



The Virtual Leader's Most Powerful Strategy for Productivity

by Matt Johnson, Head of Motivation Science - MotiveX

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COVID-19 and the aftermath has led us to a nosedive to the bottom of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs pyramid. At its core, this tried-and-true theory of human motivation suggests people are driven to engage in behaviors by a hierarchy of increasingly complex needs.

Our sudden and massive shift to remote work environments has led to virtual leaders by the millions, seemingly all overnight. This new virtual leader now has to address uncertainty on an epic scale, with high levels of emotion and anxiety. At a time when the workforce has been displaced and is now in danger of feeling isolated, the virtual leader has the added hurdle of keeping employees engaged in their actual work, and from afar. Employee engagement is a crucial ingredient for productivity, a higher bar to clear than the psychological and physiological needs for safety, security, food and health.

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs



The new Virtual Leader should remain cognizant of what is actually important to his or her employees. This is inherently different from what the leader thinks is important. Instead, the current displacement should be viewed as **an opportunity to reestablish leadership and strengthen (and support) your team through a common experience—much like what wartime fighters share.**

Things have changed quickly on the workforce front. Nearly every non-verbal cue is now gone. Managers have now lost a vital part of the relationship with their employees. They can no longer do a “drop by” or schedule a bi-monthly, in-person “check-in” or “stay conversation.”

The most effective virtual leaders need a barometer or litmus test to measure what their employees are experiencing *on a motivation level*...a decoder ring of sorts.

Unless a manager can read tea leaves, he or she will have to quickly learn now to tap into employees' psyche, emotions and most importantly, what motivates them in their new virtual work environment.

The True Virtual Leader Understands Motivation

Whether you work at HQ or a virtual office, most of us can agree that skills, abilities and business acumen remain relatively the same. Motivation is different. With work colleagues light years from their typical office routine, engagement and productivity can fall through the floor.

The true virtual leader knows that if you align your teams with what intrinsically motivates them, engagement and productivity can actually be driven to new heights. Best of all, this type of motivational alignment drives sustainable behavior change.

For context, we define motivation as follows:

- What drives a person to take action
- The energy for that action

There are two generally accepted behavioral theories of motivation: extrinsic and intrinsic motivation.

Extrinsic Motivation:

- Performing an action to receive an external reward or outcome
- Doing something to avoid punishment or negative outcomes

Ex. Waking up early on weekdays to avoid tardiness and negative repercussions from a supervisor.

Intrinsic Motivation:

- Performing an action or behavior because of actual enjoyment
- Motivation originating from inside a person (i.e. inherent behavior) “what gets you up in the morning”

Ex. Waking up early on weekdays to arrive at work an hour before co-workers because of a passion project.

Through decades of research, we know that providing opportunities and situations for people to tap into their intrinsic motivation drives sustainable behavior change. We also know this drives discretionary effort, engagement and productivity.

To provide these opportunities, we must first understand what motivates team members. Secondly, we must know whether we are providing enough preferred intrinsic motivators to unlock maximum engagement and productivity. The difference between what the employee wants and what they are currently experiencing at work is called the **motivational gap**.



Closer Look: Motivational Gap

YOUR EMPLOYEE'S IDEAL/DESIRED EXPERIENCE

One of your star employees loves to collaborate and work in team settings. She is at her best when she can ideate, build consensus and see her ideas take shape.

Her **Motivational** score for the desired experience is 5 out of 5 for Collaboration, Learning and Recognition.

YOUR EMPLOYEE'S CURRENT WORKPLACE EXPERIENCE

Instead of her ideal state, your employee is stuck at her desk all day working on mundane tasks and rarely gets to work with others, much less on anything actually innovative.

Her **Motivational** score for her current experience is a 2.5 out of 5 for Collaboration, Learning, and Recognition.

