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13 Things the Smartest Leaders Say to Motivate Their Employees

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"My boss motivates me through fear and control," said no employee ever. Here's what you'll actually hear the smartest bosses say.

Motivation comes in many forms, but most of the time it's an intrinsic desire to act with clear intention and great purpose toward achieving something good. It comes from deep within, and both heart and mind have to be in the game.

If you're in a leadership role, there's no question that you hold the key to unlocking the power of motivation to release discretionary effort in each person you lead.

And it may all start with what you *say*.

Smart leaders motivate their people from the neck up by articulating things like:

1. "I'LL FOLLOW UP ON THAT AND GET BACK TO YOU BY TUESDAY."



So much of a team's success relies on the leader setting direction and proper expectations. So when things are fuzzy, your follow-through on questions and concerns is crucial. Failure to do so may lead to your people questioning your integrity and distrusting you. Don't say it if you don't mean it. Smart leaders follow through on their promises with a clear plan of action within an agreed upon time frame. Then, they make it happen!

2. "I HAVE GOOD NEWS AND BAD NEWS."

Why would this motivate, you ask? Ever worked for a leadership team that kept things behind closed doors? Leaders who swept things under the rug? Smart leaders do the opposite. They are truth tellers and explain the context of who, what, where, when, and why in their decision making. If they can't pull something off, they explain to their tribe why something cannot be enacted. The fact that a leader can honestly and openly communicate both good *and* bad news goes a long way toward motivating people. Such leaders win hearts and minds of employees because they can be trusted.

3. "HERE'S WHAT WE'RE DEALING WITH, AND WHAT THIS MEANS FOR YOU."

People want to know where they stand. They want to feel safe, and certain that leaders have their best interests in mind. When something happens that disrupts things--a sudden change in direction or a transition takes place--smart leaders keep motivation high by painting a positive and realistic picture of business life to keep their tribe steady, rather than a doomsday scenario that triggers panic and uncertainty. They communicate what's *really* going on, and reset expectations to keep their people focused on the prize.

4. "I WANT YOU TO KNOW HOW THE WORK YOU'RE DOING ALIGNS WITH OUR COMPANY'S OBJECTIVES."

Studies show that employees don't get enough positive feedback from their managers. Smart leaders let their people know regularly how they're meeting performance goals and how their work is supporting larger organizational goals. This gives their work meaning and higher purpose.



5. "I'M REALLY NOT SURE WHERE TO GO WITH THIS. WHAT WOULD YOU DO IN MY SITUATION?"

Smart leaders are present by stating their feelings, such as "I'm really not sure where to go with this. What would you do in my situation?" or "I need some help here." It's not a sign of weakness on the leader's part. In fact, it's the opposite: It creates a space for authenticity and truth. We, as leaders, should model and replicate such behavior inside our organizations. If you're in a management role, being real and emotionally honest gives your team members permission to do the same. You will experience more connection as a result.

6. "STOP BY MY OFFICE ANYTIME."

This is merely platitude and B.S. that astute employees will see right through if you don't back it up with action. Credit Karma founder and CEO Kenneth Lin operates with an open-door policy as a keystone for good company communication. "Whenever I'm in my office and available, I encourage anyone to come by and share their thoughts about how they feel Credit Karma is doing," says Lin. The strategy pays off, because it helps loop him in to what Credit Karma employees are talking about, which increases morale and lets employees know that he's a part of the team.

7. "ASK ME ANYTHING."

HubSpot, the global digital marketing automation company, redefined what it means to be transparent in business. HubSpot co-founder and chief technology officer Dharmesh Shah once published an article on his wiki page called "Ask Dharmesh Anything." And that's exactly what HubSpotters did--engaging in a slew of discussions directly with their CTO. Even despite criticism, transparency has paid off as a business value. HubSpot has received multiple awards for its company culture.

8. "I WANT YOU TO KNOW HOW MUCH I APPRECIATE YOU."

Did you know that receiving praise and recognition is the most important performance motivator? Sure, paychecks, bonuses, and cash incentives are good, but that money will be spent tomorrow. But being recognized in front of the organization for the hard work you've put in? That's gold, because everyone can then see the value that you're bringing. In one large Gallup



study, the companies that displayed the highest engagement levels used recognition and praise as powerful motivators to get employee commitment and loyalty. How regularly are we talking? Praise should be given once per week.

9. "I NEED YOU TO IMPROVE. HERE'S WHAT'S WORKING WELL."

When bringing up a sensitive topic such as a team member's performance, don't jump right into the hard part of the discussion, which will put the other person immediately on the defense. Open with the positive: Acknowledge what is already working, and what you appreciate about your team member's strengths. Then ease into how you'd like to see performance *specifically* improve in the areas of concern. How you end the conversation is also important. If you can't come up with a solution to a problem, at least end on a positive note, with something like "I think it's good that we both got to this point. I know we're getting closer. Let's talk again and see if we can get this thing resolved."

10. "CAN I GET YOUR ADVICE ON THIS?"

Alison Wood Brooks is the author of a study indicating that people who ask for advice are perceived as more competent. She says, "In our research, we find that people are hesitant to ask for advice, because they are afraid they will appear incompetent." According to Brooks, this is misplaced fear. The reality is that people view those who seek their advice as more competent than those who do not. Smart leaders will leverage good relationships with trusted employees by asking them for advice.

11. "I TRUST YOUR JUDGMENT."

Trust is a two-way street. By extending it as a gift to employees, they'll be more inclined to return the favor and trust you back. Smart leaders avoid the Lone Ranger mentality and find ways to rely on others for input; they give their people opportunities to earn trust. This gives a workplace a clear competitive advantage and brings a team closer together to produce excellent, cohesive work.



12. "I COULDN'T HAVE DONE IT WITHOUT YOU."

This is quite possibly the highest form of saying thank you. Acknowledging someone else's effort for going above and beyond, especially if it makes a leader or manager look good, reinforces a strong team culture. This simple act of encouragement is a mental booster that will send ripples of trust across the organization.

13. "YOU ARE RIGHT."

The smartest leaders are also humble by nature. They have no problem saying "you are right" when seeking wisdom and insight from others toward accomplishing business goals. Humility is a leadership strength that is often misunderstood, because it's misinterpreted as a lack of self-confidence or as being timid--traits too soft for business. In actuality, humble leaders are modest but display a determination and fierce will to create results by directing their ego away from themselves to the larger goal of leading their company to greatness. They ask for help, they learn from others, and they acknowledge that others may have a different, and better, solution to a problem: "Yes, you are right." ■

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