

THE BARRIER BUSTERS
NEW WAYS TO ELIMINATE BARRIERS TO EMPLOYMENT
HOW TO INCREASE EMPLOYMENT MOTIVATION

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In this series of articles Larry Robbin, Executive Director of Robbin and Associates, will present new strategies that will help workforce staff be more effective with some of the common barriers to employment they frequently encounter in their work with people who are hard-to-employ.

“ The people I work with don’t have any motivation. I’ve tried telling them how getting a job would improve their lives, but they still won’t job hunt. How can I motivate them? “

This is a very common problem in workforce development. But it is not a problem with the people we serve. It is a problem with how we serve them. Let’s break down the parts of this question. It is not true that people don’t have any motivation. Every person is motivated. They may not be motivated to job hunt or do the things you want them to do, but every day they do things because they are motivated. Only inanimate objects like a rock are not motivated.

Workforce development staff should be doing a Motivational History Assessment to get a better understanding of what motivates a particular individual to improve their life. As you learn about them, listen to the choices they make and try to understand what is driving those choices. Why did they decide to do some things over other things? Why did they decide to spend their time in a certain way? Why did they decide to choose some people as friends over other people? Why did they move or not move? Why did they decide to get help with some things in their lives and not others? What or who do they love? Behind the answers to these questions are the things that are the most important to them and that motivate them.

It is important to note that not everything that motivates them is a good thing. Drug addiction or being in a gang may be motivators, but in the long run they aren't positive motivators. What we are looking for as we do the Motivational History Assessment are the things they do to make their lives better or the lives of people they love better.

Once you understand the positive motivational history, you can work on connecting getting a job with the things that they love and/or are important to them. You don't want to beat them over the head with this connection, or they will block it. You want to raise the connection between what motivates them and going to work, but not in a way that is too pushy or sounds like a lecture.

In my volunteer work, I worked with an older man who had been homeless for most of his life. As we talked in the shelter, it was clear that the most important thing in his life was his dog. He was much more concerned with the quality of life of the dog than his own quality of life. I found out that the dog had a number of serious medical problems and was in danger of not being around much longer. The dog needed medicine that this guy could not afford. Slowly I began talking about how if he had a job, the dog would probably live longer. I talked about the connection, but then I changed the subject before he rejected it. The guy had never connected getting a job with the dog living longer. The guy had a drinking problem that got in the way of job search and employment. As the dog health/employment connection started to sink in, he slowly began to cut back on his drinking.

He started talking about going to the day labor place to see about getting some temporary work. I talked about what he could do to look more employable, and I especially talked about what a great thing he was doing for his dog. This was a lot for him to take in and I was careful to pace this process. It was a big deal. He was starting to redefine himself. He started to

feel a sense of purpose. He didn't stop drinking, but he did cut back which using a harm reduction lens I viewed as progress.

Then one day I went to the shelter and saw him. He had a shave and got a haircut at the rescue mission. He got some new clothes at the Salvation Army. I asked if there was any way I could help him. He said he didn't know what to say at the day labor place. We role played that conversation several times until he felt more comfortable with it. The following day I went up to his cot and he was hugging his old dog, and he had tears in his eyes. He said to me, "This dog is the most important thing in my life. I want him to live a long time." He was clutching the paycheck from his day at work in his hand. I asked him what he was going to do now. He said, "I'm going to get him some pills from the vet before I drink up this money." We both laughed. That I thought is progress.

What are the lessons for workforce staff in this true story?

1. We need to recognize that everyone is motivated. We need to listen very carefully to their story and their choices. We need to understand what motivates them. We need to think of ways to connect work with what they value and what drives them.
2. We need to avoid lecturing or letting our values override theirs. They are the center of this work. We are their coach, but they are the captain of their lives.
3. We need to stop thinking in terms of "How do I motivate this person?" and think instead, "How do I help this person discover more about what motivates them?" We prepare the climate for their process of discovering their motivation, but they are the catalyst that sparks that motivation. As I connected the dog's lifespan with what the man could do, I was creating the climate for change, but he was the catalyst of that change. Think about how to create a climate for change and if it is strong and powerful enough, the person may decide to make the change.

4. We need to help people make progress and not focus on only achieving complete success. I thought of the five hours he worked that day as a major victory in his life and I made a big deal out of it. I especially made a big deal of the role he was playing in helping his dog live longer. I of course also made a big deal of the choice of medicine for his dog over liquor for him. We need to celebrate these victories when people show motivation to make positive change in their lives.

I have developed a free handout that you can use to acknowledge their progress. You can find it at <https://larryrobbin.com/v2/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/award.pdf>. Sometimes these barriers may seem insurmountable, but people can surprise us with their strength and motivation. As the old saying goes, the biggest mountain in the world can be moved one stone at a time. The old man was picking up the stones.

Larry Robbin has been providing training and consulting in workforce development for over fifty years. To learn more about his services, get free employment counseling handouts and to subscribe to his free newsletter go to www.LarryRobbin.com.

Do you have a common barrier to employment that you can't figure out how to overcome? Send it to Larry and it may be the feature of his next article. Email Larry at larry@larryrobbin.com.

