

# From “Just about Managing” to Leading

## By Blaire Palmer, Creative Thinking Partner and Executive Coach

When Michael started his own consultancy he employed top people; people he'd worked with in the past who had shown commitment, flair and loyalty and who seemed to share his values.

But a few months down the line one of his team members started to struggle. Jo was putting in the hours but without enthusiasm. Her confidence was dropping; she was unfocused and not bringing in enough new business.

Michael explained to Jo the seriousness of the situation. Without new business he would lose the company and that would mean her job. He showed her the books to illustrate his point. He again ran through her job description and the procedures she was expected to follow. He told her that he was sure she was up to the job but he really needed her to bring in the new business or they would all be out on their ear.

Jo told Michael that she understood. She was doing her best but she'd try harder.

But a month later and nothing had changed. After an initial burst of energy, Jo was back to her old ways.

No matter how experienced a leader you are, chances are at times you have struggled to motivate certain individuals. You've tried every trick in the book. You've sat down one-to-one with the individual concerned and explained the situation. You've outlined the big vision again in the hope of inspiring them. You've given them the bottom line: “Either you pull your finger out or your job is on the line”. You've dangled a carrot in front of them: “If you make your targets you'll get a great bonus”. And sometimes it works. But not every time. And there have been casualties. Ultimately if someone can't get the job done they have to go.

The granddaddy of motivation theory, Frederick Herzberg, calls traditional motivation strategies “KITA” (something similar to Kick In The Pants)<sup>1</sup>. He uses the analogy of a dog. When he wants his dog to move he either gives it a nudge from behind, in which case the dog moves because it doesn't have much choice...or he offers it a treat as an inducement in which case it is not so much motivated by wanting to move as by wanting choc drops!

KITA does the job but it's hard work. It means every time you want the dog to move you have to kick it (metaphorically). Wouldn't it be better if the dog wanted to move by itself?

Transferring this principle back in to the workplace, most motivation strategies are “push” or “pull” based. They are about keeping people moving either with a kick from behind (threats, fear, tough targets, complicated systems to check people follow a procedure) or by offering choc drops (bonuses, grand presentations of the vision, team building games).

### **A Different Way**

As an Executive Coach I work with a wide range of individuals and groups from a variety of backgrounds. Some are highly motivated but are struggling to get those around them in to the same state of mind. Others are at the receiving end of KITA motivation strategies that aren't working on them. They know they “should” be more engaged with their work and sometimes they fake it for a few months but it's not sustainable.

In this paper I identify some common assumptions about motivation and present some new paradigms that can help. By adding some of these coaching tools and motivation strategies to

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<sup>1</sup> One More Time: How do you motivate Employees, by Frederick Hertzberg. Harvard Business Review, January 2003.

your armoury you may find the job of leading those around you less of a struggle. Instead of spending all your time and energy pushing and cajoling you will be able to focus on leading your team to achieve their full potential.

## **Top 10 Motivation Myths**

### **Motivation Myth 1: EVERYONE IS LIKE ME**

One of the most common assumptions we make is that the individuals who work for us are motivated by the same factors as us. Perhaps you are motivated by loyalty to the company, enjoying a challenge, proving yourself to others or making money. One great pitfall is to try to motivate others by focusing on what motivates you.

I was coaching Marie, a Director in her company. She was a perfectionist. Every day she pushed herself to succeed and was rewarded with recognition from her peers. But she was unable to get the same standard of work from her team members. In the first few weeks of our work together she said "If only people realised how important it was to put in 110% and how good it felt to get the acknowledgement they would start to feel more motivated".

But it wasn't working. Instead people were starting to become resentful.

Acknowledgement was a prime motivator for Marie so to help her consider some other options we brainstormed what else might motivate people to put more energy in to their work. As we added to our list "learning new skills", "accomplishing a goal as part of a team", "creativity", "achieving work-life balance", "financial rewards" and "the adrenaline rush of working to tight deadlines" Marie began to see that perhaps her team were motivated...just in a different way to her. If she could tap in to *their* motivations she would begin to see what they were capable of.

### **Motivation Myth 2: NO ONE IS LIKE ME**

Strangely, the opposite assumption is equally untrue. For 25 years, research has shown that although we know that we are motivated by meaningful and satisfying work, we assume others are motivated mainly by financial rewards.

Chip Heath, associate professor at Stanford University carried out research that found we believe others are motivated by "extrinsic rewards" such as pay or job security rather than "intrinsic motivators" like a desire to learn new skills or contribute to an organisation.

