

## Motivating Staff

by Sue Baldwin

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When you started in your current position as director, did you receive a job description that included “motivate staff”? Probably not. However, experienced directors report that having a motivated staff is vital for having a quality program.

Within this article you will be able to read about how different people are handling this topic; a list of dos and don'ts; and specific suggestions that are recommended for your consideration.

When exploring the topic of motivating staff by interviewing staff, students, and directors; reading articles in books, magazines, and the Internet; and reviewing material that I use when offering training and consulting, I have come up with various techniques that are effective with early care and education professionals at various stages of their development.

All of the following people (who are currently working in child care at different levels) were asked the same question: “What is it that motivates you in your job?”

Nancy (who has been working as a preschool teacher for two years): “I do not need my director to say anything or do anything to motivate me. If I end the day feeling good about what I have done with the children, then I feel good about my job. I do not need external motivations.”

Paul (who has been working in a school-age program for six months): “I like to hear positive things from parents. When parents come back and tell me how much their child is enjoying their time with me at Adventure Club, then I feel good about what I am doing in my job.”

Alicia (who has been working in a child care center for three years): “My director does really fun things at our monthly staff meeting. There are door prizes from local merchants, and there is always food at the evening meetings. Although I do not like working in the evening, I do like the possibility of winning something.”

Wanda (who has been teaching preschool for over 30 years): “What motivates me is knowing that the program I work for is parallel with my values about the program. I feel good working in a quality program that goes out of its way to provide what children need. I have a passion for what I do and cannot imagine working in an environment where I do not value myself and what I do.”

Alicia (who has been working in a Head Start program for two years): “I feel good about my teaching when my site supervisor and parents make positive comments to me. I also enjoy receiving notes that I can keep about how people appreciate me and my teaching abilities.”

Gabriella (who has been working in a child care facility for six years): “Our program budgets money annually for staff to attend conferences. Because I have taken so many local training in-service classes, I like to go and meet other child care professionals at conferences that are held regionally and nationally. There is a plan for how staff are picked to attend the conferences so that not the same people attend. After we go to the conferences, we are expected to come back and report on our attended sessions to the other staff in our program. We also write brief articles that go in our program's newsletter for the parents.”

I am sure that you can relate to many of the staff comments above. Individuals are motivated by different things and in different ways and as you can see by some of the staff you supervise, for some people motivation comes from within. The director begins the process of staff motivation by evaluating what motivates their staff. Ask the staff to rank the following topics from 1 to 12 as far as what motivates them in their job. In addition to asking the staff to do this exercise, you also might want to evaluate what motivates you in your position:

- money
- promotion
- families
- loyalty to director/owner
- working conditions
- interesting work
- making a difference with children
- appreciation
- personal development
- recognition
- flexibility of work
- other

You might need to individualize motivation of staff related to your questionnaire findings. We often assume that if staff receives more money for their work, they will be motivated to do a better job. This is an assumption and can be clarified with the previous questions. Twyla Dell writes about motivating employees, "The heart of motivation is to give people what they really want most from work. The more you are able to provide what they want, the more you should expect what you really want, namely: productivity, quality, and service." (*An Honest Day's Work*, 1988). This theory is certainly applicable in the field of early care and education.

There are some dos and don'ts pertaining to motivating your staff:

#### **Do:**

Recognize that you don't have all the answers. *Directors can spend hours trying to think of what would make the staff feel more valued, but we need to ask them for their ideas.*

Offer constructive feedback on a regular basis. *People need to know that you are aware of what they are doing in their jobs. Make sure that your*

*comments are specific, rather than general (I appreciated the suggestions that you offered to Taylor's mother about biting.).*

Praise in public (staff meetings, newsletters, bulletin boards). *As part of the monthly newsletter, highlight staff who has gone above expectations with encouraging staff morale and motivation.*

Encourage staff to recognize their peer's positive behavior. *In the staff area, have something on the wall (pertaining to the season, like a tree with apples or snowflakes) where staff can write notes of appreciation to their peers that recognize positive support ("Josh, thanks for helping out with zipping kids' jackets today.").*

Take time to find out what makes others tick and show genuine caring. *Listening is about understanding how the other person feels — beyond merely the words that they say. Find the time to truly listen to what your staff are saying about themselves.*

Have staff participate in developing motivators. *Develop a "Sunshine Committee" with a small percentage of your staff who would be responsible for planning social events (once a month) for the program staff.*

