manageris

Making work more **meaningful**

Motivate employees by giving more meaning to their work

Didier Avril, série Storytelling

How to make employees more enthusiastic about their work? This is a burning question for many leaders who find themselves confronted with a morose organization where people lack enthusiasm and drive. Yet, 95 percent of employees are sincerely excited about their work when they first start a new job. After about six months, however, they begin to ask themselves, "What good is all this effort?", "What does it all mean?".

The publications we have selected analyze why it has become more difficult for people to find meaning in their work and how companies can boost the motivation of their employees. Three key messages appear to be particularly important in this regard:

- **To be truly motivated, employees must see their work as more than just a means to earn a living.**

- **The company can help give meaning to collective efforts by clarifying its own reason for being.**

- **The company can also organize work in a way that helps individuals give meaning to their work.**

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1 A need for deeper meaning

It is no secret that employees perform better when they are motivated. Not only are they more productive, but employees who are truly happy in their work tend to show more initiative, are more likely to collaborate with their colleagues, develop more constructive and satisfying relationships with clients, are more loyal to their employers, etc.

Most employees seem to be relatively satisfied with their jobs, notwithstanding dire pronouncements to the contrary in the press. In France, for example, an April 2006 CSA study discovered that 84 percent of employees were "fairly motivated" or "very motivated" to go to work in the morning, and that 96 percent felt "personally engaged" in their work. These statistics are similar to the results of studies conducted in the U.S. over the past thirty years by the authors of *The Enthusiastic Employee*. Over three-quarters of employees say that they are satisfied with their jobs – a number that has not changed much since 1970 and does not appear to vary significantly across different industries or employee categories.

Yet, satisfied does not mean enthusiastic. Ay, there's the rub! Yet enthusiasm is essential to release the energy needed to make a real difference and boost performance. The proportion of enthusiastic employees is unfortunately modest – just 25 percent of employees interviewed by the CSA answered that they were "very excited" to go to work in the morning.

The various studies conducted on the topic show that a fundamental aspect of human motivation is our ability to "give meaning" to what we do. The psychiatrist Viktor Frankl demonstrated that the search for meaning is the primary source of motivation in the life of any human being. People are willing to invest themselves more completely when they have the feeling that their efforts correspond to an aspiration bigger than just staying alive. For example, people who appreciate good food or who invite friends for dinner will naturally put more heart into preparing a meal than people who eat simply to survive. In a similar fashion, employees whose job means more to them than just doing the minimum in order to receive a paycheck at the end of the month will engage more fully in their work.

This search for meaning can take different forms depending on the person **(Figure A)**. Some people blossom because they feel proud of what they are helping to build – a feeling often

> People must feel that they are doing more than just "earning a living" to stay motivated in their jobs.

observed in well-known, reputed companies. Others are proud to surmount a challenge, like the salesperson stimulated by the thought of surpassing his or her objectives. This sense of pride can also be triggered as individuals see their work as an opportunity to develop their capabilities or expertise. Still others are motivated because the experience itself is enriching, or because they have the feeling that they are doing something to help others, etc.

Despite the many ways that people can give meaning to their work, experts point out that changes in the business environment have made this search for meaning more difficult. They underline three major transformations that contribute to the lack of enthusiasm deplored by many companies:

A different employer-employee relationship

The almost familial link that traditionally existed between the company and its employees used to be sufficient for many people to give meaning to their work. They were devoted to the company because it promised them the security of lifetime employment. In addition, work used to be a value in itself: people felt proud simply because they were working.

Economic and cultural changes in the second half of the twentieth century have changed this conception of work. The meaning conferred by the feeling of belonging to a company has greatly diminished. Moreover, the emergence of a leisure society and a more hedonistic culture has reduced the value associated with work. Today, "something more" is needed for employees to feel a sense of well being.

No longer motivated uniquely by their relationship with their employer, many employees have retreated into two attitudes:

- Increasing numbers of employees believe that the only healthy relationship with a company is transactional, i.e. "I'm working for a paycheck, and I don't expect more from my employer, who must not expect anything more from me than the work I'm paid to do." These individuals generally have other sources of motivation in their lives and therefore seek a sense of well-being outside the workplace, an attitude fostered in France by the 35-hour workweek! Although people may be satisfied with this attitude for a while, they often tend to become demoralized over time. The proportion of waking time spent at work is too high for people to feel happy when they feel that they must simply grin and bear it. Such employees become increasingly passive about their work and derive less and less satisfaction from it. In this context, they may easily become cynical or even hostile to the company.

