

Tapping into Passion

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Employees are much more dedicated, much more productive, and much easier to manage when their work engages their passion; they generate their own momentum. Conversely, when a team member's passion is not engaged, he or she is often dispirited, likely to shun responsibility, and unable to meet objectives.

Successful start-up ventures are most often built by passionate founders who seek that same level of intensity in their employees. Clearly, in any organization, it is optimal to assign team members to roles in which they will feel passionate about their work. Likewise, it makes sense to minimize the number of job assignments in which employees are merely fulfilling the need for income.

Managing passion is an art that begins with assessing the fit between job and employee. It continues by identifying which components of that job resonate with the individual's specific interests, and ensuring that these components are in rich supply. In this way, passion and intensity can be sustained over the long term, and optimum business benefits are realized.

What You Need to Know

I manage someone who was previously very enthusiastic and passionate about her work. Since I promoted her, however, this attitude has disappeared. What could have gone wrong?

There are a number of reasons why your employee's attitude could change under these circumstances. She may be finding that her new job demands skills that she has not developed, or of which she feels less confident. Perhaps this new context conflicts with her values, or may not offer the same channel for expressing her passion. This is common when a natural salesperson is promoted to a managerial role, eliminating the part of the job in which he or she excelled and found enjoyment.

In my view, "passion" is just an excuse for self-indulgence. My team has to meet very specific objectives; do I really have time to explore each person's interests?

While passion for a job can certainly become self-indulgent if not directed properly, if managed well it can become a powerful fuel that drives the team's success. If you prevent team members from contributing in the way that feels most natural to them, there will be consequences to your

business. Consider your loss as a manager, and as an organization, if you do not encourage and allow employees to leverage their individual passions and intensity to make the team more effective.

My organization has become very successful on the basis of one person's enthusiasm and drive. The business is moving into a consolidation phase, however, and her level of involvement is now creating conflict. How can we redirect this energy to create a strong foundation for growth?

Dealing with a founding member's passion and involvement in the business can be challenging. Look for roles within the business where the expression of her passion can remain very useful—for example, in a business development capacity. If she can focus externally, and channel her passion to an area where it can ignite interest in your products and services, it can dissipate much of this conflict.

Someone on my team expects others to take responsibility for all the tasks that don't resonate with his area of interest. How do I manage this?

Go back to the job description and verify that the objectives are clearly stated. If this team member is not fulfilling his objectives, first determine if it is because he lacks the necessary skills or resources to meet them. If so, training or additional support may be required. If, however, the necessary skills and resources are in place, you may need to facilitate an "attitude adjustment." Offer help in reorganizing his work with milestones, so that he will fulfill his job requirements. If this does not result in the cooperation you need, then pursue this as a performance issue.

What to Do

Engaging an individual's passion is mostly black and white; there is not a lot of gray area. This makes the successful management of passion a precarious business, especially if "fully engaged" leads to passion fatigue in others, and "completely disengaged" is disabling for the rest of the team.

There are three main areas to consider when tapping into someone's passion:

- **Identification**

When considering an employee who does not show a lot of emotion, it is easy to jump to the conclusion that everything in his or her life generates boredom. This is, however, unlikely to be the case. Most people are passionate about *something*; the key is to identify it, and then to locate a work

context in which it can be expressed. You may find clues by observing the person in question and reflecting on their previous performance. Perhaps they were particularly enthusiastic when running a certain project, organizing a social event, or serving on a committee. Explore which aspects of these roles generated the uncharacteristic level of interest and enthusiasm. For example, maybe they appreciated the “expert” status bestowed upon them as a project leader; or enjoyed interacting with a wide network of people. If these opportunities are not present in their current role, then you have probably determined why they seem dispirited.

If you have never seen any evidence of passion in the workplace, ask your employee about interests outside of work, and try to identify the root of their passion in this manner.

Once you have discovered the basis of an employee’s passion, try to accommodate components of that passion in their job. This could be done, for example, by realigning their current job objectives, offering them a special project, or even moving them into a new job where they can engage their enthusiasm constructively.

- **Creative Direction**

Passion is not always easy to manage. Signs of passion in a team member are often welcome, but not if that passion is inappropriately directed and therefore disruptive to the other team members. Passion needs a framework through which it can be effectively and creatively managed; this requires creating clear individual and team objectives to properly direct that passion. Managerial guidance—for example, reiterating objectives—can help keep enthusiastic team members focused and on track. Additionally, with clearly-stated objectives, an individual’s inappropriate use of enthusiasm can be addressed in performance appraisals, if necessary.

- **Rewards**

It is not difficult to reward a team member for using his or her passion creatively and to the benefit of the organization. In most cases, a simple “thank you” adequately demonstrates appreciation, although a particularly valuable contribution may warrant a more tangible reward. Neglecting to recognize employees’ contribution and energy is likely to cause offense and hurt.

If someone’s passion differs from your own, it is easy to overlook or even devalue it. Make a conscious effort to learn about the passions of each member of your team; doing so in a team-building session allows other members of the team to tap this energy as well. In this way, new responsibilities can be allocated according to natural aptitude and desire—as well as experience and skill—and everyone can take responsibility for creating a high-performing team.

You may find that you are managing team members who have not discovered their own passions. This can happen when an individual enters a career early and/or has never really thought about his or her personal aspirations. Some employees may have never experienced professional tasks or activities that resonated with their personalities. Consider placing these team members into various situations that trigger different aspects of their talent; this should provide them opportunities to explore their nature in more depth. Also, encourage these employees to network in other parts of the business, to discover potential new interest areas. A wide exposure to the business may get them

thinking more passionately about future career goals and delivering more value through their work performance.

What to Avoid

You Ignore Someone's Personal Investment

Passion can trigger other emotions, including enthusiasm and anger. These two emotions are deceptively close, and one can transition to the other very rapidly. When channeling someone's passion, remember that there is a significant personal investment on his or her part. This individual will not react favorably if they feel that the expression of their passion is being constrained. Once tapped, the best way to manage an employee's passion is to do so cooperatively. Let the individual know what you are thinking. If any redirection is required, discuss options with them and involve them in the decision-making.

You Don't Support Others' Passion

If a team member's passion does not match yours, it can be quite exhausting to maintain enthusiasm and support for that person. Having said that, if you exhibit an unsupportive attitude, you risk a drop in performance or perhaps losing a potential ally. If you approach this situation with a team member, be open and discuss your tolerance level. Your team member must take responsibility for managing the personal side of this energy, just as you assume responsibility for channeling the professional side.

You Assume That Passion will Sustain Itself

It is unreasonable to expect someone's passion to offset all obstacles. In the workplace, passion does not necessarily sustain itself—it needs nurturing and facilitating. Even people with high levels of enthusiasm can get frustrated and dispirited by bureaucracy, politics, and lack of resources. It is a manager's job to manage the work environment, and provide the right level of support, so that passion can be creatively and productively directed.

Where to Learn More

Book:

Kang, Lawler. *Passion at Work: How to Find Work You Love and Live the Time of Your Life*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2005.

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