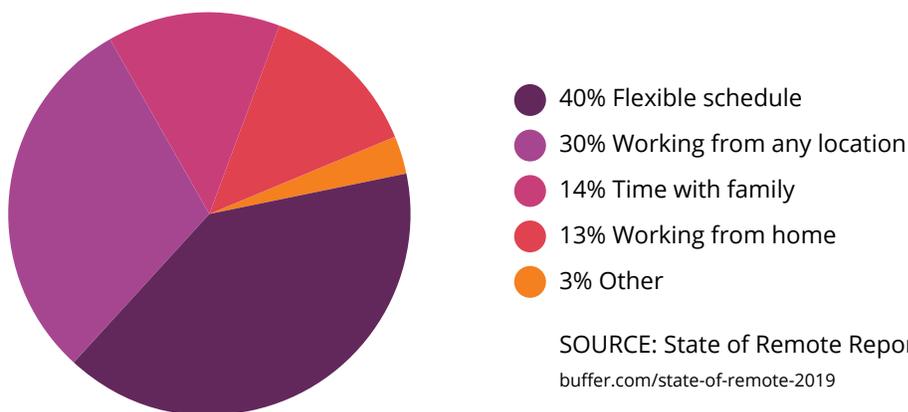
With this level of misalignment (between what an employee actually desires versus what she is experiencing), the motivation gap becomes a leading indicator and predictor of turnover intentions, disengagement, and even counterproductive behavior. This “early warning system” can and should prompt action.

By understanding motivational gaps, a true virtual leader can more easily prioritize resources, time and budget to address what really matters to team members. This allows leaders to discard one-size fits all solutions that often feel disingenuous and even desperate.

With employees now isolated and working from home, and most managers never having dealt with such extreme change, such motivational gaps are more prevalent. Meeting these needs to close motivational gaps, coupled with properly supporting the remote workforce with the right technology, policies, and tools may be the single most powerful strategy to stay competitive through the current crisis.

Forty percent of participants in a 2019 “State of the Remote” report (see chart below) stated that the biggest benefit for wanting to work remotely was to have a flexible schedule. Another 30% listed “working from any location.” Although no one’s schedule is too flexible, and given present circumstances, few if any of us can work from any location besides home, most workers are already realizing the third most cited benefit in the study: spending time with family. As much as we love our children, this benefit, however, has already hit a point of diminishing return, with untold stories of children interrupting teleconferences or asking for time and attention in other ways.

What’s the biggest benefit you see to working remotely?



SOURCE: State of Remote Report / 2019
buffer.com/state-of-remote-2019

Four Tips to Help Virtual Leaders Become More Effective:

1. **Conduct a remote workforce assessment and motivational assessment.** Now is the time to get more intentional about what truly motivates your team members, as well as which motivators are lacking in their new remote environment. Among other tools, Motivator Insights offers this ability via a six-minute survey. Virtual leaders should also spend some time assessing whether or not the right set of tools, technology and processes are in place to enable the highest level of connectivity and productivity.
2. **Easy Wins:** With an understanding of motivational gaps and remote workforce gaps, focus on “quick wins” or “low-hanging fruit” to address deficiencies. For example, if you find that your team members thrive on recognition but are no longer feeling appreciated in this remote environment, take the time to write a personal note (not email) to let each person know how important they are to the team and company.
3. **Keep it up:** Make sure that what you do to address and affect motivational alignment and productivity is done on a regular basis and not a one-off activity. Your actions must be sustainable to keep people engaged.
4. **Reassess motivation each quarter or bi-annually:** To put a quantifiable bow on your efforts, reassess team members on a frequent basis during this crisis. By measuring progress, you will have quantifiable data to know when to keep leaning into what's working well. From there, you can recalibrate as needed.

At the end of the day, companies do not need to apologize about maintaining a sharp eye on productivity, revenue, and profits during difficult times. In fact, it's in everyone's best interest to keep moving things forward. Business continuity is vital for our long-term economic health and growth. Now is not the time to retreat or even hesitate to address these core issues.

Effective virtual leaders will not require employees to run through brick walls by themselves. Effective virtual leaders simply need to remove the right bricks to create the kind of natural openings for employees to become self-motivated and productive contributors, no matter where they work from.



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