- Other employees tend to focus on their profession. They derive pride and motivation from their professional skills, which they could devote to any employer. From a pure productivity and operational performance point of view, this attitude is not particularly problematic. On the other hand, it does not foster the cooperation or cross-company initiatives that a large number of organizations are currently trying to promote. Indeed, this attitude partly explains the prevalence of the organizational silos lamented by many. Moreover, alignment of individual initiatives is not facilitated when people lack

adhesion to the company's overall objectives, jeopardizing the ability to implement the company strategy.

Increasing difficulty visualizing the end result of professional efforts

An important motivational factor for employees is pride in their work. However, work is currently structured in a way that makes it difficult for people to see the end result of their efforts:

- A large number of tasks are dematerialized. Indeed, the share of services is growing, including in manufacturing industries. Under these conditions, employees find it more difficult to get a "real grasp" on what they are accomplishing, and do not have the means to assess the quality of their work as objectively as in the past.
- Work is broken down among a growing number of people, either to capitalize on economies of scale or due to the rising complexity of the tasks involved. As a result, in today's workplace, few people actually deliver a complete service that they can legitimately attribute to their personal efforts.
- In an environment where machines carry out more and more routine tasks, man often steps in only when there is a problem. Many find it frustrating to devote a huge share of their time to dealing with problems rather than "producing" something tangible that is clearly and visibly of some use!

A rising sense of interpersonal isolation

With the development of remote work outside the office or factory, virtual or multi-site teams, and the globalization movement, employees depend increasingly on people they may rarely see face to face. This is the classic case when people are told what policies to implement by a remote head office. However, it is also true for day-to-day decisions, for example, when one's customers are managed in part through call centers or decentralized back-offices.

One implication is that employees are asked with increasing frequency to apply decisions made by people with whom they have rarely or never spoken. This tends to foster the perception that decisions are made arbitrarily, without taking account of the knowledge or ideas that local individuals could contribute, thus sapping the motivation of those who value the idea of contributing to the company strategy.

A second impact is the loss of "collective spirit." Due to the physical distance from those who impact their work, people may easily perceive the company as a juxtaposition of discon-

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FIGURE A A variety of motivational factors

Edgar Schein, researcher at MIT, has shown that different people are motivated by very different things. Each individual therefore tends to find meaning in work in his or her own way.
Schein has identified eight major "career anchors":

"My work allows me to excel in my domain of specialization."

"My work gives me an opportunity to develop myself, learn about different business lines and manage teams."

"My work helps me strike the right work-life balance."

"My work gives me an opportunity to surpass myself."

"My work gives me the freedom to act without excessive constraints."

"My work has value because it enables me to help others."

"My work provides me with a predictable and reassuring environment."

"My work gives me an opportunity to create something new."

Technical or functional competence
Managerial competence
Lifestyle
Autonomy / Independence
Challenge
Stability and security
Sense of service
Entre-preneurial creativity

Based on *Career Anchors, discovering your real values*, Edgar H Schein, Pfeiffer, 1985.

nected units, with no underlying unity or community of interest. When this happens, people generally feel more strongly attached to their local unit, but more detached from the "larger organization" of which that unit is part.

Finally, a more serious consequence is that this phenomenon tends to make interactions between colleagues much more impersonal. This is very problematic indeed, as many employees state that the quality of professional interactions with others is one of the key factors that keeps them motivated in their jobs. Increasing distance between employees thus negatively affects one of the essential conveyors of "meaning."

To boost the motivation of employees, companies must work to cultivate an environment that will help make their work more meaningful. They can accomplish this in two ways:
- Clarify what is being accomplished by collective efforts, in order to give employees reasons to be proud of their contribution to the realization of these goals;
- Organize work to help people find meaning in their individual efforts.

2 Give meaning to collective efforts

Giving meaning to work comes down to finding a "reason to be here." We have seen that simply executing a task in exchange for remuneration is insufficient to motivate most people over the long term. Indeed, they are much

> A clear and compelling collective vision generates pride in contributing to a common goal.

more inspired when they feel part of a collective effort toward a common goal that is likely to generate a sense of pride.

This is the reason why most companies devote a lot of energy to defining their values, their purpose or their vision. Sometimes these efforts bring ironic – or even cynical – smiles to the lips of employees. The challenge is to articulate this common goal in a way that speaks to employees and can serve as a guide in their everyday work, and is not perceived as just empty rhetoric.