Lead, encourage, and guide staff — don't force them. *Encourage and help your staff to grow and develop, and performance improvement is inevitable. Lead by example and encourage them to have ownership in the program by supporting each other.*

#### **Don't:**

Make assumptions about what motivates other people. *Ask staff what motivates them. Given time to reflect on this answer, most people will be able to give you the information you need to offer positive motivation.*

Assume others are like you. *What motivates you as a director will not necessarily be the motivator that is needed for your staff.*

Forget to empower staff who are ready for added responsibility. *Make sure that your staff feel they have job descriptions that give them some autonomy and allow them to find their own solutions.*

**"What is it that motivates you in your job?"**

# Beginnings Workshop

## The director begins the process of staff motivation by evaluating what motivates their staff.

Force people into things that are supposedly good for them. *Make sure that staff are adequately trained before adding more or new job responsibilities. If people feel unskilled with new tasks, they will feel overwhelmed and resentful rather than empowered.*

Neglect the need for inspiration. *Continually evaluate what inspires an individual to feel better about themselves, thus more motivated to perform at a higher level. If you cannot instill that inspiration, offer the opportunity for them to experience it with a mentor, or at a conference with a motivational speaker.*

Delegate work — delegate responsibility. *Delegating should not be dumping! The person who is being delegated to should feel ready to assume the added responsibility so that they leave the experience with positive feelings.*

For those directors who are looking for some specific tangible motivators to offer staff, please consider any of the 20 following suggestions:

- Write the staff person a personal note catching them in the act of doing something positive.
- Gift cards from local merchants that can be used for:
  - Perfect attendance
  - Tasks completed on time
  - Cleaning the storage room
  - Door prize at staff meeting
- Highlight a “staff of the month” on the bulletin board.
- Give a dollar amount that can be spent for new equipment for their room.
- Offer an unscheduled break after a difficult situation within their classroom.
- Close the program to have a staff retreat at a local motel or bed and breakfast.
- Offer in-service training during staff meetings.
- Chocolate!
- Close the program during low attendance (before Labor Day or during the holiday season) so staff can redesign their classroom.
- Solicit positive comments from parents and pass them on to the teachers.



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- Send staff to conferences and have a staff meeting following to report on new ideas that can be incorporated into the program.
- Develop a mentorship program for new and experienced staff.
- Encourage staff to pursue their education, thus qualifying for possible promotions.
- During Week of The Young Child have a “staff appreciation” day.
- Have early childhood magazines available in the staff room.
- Provide staff with information about special field trip information to local attractions.
- Provide substitutes for staff so that they can observe other child care programs in the area.
- Celebrate staff birthdays at the program.
- Have a program sports team (bowling, softball, etc.) so that staff can participate in a fun activity together outside work.
- Celebrate holidays outside the program with a pot luck evening activity, which could also include different self care activities.

In addition to any of the above items, it must also be said that if the director can tap into and support the staff person’s own motivations then the director begins to help people to realize their full potential. Ultimately, motivation must come from within each

person. No director is ever the single and continuing source of motivation for a staff person. While the director’s encouragement, support, inspiration, and example will at times motivate staff, the director’s greatest role in motivating is to recognize people for who they are, and to help them find their own way forward by making best use of their own strengths and abilities. In this way, achievement, development, and recognition will all come quite naturally to the staff person, and it is these things which truly fuel personal motivation.

## References

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Kohn, A. (1993). *Punished by Rewards: The trouble with gold stars, incentive plans, A’s, praise, and other bribes*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co.

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**What motivates you?:** Take the time to increase your understanding of each teacher’s unique motivations. Use the questionnaire idea proposed by Baldwin to gather data. Then, use what you learned to make a plan to address the different motivations of each staff member.

**Implement the “Do List”:** Baldwin shares wonderful ideas for getting started. So, implement her “do list” and see where it leads.

**Consider the “Don’t List”:** Managers and administrators might want to take a look at the “don’t list” as well. There are good suggestions for avoiding these pitfalls that deserve attention.

**Tangible motivators:** What a wonderful list of tangible motivators. Baldwin gives us a jump start on considering motivation with this great list. To find out which ones teachers think might work best, ask them to rank order the list with the idea they like the best at 1 and least at 20. Use the information to individualize motivators, find trends, and identify differences in what motivates.

Using Beginnings Workshop to Train Teachers  
by Kay Albrecht