Yet this is not true. Numerous surveys show that most people are motivated by intrinsic factors. As a leader, if we assume our team members only care about their pay packet this will certainly affect how we attempt to motivate them and the effectiveness of the strategies we use.

### **Motivation Myth 3: PEOPLE DON'T LISTEN TO ME**

When some people talk, everyone listens - John F Kennedy, Winston Churchill, Margaret Thatcher. And you probably know people like this too. You may not agree with what they say but they have a presence, a tone of voice and a confidence that is unmistakable. Fundamentally these people are great salesmen. They can make an unmitigated disaster sound like an unqualified victory.

But do you need to be like this to motivate and lead?

James was a relatively successful salesman but he was never at the top of his team's league table. In our coaching session he wondered whether he would ever be as good as his colleagues. James saw himself as a sensitive person and was concerned that he was too sensitive for the job.

We looked at how he could use his sensitivity to make more sales and beat his teammates. He re-worked his sales pitch and instead of starting with the standard boast about the product he asked questions. He made no attempt to sell but instead listened to the challenges facing the people he called and asked them what kind of solution they were looking for. When he had earned their trust and established what they needed he described his product. His sales figures went through the roof.

Each of us has qualities that can be adapted to a leadership role. Instead of acting the way we expect those in our position to act we are more likely to get others behind us if we tap in to our natural, authentic leadership style.

#### **Motivation Myth 4: SOME PEOPLE CAN'T BE MOTIVATED**

Whilst it is true that not everyone has the same motivational triggers, as already shown, the belief that some people cannot be motivated is what generally leads to the “pep-talk-then-sack-‘em” cycle. Managers use conventional methods to inspire their teams, reminding them that they are “all in this together” or that they are “working for the greater good” or that they have “complete faith in you” and when that fails to have an impact they shrug their shoulders and hand the troublesome employee his P45.

The reality is that motivating some individuals does involve an investment of time. When his manager left the company, Bob was asked by the site director, Frank, to take over some extra responsibility. As well as administrative work he would be more involved in people management and report directly to Frank.

Frank saw this as a promotion for Bob and assumed that he would be flattered and take to his new role with gusto. Instead Bob did little but complain. He felt he had too much to do, he didn't trust the new administrator brought in to lighten his workload, and he felt resentful that his extra responsibility hadn't come with extra pay.

Frank was a good manager and told Bob that he simply had to be a little more organised and that he had complete belief in Bob to be able to handle this new challenge. But Bob remained sullen.

So Frank took a different approach. He tried to see the situation from Bob's point of view. Bob enjoyed his social life and was no longer able to leave the office at 5pm. Bob was dedicated to doing a good job but not particularly ambitious so promotion meant little to him. Bob was also expected to work more closely now with a colleague with whom he clashed.

Then Frank looked at how Bob might perceive him. He realised Bob probably thought Frank's hands-off management style meant he didn't care. To Bob it might look as if Frank took no direct interest except when he found fault.

Finally, Frank looked at the situation Bob was in to see if there was anything bringing out the worst in him. He realised two weeks of every month were effectively “down-time” for Bob followed by two weeks where he was overloaded with work.

Having set aside his assumptions about Bob and armed with a more complete picture from Bob's point of view, Frank arranged for the two of them to meet to discuss a way forward.

Whilst there is no guarantee that this approach will always work, “seeking to understand”, as Stephen Covey, author of “The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People” puts it, is often a more powerful first step than “seeking to be understood”<sup>2</sup>

#### **Motivation Myth 5: BUT I AM LISTENING**

We are always told how valuable listening is as a leadership tool and encouraged to do more of it. So, when we remember, we listen really hard, trying to catch every detail of what is being said and maybe follow up with a question to show that we caught everything.

This is certainly important. Checking your email, thinking about last night's big game and planning your weekend certainly stop you from hearing what is being said.

But there is another important aspect to listening and that is Listening Without Judgement. Normally whilst an employee is telling us why they are lacking motivation we are busy internally making notes about what is wrong with what they are saying. Really listening means shutting off the voice in your head that is already planning your counter-argument and actually taking on board what you are being told.

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<sup>2</sup> “7 Habits of Highly Effective People”, by Stephen Covey. Simon & Schuster Ltd, Jan 1999

This is not to say that “the employee is always right” but until you really understand their perception of the situation you won’t be able to develop a strategy that really works for them.

