



## The Secrets to Motivating Teams During Difficult Times!

Dale Carnegie said “*There is only one way to get anyone to do anything. And that is by making the other person **want** to do it!*” That simple statement represents a profound shift in thinking for many of us. I’ll admit that when I’m thinking about *motivating* my husband to wash the dishes, I’m really thinking *OK...how can I get him to do what I want him to do?* That sort of thinking may elicit short term results (or not), but it definitely won’t yield the longer term results I’m seeking. In many ways that is the exact challenge that team leaders, managers, and executives have with their teams – how to motivate in a way that is truly lasting?

Even more daunting is the thought of trying to motivate during difficult times. These difficult times often come in the form of a down economy, layoffs, organizational changes, etc. The good news is that many of the best motivation techniques still hold true even during these difficult times. In fact, in many ways motivation becomes even more important during these times. Let’s explore a few secrets...

### ***Secret #1 – Get to Know Your Team Members Beyond the Resume – Relationship Building is Key!***

It sounds simple and basic, but this principle is truly the basis for most motivation strategies. Motivation is very personal. What is motivating to one person might be viewed as a punishment to another. You simply cannot effectively motivate individuals without knowing them as a person – their likes/dislikes, strengths/weaknesses, idiosyncrasies, lifestyle, etc.

A friend of mine was trying desperately to launch a line of soaps and lotions out of her apartment. Although her heart was in her own business, she kept her corporate job to pay the bills while her business was getting off the ground. When she gave out some of her products as gifts during the holiday season, her manager asked her more about her business. Although she initially was a little hesitant to discuss it, she eventually beamed as she talked about her new product line. Seeing her level of excitement and natural motivation, he asked her if they might explore some new responsibilities that she might take on that would build her skills in a few areas beneficial not just in the workplace but equally valuable to her as she grew her business. This approach was amazingly effective. She attended a few courses in internet marketing and was able to not only use these skills in her primary job but also to help grow her business. She was highly motivated and also appreciated his taking an interest in something so important to her.

Indeed, managers will naturally vary in their level of focus on task and relationship in daily interactions with our team members. During difficult times, it can seem even more important to “crack the whip” so to speak and focus on task, but to truly motivate the team, focusing on the relationship component can often yield longer lasting benefits. This does NOT mean that you should spend inordinate amounts of



time socializing with team members or becoming overly personal. It does mean that in almost any interaction you can strive to strike a balance between task and relationship.

### ***Secret #2 Walk the Talk!***

As a management consultant, I often worked *really* long hours. But no matter how late I stayed up perfecting a presentation, I knew my director Jim was up just a little later. I also knew that he would never ask me to do something that he wasn't willing to do himself. That simple fact made me extremely motivated to do whatever he needed. In contrast, years later a new director joined the organization. Shortly thereafter the company sponsored an all employee retreat and asked employees to room two to a room to reduce costs or pay an additional amount for a private room. Most members of our team roomed with someone, and a few paid a bit extra for a private room. The new director decided that she didn't want to stay in the designated hotel at all (a four star hotel on the Las Vegas Strip) and paid for a room at the Four Seasons instead. That one decision caused irreparable damage between her and the team...indeed her actions spoke loud and clear!

A wise man gave his young daughters very sage dating advice, "*Ignore everything they say, and just pay attention to what they do*". That is exactly what team members are doing...watching what leaders **do**! If you're constantly telling your team that times are lean and everyone needs to do more with less, let them see you doing it!

### ***Secret #3 – Provide Support for Personal Crises***

Part of what makes leadership so difficult is the fact that team members aren't robots and are constantly dealing with personal issues and problems that impact them significantly (and can spill over into the workplace). As a team leader, the reality is that you're wearing several hats and one of those hats is friend/mentor/confidant. Don't ignore the reality that sometimes crises strike, and at those times team members need support.

As a public school teacher in the Bronx in the 60s, my mom struggled with the daily challenge of how to motivate her students. She taught the "drop out" class – those who had performed the worst academically and were just expected to likely drop out as soon as they reached the minimum age required to drop out. She'd decided to use the DMV's driver's permit exam prep materials as her course materials because her students were all 15 years old and VERY motivated to get their drivers permit. Her thought was that she could use virtually any reading material to teach reading skills; she just needed the right topic to really motivate them. This approach was extremely effective...with one exception. One student (Melissa) seemed impossible to motivate. After using every motivation technique in her arsenal, she decided to have a heart to heart with her after class one day. She asked about her home life, and Melissa immediately burst into tears. Evidently, her mother was gravely ill and needed a kidney transplant.



Melissa's mom had asked her to donate one of her kidneys, but Melissa's own health problems made that option very risky. She was torn and couldn't concentrate on anything else. Immediately, my mom shifted from teacher to mentor/supporter.

Maslow's hierarchy of needs clearly indicates that a person's physiological and security needs must be addressed before higher level motivation tactics will be effective. As team leaders, we must remember this and check in with team members who seem to be particularly unmotivated or distracted. Whether the crisis is personal or generated by workplace difficulties, any real crises should be addressed proactively.

#### ***Secret #4 – Tell the Ugly Truth***

Remember that during difficult times, it's vitally important to be honest about the organization's health/current state. Most managers make the mistake of decreasing communications during difficult times when just the opposite is what is really needed. In the absence of information people create their own information, and it's usually not positive (think rumor mill). If the group's project is really an "ugly baby" or if budget/headcount cuts are likely, be honest about it! People are motivated to work in an environment where leaders will be candid and honest...even if the news isn't good.

Motivation is certainly one of the keys to effective leadership, but figuring out how to do it in the midst of a difficult environment can certainly be challenging. The reality is that there isn't a bag of tricks – just a few proven secrets that will enhance your ability to motivate your team in virtually any environment.

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