



# You Can't Motivate Employees!

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## ☞ I'm Excited, You're Excited, Right?

It might be nice to think that what gets me going gets you going, that if I like it, you'll like it, or that what energizes me energizes others. But the fact is it's not possible to persuade someone else to get excited about something they're not – at least a little bit – naturally excited about. No form of incentive, no sums of money, no amount of community reinforcement can make others genuinely rev up about something they don't especially care about or believe in.

Business leaders who think money, incentives, or even threats are “motivating” their employees are kidding themselves. “Finish this project ahead of schedule and there's a bonus in it for you!” is tying a reward to a specific outcome. It may result in short-term behavior changes (longer hours, more focus on the task), but that's hardly the same as motivating people.

Motivated, committed, engaged employees care about what they do and why they do it. They get up and come to work every day because they care about it. It's not a short-term energy surge; it's a way of life.

## ☞ Why You Can't Motivate People

So the truth is you can't motivate people because *people motivate themselves*.

What, then, can you as a business leader do to help them get there?

*You can create the best conditions under which people*

If you're asking yourself, “Good grief, what conditions are those?” here's the answer:

**Sense of Purpose:** What is it about your job that gets you out of bed in the morning? What contribution to the betterment of anything are you, personally, making every day?

**Leadership:** Competent, trustworthy, genuine, conscientious innovators who are glad to be on the job every day! (Well, okay, *most* days.)

**Organizational Character:** The integrity and consistency of choices and decisions the organization makes. More than “how we do things around here,” but the principles that guide why we do them that way.

## *First - A Sense of Purpose*

Most people want there to be some meaning in the work they do, something more than hours of labor that result in a bi-weekly paycheck. The paycheck is necessary, of course, but at the end of the day, we want to think we've done something more than that.

A little over 30 years ago, an extraordinary book came out that remains the definitive examination of people in jobs – *Working*, by world class journalist Studs Terkel. He met and listened to workers around the nation, capturing their thoughts and feelings about the jobs they were doing, the on-the-job experiences they'd had. A recurring theme in this narrative is that employees want to feel they're doing something that matters.

"You throw yourself into things because you feel that important questions – self-discipline, goals, a meaning of your life – are carried out in your *work*," says one of the more than 100 workers whose stories and voices Terkel captured.

Keeping an eye on why our companies are in the business they're in sounds easy enough, but it isn't often enough what employees are reminded of. For one thing, it's difficult to measure purpose. There aren't generally accepted accounting practices that quantify how much of a company's operations are fulfilling that purpose.

Perhaps that's why it goes in and out of focus for so many employees. They're more often aware of the stock price, the latest cost-cutting measures, and the current steps being taken to meet that all-important end-of-quarter earnings report.

"You cannot inspire employees by urging them to help management get the company's stock price up," says Bill George in his book *Authentic Leadership*. "Employees today are seeking meaning in their work."

In his *Harvard Business Review* article (December 2002), "What's a Business For?" Charles Handy recognizes the same thing: "The contribution ethic has always been a strong motivating force. To survive, even to prosper, is not enough... We need to associate with a cause in order to give purpose to our lives."

Purpose: Every business has one. To deliver electricity that sustains lives and livelihood. To conduct research that leads to life-improving discoveries. To build bridges across cultures. To renovate civic infrastructure. To promote learning, restore rivers, capture history, heal the sick, enable new businesses.

It could be anything, but it needs to be front and center in the hearts, minds and conscious attention of the people who do the jobs and the people who lead them.

Motivated, engaged, even enthusiastic employees believe in what they do. Business leadership must also and must remind people "why we do what we do" so that employees can align themselves and their individual jobs with the contribution.

## Using Power Well

Let's start by examining a formidable force in management circles: Positional power, also known as "authority." The generally accepted paradigm is that people in management call shots because they're in positions of authority. They have, then, *positional power*, power they're awarded because of their position.

Positional power's counterpart is *personal power*, i.e., a person's capacity to affect decisions and actions because of his or her credibility, expertise and competence. Individuals (managers or not) who have personal power do the right things for the right reasons. They embody the elements of leadership that wield influence and make them respected, rather than second-guessed.

“Positional power is the authority you receive from the office or position to which you are appointed or elected. Personal power is the authority you command as a result of who you are as a person,” says Dr. Dilip R. Abayasekara (President of Toastmasters International) in his article “A Common Leadership Challenge - Balancing Positional Power and Personal Power.”

We can probably all cite examples from our own lives of positional power run amok, as well as times when personal power was sorely needed and obviously lacking. But creating conditions under which people motivate themselves isn't just reining in positional power. It's about encouraging personal power in everyone.

## ▣▣ **Personal Power at Work**

Positional power (authority) is fleeting. When you're a manager, you have it. When you're not, you don't.

Personal power, on the other hand, is something that, if you have it, you have it forever, and it grows with you as you mature. Encouraging personal power in the workplace is a major contributor to the kinds of environments in which people are motivated.

Encouraging personal power in everyone in part means affirming and promoting respect for others in the workplace. Not just some people some of the time, but all people all of the time. Not that respect should be unconditional – certainly not. But setting an expectation that it's a prize only a few are worthy of is a sure way to disenfranchise people.

"My people have to earn my respect. I don't just give it to them," says a Vice President about the people who report to her. "So I make sure they have plenty of opportunities to compete. The brightest and best prevail over the others. The others, they know who they are."

This is not a leader who's using her positional power very well, creating organizational churn, building distrust among peers. Hers is not an environment that most would look forward to taking their energy and creativity to every morning.

But given that that's clearly wrong, how would we instead encourage personal power in a work environment?