To do this, the company must both express its purpose, that is, the reason the company exists, and its vision, that is, what it would like to achieve over time.

▶ Articulating the company purpose

By expressing its raison d'être, the company shows its employees the bigger picture of which they are part **(Figure B)**. In adhering to this goal, employees can find justification for their day-to-day efforts, as well as a source of significant pride. For example, the purpose stated by the FNAC book and record retail chain since its founding in 1954 of "making culture and entertainment accessible to the largest number" helps store employees see their work as more than just selling products or facilitating logistics, but as a real mission of larger scope.

To be effective, the purpose must be articulated to meet three requirements:

The purpose must be expressed in a way that encourages adhesion

The purpose must be "bigger" than the mere realization of profit, which is generally insufficient to keep people motivated over the long haul. For example, reference should be made to values that are important to employees. By defining its mission as "helping people lead a healthy lifestyle," Dannon

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FIGURE B A few examples of company purposes

Any companies can claim to have a reason for being or a vocation that goes beyond the capitalistic search for profit. The author of *Crises du sens, défis du management* [The Loss of Meaning at Work: A Management Challenge], has identified three basic reasons why most companies exist:

"Change lives"	**Sony**	"Rebuild Japan and lift the culture of the Nation by developing dynamic activities in technology and industry."
	DuPont	"The miracle of science: Bring science to people to change the way they live."
"Facilitate everyday life"	**Seb**	"Improve the quality of life of consumers the world over by providing innovative products that reduce and simplify burdensome or fastidious tasks, or that give them more pleasure and fun."
	3M	"Find innovative solutions to everyday problems."
"Serve others"	**Merrill Lynch**	"Bring Wall Street to Main Street."
	FNAC	"Make culture and entertainment accessible to everyone."
	Danone	"To help people lead a healthy lifestyle."
	Merck	"Our business is preserving and improving human life."

Based on *Crise du sens, défis du management* [The Loss of Meaning at Work: A Management Challenge], Olivier Vassal, Village Mondial, 2005.

is placing the work of its employees within the context of a higher purpose that has deeper meaning than merely selling food products.

The purpose must be connected to a strongly embedded conviction

The purpose must reflect the mindset and profound convictions of the leaders of the company. Leaders are therefore advised not to define the purpose in a participative fashion, because it must represent a "certitude" that is likely to be watered down excessively by the consensual nature of participative thinking. Sony, for instance, distinguished itself with the ambition of its founders to develop products and technologies that would help rebuild Japan's economy. When the company was created, such a giant ambition could have seemed unattainable and even pretentious. However, Akio Morita and Masaru Ibuka sincerely believed in it and their conviction gave the company the needed energy to convince their employees and serve as a motor for the company's legendary growth.

The purpose must strike the right balance between precision and generalities

The manner in which the purpose is articulated is always a delicate thing.

It must be sufficiently general to leave room for initiative and individual inspiration, while being specific enough to reflect a real identity to which people can adhere. Simplicity is the watchword here. The point is to express the reason why the company exists clearly, without providing excessive details that would constrain its development. This objective is fulfilled by mission statements such as "Our business is preserving and improving human life" for Merck, or "Bring the miracle of science to the market in order to transform human lives" for DuPont.

Expressed in this way, the company purpose contributes strongly to the sense of meaning that employees derive from their work, by helping them articulate why their daily toils are justified, above and beyond just working for money.

▶ Clarify the vision of the company

To obtain adhesion, the purpose must be more than just a simple statement of intention. It must be concretely manifested by articulating a clearly identified common goal that serves as a visible beacon to guide the initiatives and efforts of the entire organization **(Figure C)**.

Company leaders must therefore express a vision that portrays the future that the company is trying to build. To

keep the energy flowing over a long period, this vision must follow the following principles in particular:

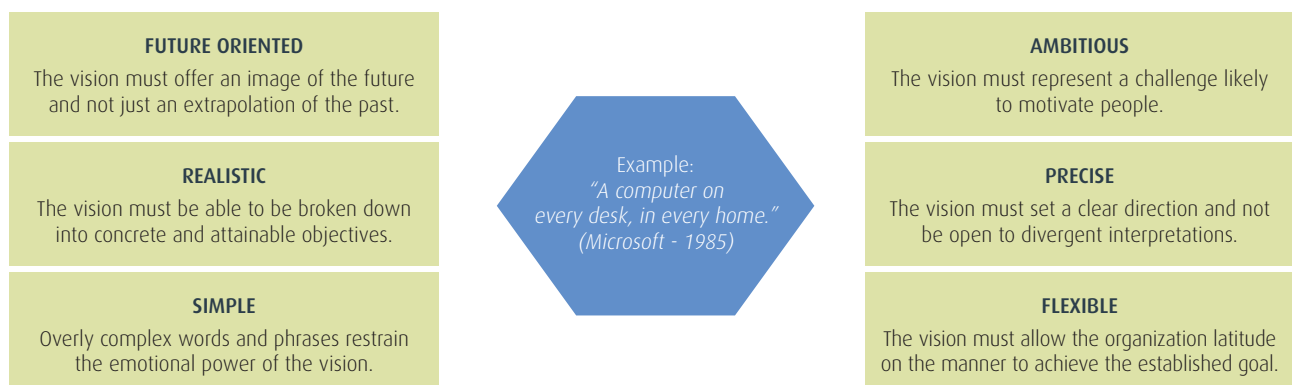### The vision must express a personal concept of the future

To give meaning to individual efforts, the vision must be credible, but still worthy of being attained. This is generally achieved by expressing a conviction about the way the industry will likely evolve, and describing the position the company would like to hold in that world **(Figure D)**. Bill Boeing, for example, built his vision around his intuition that commercial aviation would develop, at a time when planes were used essentially for military purposes. This vision enabled his employees to project themselves into a future where their company could distinguish itself, greatly stimulating their desire to gain a foothold in the market for aircrafts capable of transporting the mail, and subsequently passengers.

The vision must be long term

The vision must help employees find their bearings in an inevitably unstable environment. To do this, it must clearly define the long-term goal, while allowing for great leeway as to the means to get there. Indeed, predicting what will happen in the medium term is very difficult. The company must thus maintain sufficient latitude to adjust its strategy

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FIGURE C Build a compelling vision
To help create meaning for employees, a vision must meet several key criteria:

FUTURE ORIENTED
The vision must offer an image of the future and not just an extrapolation of the past.

REALISTIC
The vision must be able to be broken down into concrete and attainable objectives.

SIMPLE
Overly complex words and phrases restrain the emotional power of the vision.

Example:
"A computer on every desk, in every home."
(Microsoft - 1985)

AMBITIOUS
The vision must represent a challenge likely to motivate people.

PRECISE
The vision must set a clear direction and not be open to divergent interpretations.

FLEXIBLE
The vision must allow the organization latitude on the manner to achieve the established goal.

to environmental changes, without having to renege on its vision. Indeed, companies that have defined or maintained a clear heading have fewer problems getting people to accept needed changes, because they understand that these changes are part of a consistent strategy. Conversely, if the long-term vision is hazy, such changes could easily be perceived as haphazard, unwanted and uncontrolled. A stable vision defining the long-term view must therefore be combined with an evolving strategy that takes account of environmental changes.

The vision must be translatable into concrete initiatives

Just as the mission must be translated into a concrete long-term goal, the vision in turn must be broken down into an action plan that clearly demonstrates that the vision is more than just a pipe dream, but will be effectively supported by the means necessary to achieve it. An action plan must therefore be established to define the measures needed to implement the vision and guide day-to-day initiatives. The authors of *The Enthusiastic Employee* thus note that companies experiencing the smallest gap between what they would like

to attain and what they have actually achieved are those that have established large-scale programs – such as TQM or Six Sigma – which have concretely guided the actions of employees over time. Fedex, for example, managed to implement its vision of an exceptional service in which "All customers are satisfied all of the time" by defining a sufficiently precise company program of action to transform this goal into everyday reality.

The vision and the corresponding action plan are thus essential tools for managers to explain how the various initiatives undertaken are consistent – and thus meaningful.

3 Giving meaning to individual efforts

To help employees give meaning to their efforts, companies can also take measures with regard to the way work is organized, principally in three ways:

Foster the inherent interest of each job

Many seemingly minor changes can have a considerable impact on

how employees experience their work **(Figure E)**. Great care must be taken, however, to ensure that those in charge of considering the best way to organize work do not project their own expectations on others. Indeed, we have seen that motivation factors vary considerably from one person to the next. All jobs do not need to create a challenge

> **Work can be organized to reinforce individual engagement.**

or to include a strong interpersonal dimension, for example. The key is primarily to develop jobs that correspond to the profile of existing employees or people the company would like to recruit.