### **Motivation Myth 6: IF THEY LEAVE, I’VE FAILED**

What happens if, at their meeting, Bob admits to Frank that he doesn’t see his future with that company? What if he says the main reason he is demotivated is that he isn’t really suited to the company culture and would be happier elsewhere. Has Frank failed?

I often work in companies helping key individuals to tap in to their true motivators and understand their core values. Part of my role is to help align company goals with individual aspirations. But sometimes the person and the company are simply unsuited.

In a different culture, industry, role or team that individual would be energised and dedicated. But in this environment the same person doesn’t fit.

Sometimes “success” does not look the way we expect it to look. A successful outcome for an individual and for a company may be that a demotivated person, having identified what sort of work and environment would suit them better, leaves to find their ideal job elsewhere. The assumption that you fail as a leader if individuals do this means unhappy people often stay in jobs out of a sense of loyalty when they could be an asset elsewhere and be replaced by someone who is really dedicated to the job.

### **Motivation Myth 7: THE SAME FACTORS THAT DEMOTIVATE, MOTIVATE**

When asked what brought about lack of motivation at work, the majority of people in research carried out by Herzberg blamed “hygiene factors” such as working conditions, salary and company policy.

But when asked what motivated them they gave answers such as “the sense of achievement”, “recognition”, “the opportunity to grow and advance” and “greater responsibility”.

This suggests that the factors that demotivate do not necessarily motivate when reversed. The conventional solution to dissatisfaction over pay levels would be to increase pay in the belief that people would then work harder and be more motivated.

However, this research shows that whilst increasing wages, improving job security and positive working relationships have a marginal impact, the main factors that characterise extreme satisfaction at work are: Achievement, Recognition, Interesting Work, Responsibility, Advancement and Growth. Leaders who tap in to the *values* of those who work for them and *enrich* their work rather than simply address complaints are likely to see improved levels of motivation.

### **Motivation Myth 8: PEOPLE WILL RISE TO THE CHALLENGE**

Many managers hope to motivate by setting their people challenging targets. One client told me that she had managed to complete all her priority projects that month, although it had involved 18 hour days, international travel and no weekend breaks. When she handed in her final report, her Line Manager simply said, “You see? It’s worth all the hard work. So, don’t complain about it again”.

Her Line Manager’s belief was that my client would get a sense of satisfaction from completing an almost impossible job. He was relying on her sense of duty to get the job done. But this is a return to the KITA style of motivation. It doesn’t really show dedication to the job or a sense of pride. Simply a lack of choice.

Job Enlargement is different to Job Enhancement. Herzberg’s research shows that it is improving the “meaningfulness” of a job (see also Motivation Myth 7) that has the motivational impact, not simply increasing the amount of “meaningless” tasks that a person has to undertake.

### **Motivation Myth 9: I TRIED IT AND IT DIDN’T WORK**

You’ve done all this before and motivation levels went down...I hear you cry.

People are naturally sceptical of unconventional motivational approaches. They may wonder why you have suddenly taken such an interest in them. They may feel you are giving them too much responsibility or be concerned that changes in the way they work may lead to job losses.

After companies introduced job enrichment schemes, Frederick Herzberg monitored the results. He found that initially performance levels dropped. Supervisors felt threatened by the new autonomy of their teams and the team members themselves resisted change and complained that they would prefer more money than more challenging work.

But eventually people started to behave differently. Performance improved and overtook past levels.

**Motivation Myth 10: THIS TYPE OF MOTIVATION TAKES TOO MUCH TIME**

How are you feeling? If you have taken on board the ideas above, chances are you are wondering where you would find the time to motivate people using these approaches.

It is true that the style of leadership required to achieve sustained motivation, commitment and focus is more time consuming in the short term than KITA. Standing in front of your team on a Wednesday at 5pm shouting words of encouragement to get them through the rest of the week probably takes no more than 5 minutes out of your schedule. (I am sure that none of you does this but I am illustrating a point!)

Engaging fully with your staff, understanding their wants, desires and values, getting to know them as individuals and developing strategies that achieve a continuous release of energy is more intensive and takes time to work.

But consider the advantages. This investment of time means you will eventually have less to do. Instead of constantly chivvying your people along and having to solve all the problems yourself, you'll be the leader of a well-oiled machine, giving you the chance to step back from fire fighting and consider the bigger picture. As explained above, Herzberg found that when this style of motivation was introduced in to companies some managers found the results unsettling. If they didn't need to invigorate the troops every day, perhaps they weren't needed at all? It took some time for them to discover that there was still plenty of work to do but it was work that really required them to lead and not simple manage people-problems.

Are you ready?

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