First of all, see your organization or company as flat. It's not “better” to be a manager than an individual contributor. It's just a different job. Don't say “move up” the organizational ladder, as if supervision and management (positional power jobs) are in the high class neighborhoods. Similarly, don't say “further down in the organization,” or “far from the top of the company,” to refer to individual contributors' jobs.

Removing what may seem like subtle inferences – up and down, top and bottom – sets a tone for talking about every job as though it's worth doing and worth paying for. Because it is, and it's one way to ensure people feel respected and appreciated, willing to be part of the effort – in short, motivated.

## ▣▣ **“Effective Managers Are Not in Control”**

Richard Farson says that in his remarkably insightful book *Management of the Absurd*. He means that effective leadership is not a result of the command-and-control approach. Instead, it's more like navigating than commanding – using the ability to “turn confusion into understanding,” and “see a bigger picture.”

How does that help set an environment where people motivate themselves? The answer is probably obvious: No one likes to be controlled. Led? Yes. Answered? Sure. Encouraged? You bet. But not controlled.

What does “control” look like? Micromanagement; Decisions from management with no input; discussion suppressed; irrelevant rules. If that rings a bell with you, consider that there may be unnecessary controls squelching enthusiasm in your environment.

There are, of course, necessary controls within an organization – checks and balances, approvals, governance. This isn’t about that. This is about people trying to exert control over other people unnecessarily and damaging morale – and motivation! – in the process.

## ▮▮ **Climate Control**

Working in a climate where personal power supersedes positional power and where tricky territory is navigated, not dominated, are two important ways in which leadership contributes to a healthy environment where people find their own commitment and enthusiasm for the jobs at hand.

## **Organizational Character**

### ▮▮ **An “Ah Ha!” Moment**

In 1985, Dr. Edgar Schein, a professor in MIT’s Sloan School of Management, studied the phenomenon of life in the workplace. He published his findings in *Organizational Culture and Leadership* and so brought to the world the idea that companies have cultures. He talked about culture in terms that sound like anthropology and social science, with words like the “artifacts” of work (technology), and values (what “ought” to be) and basic assumptions (what we take for granted). He examined the roots of culture in the workplace, the importance of it, and how it shows up on the job every day.

It was a groundbreaking idea in 1985, but today “organizational culture” is a commonplace term. Every company has an organizational culture. Leadership now knows it’s supposed “to hire to the culture.” We’ve figured out dysfunctional cultures cost more money to sustain than healthy cultures. Anyone who’s tried to drive an initiative to change organizational culture knows it’s difficult and time-consuming and often unsuccessful.

### ▮▮ **What is Organizational Character?**

Extending Dr. Schein’s discovery just slightly, *Organizational Character* is not only “how we do things around here” (the culture) but also why we do things this way and what people expect when we do things. It’s an organization’s reputation with the people who work there. It’s the tone and the pace of the organization, and it’s how people are treated. It’s a major reason people like, or don’t like, where they work and a key contributor to motivation.

### ▮▮ **The Disengagers**

So, then, what aspects of Organizational Character disengage people, causing them not to be motivated or energized by the jobs they do? These:

Secrecy – When “They don’t need to know” is the motto of the day and information is always kept close to the vest, it seems that leadership doesn’t trust the people who work there or that the employees are irrelevant to what the company is doing, planning. Sometimes, of course, confidentiality *is* called for – to keep things from the competition or to manage a public announcement. But when everything is handled that way, employees disengage.

Surprises – Keeping people off-guard because they never know quite what is coming is one way to keep them alert, but not a way to keep them engaged. Surprise announcements (“Ta da! Here’s the latest re-org of your area!”) make people edgy and nervous, especially when there are a lot of them.

Messenger-shooting – We all know this one: The bearer of bad news is assumed to be the cause of it. It’s a big disengager because people who are naturally forthcoming and honest will shut down quickly if they know they’ll be mistaken for the target.

Distrust – Nothing says “I don’t value you” better than distrustful behavior, and of course people who don’t feel valued won’t be motivated. If your management practice is “We’re watching your every move,” consider whether that’s *really* warranted.

## ▣▣ The Engagers

What can you do to make improvements in Organizational Character where you work?

Know people as people – Trusting people requires knowing them. People feel valued when they’re trusted. Enough said?

Encourage cross-pollination –If your leadership philosophy is “Just do your own job and don’t bother about what they’re doing over there,” re-consider. Instead, make sure people who work together know each other, what to depend on their peers for. It’s key to feeling like part of the community and essential for motivation.

Be committed to individuals’ growth – Actively discover and develop people’s best talents. There may be no single factor greater than this one to ensure a motivated workforce - it’s a positive statement about the role of the individual in the work being done. (In fact, Marcus Buckingham wrote a whole book about this. It’s *The One Thing You Need to Know* – the title of his book!)

Last but not least –

Expect the best – Seasoned managers know that you pretty much get what you expect from people who work for you. If you expect untrustworthy, deceitful, unproductive individuals, you’re likely to find them. If you expect professional, mature, individuals who come to work every day expecting to do the best job they understand how to do, you’re likely to find them. Employees want to be thought of in the latter category, not the former.

## ▣▣ And Finally ...

You actually can motivate employees by creating and sustaining the kinds of conditions that help them bring their best selves to work every day. Respect, proactive and honest communications, capable and engaged leadership – these are the ingredients that add up to an engaged, energized workplace.

But this is not a recommendation for a quick fix. Here in the “fast-food nation,” we like instant repairs, but there is no Jiffy Lube approach to motivating employees. There is only the lasting success companies enjoy when their daily operations don’t overlook purpose while they employ good leadership practices in a healthy organizational culture.