

Motivating People

4 Reasons Good Employees Lose Their Motivation

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Summary. Managers are often at a loss as to how to effectively motivate uninspired employees. Research indicates that managers first should identify the reason for an employee's lack of motivation before applying a targeted strategy. These reasons fall into four categories called motivation traps. Namely, these are values mismatch, lack of self-efficacy, disruptive emotions, and attribution errors. Each of these four traps has distinct causes and comes with specific strategies to

release an employee from its clutches. Identifying exactly which trap has ensnared your employee and applying the right targeted intervention can get things moving again. [close](#)

Motivation — the willingness to get the job done by starting rather than procrastinating, persisting in the face of distractions, and investing enough mental effort to succeed — accounts for 40% of the success of team projects. Yet managers are often at a loss as to how to effectively motivate uninspired employees. Our review of research on motivation indicates that the key is for managers to first accurately identify the reason for an employee's lack of motivation and then apply a targeted strategy.

Carefully assessing the nature of the motivational failure — *before* taking action — is crucial. Applying the wrong strategy (say, urging an employee to work harder, when the reason is that they're convinced they can't do it) can actually backfire, causing motivation to falter further.

These reasons fall into four categories — a quartet we call the *motivation traps*. Namely, they are 1) values mismatch, 2) lack of self-efficacy, 3) disruptive emotions, and 4) attribution errors. Each of these four traps has distinct causes and comes with specific strategies to release an employee from its clutches.

Here are the four motivation traps and each targeted strategy to help your employees escape them:

Trap 1, Values Mismatch: *I don't care enough to do this.*

How this trap ensnares employees: When a task doesn't connect with or contribute to something workers value, they won't be motivated to do it.

How to help an employee out of this trap: Find out what the employee cares about and connect it to the task. Too often, managers think about what motivates *themselves* and assume the same is true of their employees. Engage in probing conversation and perspective-taking to identify what your employee cares about and how that value links with the task.

There are different types of value which you can draw out. One is *interest* value, or how intellectually compelling a task is. For this, find connections between the task and the things that the employee finds intrinsically interesting. Another is *identity* value, or how central the skill set demanded by a task is to an employee's self-conception. Point out how the job at hand draws on a capacity that they consider an important part of their identity or role — such as engaging in teamwork, analytical problem solving or working under pressure.

Importance value is how important a task is. Identify ways to highlight how crucial the task is to achieve the team's or company's mission. Finally, *utility* value is a measure of the cost of achieving (and avoiding) the task versus the larger benefits of achieving. Find ways to show how completing this particular task contributes to the employee's larger goals and avoids blowback. Sometimes it may be necessary to ask an employee to, essentially, hold their nose while carrying out an undesirable task — making clear to them the future benefit its completion will yield or the problems it will prevent.

When an employee doesn't value a task at the outset and the values mismatch may not be apparent, a manager's best bet is to try to appeal to multiple values. One or more of them may resonate with the employee.

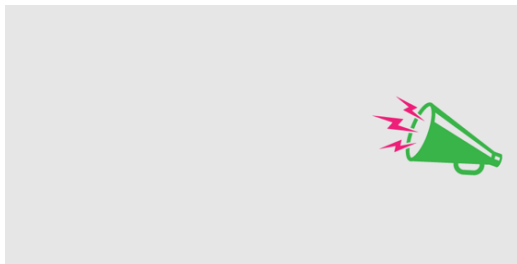
Trap 2, Lack of Self-Efficacy: *I don't think I'm able to do this.*

How this trap ensnares employees: When workers believe they lack the capacity to carry out a task, they won't be motivated to do it.

How to help an employee out of this trap: Build the employee's sense of confidence and competence. This can be done in several ways. One is to point out times in the past when they've surmounted similar challenges. Perhaps share examples of others just like them who overcame the same challenges in a way the employee can do, too. Build their sense of self-efficacy with progressively more difficult challenges, or by breaking down the current task into manageable chunks.

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Often, employees who lack self-efficacy are convinced that succeeding at a particular task will require the investment of far more time and energy than they can afford. Explain that they have the ability to succeed but may have misjudged the effort required; urge them to invest more effort while expressing confidence that additional effort will lead to success. It helps if managers offer some extra support as work gets underway.

Occasionally employees have the opposite motivation trap.

They may lack motivation because they feel, in a sense, overqualified. Employees with inflated self-efficacy pose one of the more difficult motivational management challenges. Overconfident people often make mistakes, even as they're certain they know what they are doing.

When they err, they insist that it's the *criteria* for judging success on the task that is flawed, so they take no responsibility for their failures.

When dealing with such employees, it's important to avoid challenging their ability or expertise. Instead, demonstrate to them that they have misjudged the requirements of the task, and convince them that it requires a different approach.

Trap 3, Disruptive Emotions: *I'm too upset to do this.*

How this trap ensnares employees: When workers are consumed with negative emotions such as anxiety, anger, or depression, they won't be motivated to carry out a task.

How to help an employee out of this trap: Begin in a setting where you cannot be overheard. Tell them you want to understand why they are upset and engage in active listening. Do not agree or disagree. Be nonjudgmental by asking what the employee believes is causing them to be upset. Then, briefly summarize what they said back to them and ask if you have understood. If they say "no," apologize and tell them you are listening carefully and to "please try again." When people feel they have been understood, their negative emotions soften a bit. It may be useful to tell them that you want to consider what they told you and schedule a time the next day to discuss. This often helps the person get more control over their emotions.

Keep in mind that anger is the belief that someone or something external to the person has caused or will cause them harm. Ask an employee feeling angry to try to reframe their belief about the external as resulting from ignorance or accident, not intention. Suggest ways they could invest the effort to eliminate the threat. Depression sometimes results from employees' belief that they are internally inadequate in some way that they cannot control. In this case, it often helps to suggest that they are not "broken" or

“inadequate” but only need to invest more effort in effective strategies. Offer your help. Anxious or fearful employees often respond positively to assistance with their approach to the task as well as to reminders that they are capable and can succeed with more effort.

If the emotions do not soften with time and effort or if they spring from outside the workplace, for example, it may be advisable to help the employee access counseling.

Trap 4, Attribution Errors: *I don't know what went wrong with this.*

How this trap ensnares employees: When employees can't accurately identify the reason for their struggles with a task, or when they attribute their struggles to a reason beyond their control, they won't be motivated to do it.

How to help an employee out of this trap: Help the employee think clearly about the cause of their struggles with a task. Attribution errors are often to blame when employees seem to be finding excuses not to carry out a task (calling in sick, pleading overcommitment or “not enough time,” trying to foist the task on colleagues). Helping the employee identify exactly why the task seems insurmountable can help them move past such avoidance. If they identify a cause that's out of their control (blaming other people, for example, or a flaw in themselves that can't be fixed), suggest other causes that are under their control, such as the need to adopt a new strategy or to apply a greater level of planning.

With each of these four motivation traps, the trick is to think more comprehensively about what stops employees from initiating, persisting, and putting in mental effort. The research suggests that managers can do more to diagnose the motivation problems of employees. When motivation goes off the rails, identifying

exactly which trap has ensnared your employees — and applying just the right targeted intervention — can get things moving again.

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