

Let's Get Engaged and Motivated:

How 20 Minutes Can Make a Difference In Your Relationship with Your Employees

By Alan Vengel

Sarah, a top supply chain manager at a major corporation, had just saved her company several million dollars by spearheading a new global process improvement effort. She should have been on Cloud 9; instead, she was telling me that her job just didn't seem to be a "good fit" any more, and that she wanted to start "looking around for something different."

I asked her why.

"Well," she replied, "I just got my bonus for this project, but it seemed rather empty. No one even said 'thank you' to me, or asked what I wanted to do next. They just didn't seem as if they really cared."

I've been hearing stories like Sarah's for a long time now, and the refrain is always the same: no one has time to really get to know their talent and what engages them in their work. Yet simple, focused 20-minute conversations that let your employees know you value them and care about their professional development can make a world of difference.

Getting to know your talented people at a deeper level is paramount for an engaged workforce. The cost of not getting to know them can be huge. An employee may be willing to do more, but may grow increasingly tired of not being adequately recognized and appreciated for his or her work. Even if an employee doesn't physically leave the organization, his or her performance will suffer as the individual becomes increasingly disengaged.

Authors Beverly Kaye and Sharon Jordan-Evans in the book *Love'em or Lose'em: Getting Good People to Stay* (Berrett-Koehler), reported on a survey of more than 20,000 people who were asked what kept them at a company and engaged them there. The top answer was "Career Growth and Challenge" followed by "Exciting Work" and "Great People." Money didn't make the cut. Kaye and Jordan-Evans contend that the reason most managers don't give people what they want is that they never bother to ask what is important to them. An essential part of a 20-minute motivation conversation is asking. In my research I have found there are four main reasons why leaders don't ask:

1. "We don't have time..."
2. "We can't do anything about it anyway..."
3. "We'll set up an expectation that we won't be able to fulfill and people will be disappointed..."
4. "We don't know how. It's awkward for us to start such a conversation."

Now more than ever time is at a premium. Managers are responsible for more people but also are taking on more work themselves. Spending an hour talking about career growth and professional development, when they think they won't be able to do anything about it anyway, seems like a very long time. However, research shows that if a conversation is focused, conscious, and purposeful, 20 minutes is more than enough time for a meaningful interaction.

To make the most of 20-minute motivating conversations, remember these five tips:

1. **Stay focused on issues that are within each person's control:** Identify what is controllable, and make that a priority, versus some "pie in the sky" goal neither of you can achieve.
2. **Stay positive but realistic:** Acknowledge what is not possible or working now, and focus on what can work in the future.

3. **Stay on the big picture** : Show perspective by presenting the long-term, big picture scenario, then move to a doable action step that will bring you both to an ultimate goal.
4. **Stay away from false promises**: Promises of future pay raises or promotions may lead to disappointments if they don't materialize or measure up. Focus on what you actually can do. Your sincerity in trying to make a difference is critical.
5. **Stay on track with what is best for this individual**. Learn what engages each individual and work on that. Reschedule when you cannot make a conversation and check in on how the process is going after a meeting. This shows employees that these 20-minute conversations mean something to you, that they're not just another "Flavor of the Month."

How can you motivate and engage your people to be more active, more open, more productive? It's easier than you think. Being open, being honest, and being a good listener are the **"Three Big Truths of Motivating Your Employees."**

Being honest: Being a leader does not mean being the right person for every job----or every situation. Suggesting someone with more expertise in a certain area is not passing the buck--- it's just being honest about your strengths and weaknesses. Admit what you don't know or what makes you uncomfortable. For example, one of your people may be having a problem with another manager with whom you have a personal relationship. It's perfectly appropriate for you to direct the person to someone else in the company for assistance with this issue.

Being open: By being open to discussion, you reveal that you want to hear what is going on and you are inviting conversation. Show your curiosity by asking open-ended questions that don't require multiple-choice answers to limit the response in any way. Questions that require more than just a "yes" or "no" answer can often be the most revealing in mentoring conversations. Open-ended questions such as "What are your thoughts on.." or "How might we go about this?" invite an open response.

Being a listener: Most managers and employees will admit that they don't really understand each other well, but they want to. Listening closely can help you check your understanding of what an employee is saying, and help you guess at underlying goals, needs and fears. Communication is a road travelled by two people. The destination should be a compromise of both, not a bending of the wills from one to another, The leader must have the patience to let the employee participate and present their point of view fully. Only when both parties are engaged in the conversation will true engagement in the work follow.

Alan Vengel is the founder of Vengel Consulting Group (www.vengelconsulting.com), a global consulting firm. He is the author of the new bestseller, *20 Minutes to a Top Performer* (McGraw-Hill) as well as *The Influence Edge* and *Sprout!*, both published by Berrett-Koehler. Vengel has been teaching workshops in Fortune 1000 companies for the past 25 years and is a sought-after speaker on improving talent engagement, influence and negotiation.