

# **Leading and Motivating People through Challenging Times**

**By**

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Perhaps now more than ever, we find ourselves in a business environment characterized by fierce and aggressive competition and what some may consider, insatiable shareholder demands. In addition we live in an economic reality marked by uncertainty, lack of stability and insecurity. Within this context it is very tempting for organizations and their leaders to get caught in the 'default behaviour' trap, shifting towards a survival of the fittest mentality and focusing on short sighted strategies with little or no long term sustainability. I often call these companies 'panic driven' organisations. What do such organisations look like?

## **Aggressive competitiveness**

In panic driven organizations, leaders tend to constantly remind their staff, in both direct and indirect ways, that their jobs are on the line, that competition may lead to downsizing, that unless targets are met people may lose their jobs, that meeting targets is not enough and that people have to keep pushing and pushing for more and more. Workplace conversations start revolving around 'raising the bar', 'trimming the fat', 'tightening the belt', 'cost cutting', and 'doing more with less'. This may drive people towards behaving individualistically, narrowing their focus on justifying their existence, outsmarting their colleagues, protecting their territory, promoting themselves and possibly even backstabbing others. It creates an environment of mistrust, hypervigilance, defensive communication, and dishonesty, resulting in an atmosphere of excessive stress and tension. It can also encourage unethical business practices such as hard-selling. One needs to recognize that such climates have a negative impact on motivation and could lead to burnout.

## **Narrow and short-term focus**

Another typical reaction to challenging times is to cut down on any initiative that does not yield direct and immediate returns on investment. While maximizing resources and efficiency are important measures, one needs to be wary of going overboard and demotivating employees by focusing too strongly on direct and immediate results. An example of this is staff development and training. While many leaders realize that challenging times call for more highly trained and effective staff equipped with the right attitudes, skills and competencies, others see such development as a luxury that should be done away with when the going gets tough.

## **Excessive monitoring and control**

Another common reaction of panic driven organisations is to breathe down people's backs to make sure that they are doing what they are instructed to be doing. Hours are counted, output is excessively measured and controlled, procedures become ends in themselves and people's value to the organization is reduced to immediate financial outcomes. While a degree of control is necessary, wise leaders know that excessive control leads to resigned compliance as well as covert or overt defiance. When employees feel that they are the pawns not the players, they begin to lose their sense of value to the organization and with that feeling, motivation, innovation, initiative and creativity may also go down the drain.

The major responsibility for resisting all the above reactions lies within the leadership of an organization and the culture that they promote. Leaders need to understand that there is a limit to pushing performance through increasing pressure on people. The well known Yerkes-Dodson law shows how, beyond a certain level, adding pressure has a detrimental effect on cognitive processes such as attention, concentration, memory and problem solving capacity. It also impacts our emotions resulting in feelings of irritability, anger and anxiety. This is the direct result of excessive levels of glucocorticoids (stress hormones) in the system which damage health and tax immunity to illness. In the UK alone over 600 million Euro and 14 million working days are lost yearly because of stress related illness and underperformance directly resulting from stress.

So how can leaders face current business challenges positively and proactively? The following are three main areas that should be given special importance in organizations if they want to have a leading edge.

### **Autonomy, mastery and purpose – the basis of internal drive**

The belief that people can perform only if coerced, controlled or provided with sticks and carrots has long been outdated and proved incorrect. This is especially true in the case of knowledge workers and skilled employees. Psychologically, humans are self-directed and move towards freedom and self-mastery. The more leaders manage to allow autonomy in the way people work and achieve results, the more motivated and creative people become. Leaders do well to avoid micro-managing their people and instead find ways of increasing and developing employee autonomy without compromising accountability.

Another factor that increases internal drive is **mastery**. From birth, infants are on a constant mission to gain mastery over their environment and as they grow older, this inner ability continues and specializes, and becomes more focused. Providing opportunities for people to become better at what they do and do what they are best at is a great way to boost motivation. Psychologist, Professor Alex Linley, explains how effective leaders are good "strength spotters". Rather than wasting time and money

trying to force people in turning weaknesses into strengths, strength spotters encourage people to play to their strengths and to keep developing them. He describes strengths as skills that people are good at. Moreover, people become energized and motivated when practicing such skills. In the words of Peter Drucker “We all have a vast number of areas in which we have no talent or skill and little chance of becoming even mediocre. In those areas a knowledge worker should not take on work, jobs and assignments. It takes far more energy to improve from incompetence to mediocrity than it takes to improve from first-rate performance to excellence”.

The third element of internal drive is **purpose**. Leadership guru, Robin Sharma, explains how effective leaders constantly ‘link paycheck to purpose’ for themselves and for the people they lead. Employees should be encouraged to find purpose in the work they do and link it to the important contribution that they have in the success of the business and the service or product it offers. This point is beautifully illustrated in the following story: One day, after work on his cathedral had begun, architect Christopher Wren, unknown to the workers, walked among the artisans and stonecutters. He asked one of the workmen: “What are you doing?” “I am cutting a piece of stone“, the workman replied. He asked the same question of the second stonecutter. “I am earning five shillings two pence a day“, the second workman replied. He asked a third workman the same question, and the man answered, “I am helping Sir Christopher Wren build a magnificent cathedral to the glory of God.”

### **The EAP of motivation – Encouragement, Appreciation, Praise**

While results are important and should be rewarded, effective leaders also focus on effort, curiosity and innovation. They also need to allow reasonable space for genuine, initiative and innovation-driven mistakes. CEO of Reebok, Paul Fireman, was quoted as saying that the secret to the company’s success was that their employees were given the freedom to experiment and create. Without the freedom to fail and the encouragement to persist, employees cannot feel confident in leaving their comfort zones and will stick to that which is tried and tested....and often boring!

Appreciation and praise tap into the human innate psychological need for recognition. People need to feel that they are valuable to the organization and that their contribution is an important part of its success. They also need to get positive feedback about their efforts, initiatives, ideas and achievements. When these go unnoticed, people feel unappreciated and taken for granted. A simple and genuine, ‘Thank you’ can go a long way in making someone’s day. Effective leaders constantly find creative ways of showing appreciation and expressing praise towards their employees. In Robin Sharma’s words they “reward routinely and recognize relentlessly”.

### **Human factors – Maintaining strong teamwork and trusting relationships**

Humans are neurobiologically built to connect. It is the strongest human psychological need and people will go to great lengths to fulfill it. Consider the explosion of social media, mobile phone use and the whole network of relationships that underlie and give purpose to our very existence. Years of research on employee motivation indicate that people want more than money for their work so that they feel satisfied and motivated. Amongst other things, employees at all levels of organizations, are deeply affected by the quality of their relationships at the workplace, especially with their supervisors, managers, or people they regard in high esteem. They want to feel appreciated, valued, cared for and respected in the same way that they would within a family. Once the material and financial requirements are satisfactorily met, the primary needs that people have at work are emotional. In a research study that identified some of the best companies that one could work for in the U.K., the overriding factor distinguishing the top companies was the quality of life they offered at work. The most important factors that determined this were: respect for the individual, a friendly non-aggressive environment, a relationship of trust and openness between management and the rest of the staff, and opportunities for learning and development. Building strong teams based on trust and interdependence can go a long way in creating the sense of belonging and connectedness that is so essential for a high performance working environment.

Today's business environment is often considered **as** an aggressive urban jungle where only the fittest survive, where positive values of integrity, trust and compassion seem to have no place. A brief look at the state of our world today can quickly show how unsuccessful this business model is. Today's leaders have the responsibility to change this with the power and influence that they possess and the way in which they lead organisations into the future.