a team member's needs is another way of showing that you recognize their contribution and are willing to work with the team member to support them.

### 4. Communicate freely.

Actively solicit individuals' ideas. Keep everyone "in-the-know". Make people feel important. Tell your team everything you can tell them even when they don't need to know. Giving information freely and soliciting opinions makes individuals feel like they are important parts of the team.

### 5. Walk your talk.

Operate with honesty and integrity. Ensure that your actions and the actions of the management team are congruent with your messages: pay attention to words, tone, and body language. People value fairness, honesty, integrity and sincerity. They need clear, consistent and achievable performance goals. Walking your talk ensures that team members will value the recognition you give and trust what you communicate to them.

### About the Author

**Anita Caputo** is an expert in authentic management and work-change resilience, and focuses on solving real business dilemmas with common sense "how-to" strategies. She is author of *Promote Yourself* and coauthor of *Learn to Bounce: from a high-tech layoff to your ideal work*. She is also a management instructor at Learning Tree and teaches Course 290, "Management Skills," Course 222, "Leadership Skills: Success through Teamwork," and Course 902, "IT Relationship Management." E-mail: [anita@bigpictureinstitute.com](mailto:anita@bigpictureinstitute.com)