Generally speaking, for a job to be perceived as enriching by the majority of individuals, it must be considered as involving more than just the simple execution of tasks. For example, clearly allocating responsibility for part of a process can be a way to give meaning to the work a person carries out. It is also fundamental that employees be given an opportunity to exercise their own judgment, so that they do not feel like robots and can perceive the added value of their engagement. Leaving

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FIGURE D Help employees project themselves into the future

A FEW EXAMPLES

Boeing	Bill Boeing was the first to anticipate the role that aviation would play in carrying mail and passengers. As early as 1925, he launched the first airmail route between Seattle and Vancouver. In 1926, he created the future United Airlines dedicated to transporting passengers.
Citroën	In 1919, André Citroën launched the first mass-produced automobile in Europe. Predicting the growing role of the automobile in society, he worked to product the cheapest cars possible by capitalizing on every possible technical innovation.
Dell	Michael Dell made a successful bet that people wanted rapid delivery of computers configured exactly to their needs at a competitive price.
Renault	In the eighties, at a time when many auto makers were undertaking drastic cost cutting and focusing on reliability, Renault decided to launch "lifestyle cars" (Espace, Twingo, etc.). In another example, Louis Schweitzer announced in 1998 a project to develop a $6000 car when other auto makers preferred not to venture into emerging markets.
Nokia	In 1990, when he took the helm at Ericsson, Lars Ramqvist decided to bet everything on mobile telephony development and invested heavily in this domain.

Based on ***Crise du sens, défis du management*** [The Loss of Meaning at Work: A Management Challenge], Olivier Vassal, Village Mondial, 2005.

sufficient room for autonomy and initiative is therefore truly important. The company can also work to ensure that each job calls upon a variety of valued skills, or constitutes an opportunity to develop them.

Facilitate interpersonal relations

The study realized by the authors of *The Enthusiastic Employee* shows that a fundamental dimension of employee satisfaction is the camaraderie found in the workplace, that is, the opportunity to build enriching and constructive relationships in the professional environment. As an example, the authors cite the responses of employees who were asked what they liked most about their work: "The people I work with," "My team, made up of intelligent, nice people who work together and help each other," etc. Conversely, what employees say they like "the least" is the lack of cooperation and communication, or excessive internal competition.

Work can often be organized to foster interpersonal contact rather than create organizational silos. Physically bringing closer people who are likely to work together, designing processes not as a succession of tasks performed in isolation, but as a series of interactions, constituting diverse project teams to help employees get acquainted with new people, etc., are examples of such techniques.

Emphasize the value of the work accomplished

Employees need to feel that something has been achieved thanks to their efforts, and that this is recognized by others. Giving meaning to work therefore also requires making individuals aware of the added value of their contribution, and ensuring that this contribution is adequately recognized and fairly rewarded among employees. One effective way to do this is to clarify objectives and establish performance criteria that are as objective as possible. Likewise, the more employees are shown how their personal contribution affects the quality of the final result, the more likely they are to feel that their efforts are meaningful. Reporting on the detailed findings of a customer satisfaction survey, for example, can have a significant impact on the motivation of employees working in logistics, a call center, or even in the accounts receivable department. Finally, the company must visibly show that it recognizes the contributions of each individual. The attitude of company leaders is very important in this regard, which is why the factory visits made by many executives play an important role in communicating this message. For the same reason, internal communication must not only contain top-down messages, but also constitute a means to demonstrate how much the company values the work of each employee.

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Professional motivation depends largely on the ability of employees to "give meaning" to their work, above and beyond merely earning a living. The company can help in this endeavor, not only by explaining the meaning of collective efforts – i.e. What credible and stimulating mission are we working together to achieve? – but also by organizing work so that each individual can find meaning in his or her engagement – i.e. Why should I feel proud or satisfied with the work I do personally?

FIGURE E Make the work of each employee more meaningful

There are various ways to make the work of employees more meaningful. The following checklist will help you assess the inherent interest of the jobs in your organization. If you answer "no" to most of these questions, jobs are probably excessively structured to enable the simple execution of tasks and thus are unlikely to convey meaning as they are currently organized.

- Does the work call on a **variety of skills or knowledge**?
- Is the employee **responsible** for ensuring that the **job is done well**?
- Is the employee expected to show **initiative** or his ability to use his or her **judgment** in carrying out his job?
- Does the work enable the employee to **develop his or her skills**?
- Does the work enable the employee to develop **new knowledge**?
- Does the work give the employee the opportunity to **meet interesting people**?
- Does the work give the employee the opportunity to **help others**?
- Does the work correspond to the **employee's capabilities and aspirations**?
- Does the employee know exactly what is **expected of him or her**?
- Can the employee **visualize the final results** of his or her work?
- Can the employee **perceive his or her personal contribution** to the final outcome?
- Are there objective **assessment criteria** by which the employee can assess his or her own work?
- Is the **impact of the employee's work** on company performance clear?
- Is the **value of the employee's work** recognized by the company?

