

Do Leaders Motivate or Demotivate?

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP

I have written about the connection between leadership and motivation in the past, but I have not coupled that with the connection between leadership and demotivation. By the way, just because my spell checker keeps underlining the word "demotivate" does not mean it is an illegal word. It is not in many dictionaries, like Websters, but it does exist in some of them, like [The Cambridge Dictionary](#). There is even an organization ([Despair Inc.](#)) that sells demotivating posters and other strange products. I love their motto, "Motivational products don't work, but our demotivational products don't work even better." There is also a fun website completely devoted to [demotivation](#). In this article, I reveal some truths and myths about how leaders motivate and demotivate.

My thesis on motivation is that leaders really cannot motivate individuals. When leaders use the word "motivate" as a verb, as in "We need to motivate the team," it is incorrect usage. What leaders do is create the culture in which people react with high motivation. A prime example is when leaders create an inspiring vision, shared values, and an environment of high trust, where people feel valued.

Motivation comes from within an individual, and a person working in a culture of trust is more likely to feel motivated. Once motivation is generated within someone, that person owns it. The sad truth is that the precious commodity can be snatched away from that individual as quickly as a seagull can snatch a discarded scrap of bread at a beach picnic.

I believe that leaders can easily eliminate the motivation within a person. Many leaders are masters at it, demonstrating their skill numerous times a day. Taking away the motivation of an individual is easier than doing the Chicken Dance.

Here is my top 10 list of things that leaders do to demotivate people at work. See if you agree, and let me know if you have pet peeves of your own to add to the list.

1. Trivialize what an individual is doing or make fun of the employee
2. Claim credit for the good work of an employee

3. Give an assignment, then micromanage the employee
4. Ignore the employee when he or she does some spectacular work
5. Punish the employee who brings up a concern
6. Play favorites or appoint a relative to a position of power over others
7. Insult the employee by drawing attention to what he or she cannot do
8. Engage in sexual or other forms of harassment with the employee
9. Set impossible goals and berate the employees for missing them
10. Demand honesty from the employees but demonstrate low integrity himself

In reality, there are thousands of ways a leader or manager can demotivate an individual who has already been inspired to become motivated. Elite leaders realize that the way to encourage top performance is to set up conditions such that individuals motivate themselves, and then stand out of the way and let them turn the motivation into positive action for the organization. My advice for leaders is to create enduring trust, which is the environment for high motivation, and then when motivation occurs, don't kill it.

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