

# What Really Motivates Employees?

Teams

By Rebecca Houghton



I often hear clients ask how they can motivate their employees. I think we are looking at employee motivation from the wrong end of the telescope. Why are we looking for the magic bean of motivation instead of wondering why our employees lost motivation in the first place? Surely that's treating the symptom rather than the cause?

The first mistake we make is to assume employees need to be motivated. Do you think about being responsible for your life partner's level of motivation in your relationship? Or do you consider them grown-ups and responsible for their own motivation?

Your role, as a leader, is to provide an environment that *enables* motivation—but your job is not to *instill* motivation. We often get the two confused.

Thinking that you need to motivate your people suggests they don't already want to be there and aren't already willing to try their best. That's classic McGregor Theory X manager thinking—that they need to be pushed by you.

**Having made around 10,000 job offers in my previous career, I can assure you that the moment someone gets a new job, they are motivated. They are delighted, excited, eager to please, and ready to get into it. They have good intentions, and they are willing to try hard. And it clearly goes downhill from there.**

Another myth is that we should establish a social contract—a commonly held belief that there is an implicit value exchange in employment. Did you know this

economic theory is actually based on justifying sovereign authority? I don't think that's the kind of leader/worker relationship we are after in modern business.

The best quality relationships are not based on a stated transaction. If you're looking at your partner and thinking, "The main reason we are together is that you take out the trash and I do the laundry," then I'd propose your motivation has room for improvement.

An important sign of a relationship breakdown (with work or a life partner) is the use of the contract. If you have to refer to the contract in your relationship, then things are not looking good—you've lost connection, and you've lost trust. Demotivating.

So let's leave the social contract where it belongs—in the past.

The third myth is that demotivation is a systemic or cultural issue. Well, I have some bad news. It's not the system. According to McKinsey, it's 75% you, their leader. Their research states, "Of all the misery in the world, one source lies within an organization's sphere of influence: the behavior of its bosses." Hmm. Oh dear.

Bad bosses sometimes derail motivation by failing to delegate interesting work. Sometimes, by protecting employees from overwork, we are guilty of keeping them in boring work. Confucius said, "If you do what you love, you'll never work a day in your life," and he's right. Teams never complain of overwork when they are doing work they love.

Being an authoritative leader—remember the social contract?—is going out of vogue for how we manage people, as it's fundamentally a power play. If it's a habit for you, try these three simple hacks:

1. Be curious about your people, not just curious about their work.
2. Give positive feedback, not just constructive.
3. Say thank you more often.

As a leader, establish a psychologically safe space to operate:

1. **Security is table stakes.** If jobs or well-being are at risk, motivation is off the table.
2. **Minimize threats to their status.** If people don't know where they sit in the pecking order, it's a derailer. You may not be able to provide organizational clarity in the middle of a restructure, for example, but you can provide your perspective.

### 3. Minimize their sense of uncertainty.

Your team needs you to show them the pathway through the fog of ambiguity. Not knowing where you are going or if your work matters is a huge derailer.

4. **Give them more autonomy.** Only robots like being told what to do all day. Humans become hopeless if they feel they have no power to change their situation. Encourage feedback, delegate decision-making, and empower change.

5. **Give them time to nurture their relationships with others.** The pandemic has proved that isolation is not great for well-being or culture.

6. **Make sure that people are treated fairly.** If there's a perception they are not, deal with it quickly. Once people have experienced a black mark against you on this issue, it's hard to shake it off.

And finally, or perhaps first: Stop asking yourself how to motivate your employees and ask yourself how to stop demotivating your employees instead.

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