Our selection

To find the best ideas on this subject, we recommend the following publications:

Crise du sens, défis du management

The Loss of Meaning at Work: A Management Challenge], Olivier Vassal, Village Mondial, 2005.

Olivier Vassal undertakes to make a detailed analysis of the link between changes in the business environment in recent decades and the "desperate search for meaning" that seems to be so prevalent in today's workforce. The picture that he paints is undeniably disturbing. The reader is left with an uncomfortable feeling as the reasons why meaning has evaporated are cited in rapid-fire succession: the acceleration of time, the rise of uncertainty, the overload of information, the increasing complexity of collaboration, the expansion of just-in-time production, the collapse of the concept of national border, the transformation of the rules of power, the declining value accorded to work, and so on. Who could be surprised that employees have lost their bearings?

If you would like to improve your understanding of the deep reasons why many employees are in disarray, you will be interested in reading the first half of the book, which covers the main dramatic changes that have occurred in business in recent decades, illustrated by many concrete examples.

You may then go directly to part 3, where the author tries to show how leadership is precisely the art of creating meaning for employees. The company must thus define its reason for being (chapter 14), its vision (chapter 15) and its program (chapter 16). This section of the book relies on detailed descriptions of famous examples, such as Sony, Dell, Boeing, FNAC, Citroën, etc. This part should inspire not only executives, but also team managers who would like to instill more meaning into the work of their employees. Here they will find a multitude of practical tips that may help them avoid falling into the traps that await decision makers when attempting to define a raison d'être or a vision.

Part four of the book offers a few interesting insights, although sometimes a bit brief, on how to organize work to be more meaningful and the difficulty of combining autonomy, supervision and cooperation. You will probably find a few useful tips for action in this section. The second half seems less essential to us. Dedicated to an analysis of major management trends in the past twenty years, it points out their limitations, but has difficulty suggesting viable alternatives.

Finally, in the epilog, you will find a few of the author's convictions in lexicon form that may simulate your thinking on various topics.

The Enthousiastic Employee

David Sirota, Louis A. Mischkind, Michael Irwin Meltzer, Wharton School Publishing, 2005.
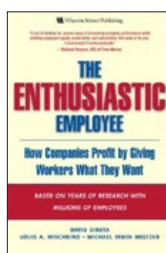
Within the scope of their consulting activities since 1972, the authors have studied how companies relate to their employees, their customers and society in general. They consequently possess a very large store of quantitative and qualitative data taken from studies conducted at a large number of companies.

What they have to say is good news – most employees are in fact motivated by their work! And if their enthusiasm tends to decline after a few months in the company, the drivers available to managers to raise the level of motivation seem attainable, e.g. treat employees fairly in terms of compensation and job security, help them be proud of their work, their accomplishments and their company, and create an environment that facilitates the development of warm and enriching relationships with their colleagues.

Strongly colored by the American culture, this book will bring the European reader a less defeatist and more proactive vision of professional motivation. All of the advice is not transposable, but you will find many concrete ideas, particularly on how to articulate the company's mission and vision (chapter 6), on how to empower people (chapter 7), on the importance of challenges (chapter 8), and on feedback and recognition (chapter 9).

A book that anyone in charge of facilitating a team would benefiting from reading.

Further readings

To explore this topic further:

- *Rally people around a vision* (Manageris synopsis 123a) Design and disseminate a compelling vision.

- *Career Anchors, Discovering Your Real Values*, Edgar H. Schein, Pfeiffer, 1985. (Book) The eight pillars of motivation.

- *Prisoners of Our Thoughts: Viktor Frankl's Principles at Work*, Alex Pattakos, Berrett-Koehler, 2004. (Book) The quest for meaning, principal source of human motivation.

- *How to Get a Handle on Employee Motivation*, Harvard Working knowledge, Oct. 2003. (Article accessible at http://hbswk.hbs.edu) Understand what motivates employees and adapt the organization accordingly.

- *Why Your Employees Are Losing Their Motivation*, Harvard Working knowledge, Apr. 2006. (Article accessible at http://hbswk.hbs.edu) Stop sapping employee motivation.

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