

## **Motivation Needed Now More Than Ever: 4 Steps That Work**

By Joe Takash

***Question:** How do you motivate people in an economy that is highly unstable and perpetuates fear?*

***Answer:** Encouragement, optimism and honest communication.*

This may seem counterintuitive to task-driven managers who focus on the news headlines and the bottom number in their ledger. Granted, the economy is shaky and companies in almost every industry are either feeling the tremors or getting hit head on by the financial power outage. Things have changed dramatically and in a short period of time leaving countless organizations thinking, "I have no control over this."

On the contrary. The market will go up and down but obsessing over it forces good businesses to make bad decisions. A prudent investment is to focus on building human capital and it starts with influencing your people to perform at a higher level.

The need for leaders to manage relationships with staff and clients is greater than ever, but what are the specific actions required? The following four steps, if implemented, can help tremendously.

1. **Practice emotional control:** It's easy to lead when times are good and business is flowing like fine wine. However, when times are stressed, does your impersonal autopilot take over put the business process before the welfare of your people?

You may justify calculated decisions by saying, "it's business," but if you need people for business, remember this: *People don't care how much you know until they know how much you care.*

Client trust and employee loyalty are developed most effectively by those who can be relied upon to connect with others respectfully, timely and competently. How you connect with others when times are hot says a lot about how they'll respond to you when things go cold.

The area where our thoughts and decisions filter through is typically emotional. True "thought leaders" are able to execute at a high level because they can demonstrate compassion and understanding, while maintaining clinical objectivity. A key action step is to be sure to get feedback on how cool you are when times are heated.

2. **Provide frequent updates:** Many executives create stress and resentment with those they manage because knowledge of company status is not shared. In the absence of feedback, we will create our own and it's often negative. When people are uninformed, they work from a place that does little for building trust or morale.



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## Motivation Needed Now More Than Ever: ~ ( continued ) ~

A great way to keep teams and individuals informed is to designate time on your calendar to share your knowledge. These updates should be initiated by you, the leader. They must involve honest disclosures of what you do know, what you don't, what you can share and what you cannot.

A colleague named Jill is a brilliant business development manager. Recently, her firm was involved in a merger and she was instrumental to the success and seamlessness of the transition. Ironically, not a single partner on either side of the merger took time to meet with Jill and inform her what role she would play when the transaction was completed.

Jill inquired often and the executives, self-involved and ineffective in communication, never provided her a solid answer. When she finally gave her notice, you would have thought someone pulled the fire alarm as every big shot made desperate attempts to woo her back and keep her aboard. But it was all in vain.

The very effort of proactive communication is not only crucial for competent alignment within organizations, but it can have significant impact on the retention of immensely talented contributors like Jill.

3. **Become an exceptional listener:** Getting people to perform in tough times requires understanding. A checklist for this type of listening includes:

Encourage others to talk: Get your staff and clients to talk about themselves by asking open-ended questions, i.e., "How are things going? How you are doing?" "What suggestions would you give to improve our current working situation?" or "What concerns or questions do you have that I have not addressed?"

When others speak, clarify for certainty: You can accomplish this by repeating what people have said by rephrasing the their message. "If I'm hearing you correctly, you're telling me that..." or "Let's see if I completely understand what you're saying..." Paraphrasing shows respect for team members and client ideas and keeps miscommunication to a minimum.

Eliminate distractions: Many leaders attempt to multi-task which generally achieves little. It's important to show focus on those you're listening to by shutting the door, turning off your cell phone, turning away from your computer or forwarding your office phone. Let the person know that his/her message is valued and respected.

Many people believe that they are good listeners, but employee surveys often indicate very few leaders are exceptional. Amid uncertainty, people want information, but they also want ownership, value and yes, even a little bit of therapy. Listen at a deeper level and you're likely to create more committed and confident performers.

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4. **Lead with (realistic) optimism:** Jeff is a long time client and CEO of what once was a thriving bank. Recently, however, his branch has taken repeated, devastating blows from the swing of the financial market. He is a positive guy, yet in a conversation with him a couple weeks back Jeff said, "It's hard to smile when you keep getting kicked in the teeth."

Leading in turbulent times can bring the sobering reality of negativity, anxiety and stress. It can not only turn careers upside down, but can take a toll on home lives as well. And while you want to hear the straight story with no strings attached, think about this:

*Would you rather follow someone who is constantly preaching failures and bad luck or someone who is persistent in finding opportunity?*

Attitude and the behaviors that go with it are contagious. Leaders need to paint pictures that are reflective of the truth, but they must also speak about possibilities. It's easy to get swept up in the bad news, but the mettle of our character is how we get off the deck when we've been knocked down.

In the situation with Jeff, he remains optimistic that things at the bank will not only stay afloat, but rebound for the better. In talking to those who work for him one bank employee said, "There is not leader I'd rather follow than Jeff. He's been supportive of the uncertainty and worries of his employees."

Jeff remains resolute throughout, preaching, "Times are tough, but we must be tougher and realize that our success will be the result of our conviction to seek solutions and be persistent."

Again, it's a heck of a lot easier to lead with optimism when the times are in line with the message. But now is when real leaders are challenged, navigating unfamiliar territory they've never been.

In continued studies of how relationships impact business results, the need to establish and cultivate business connections is greater than ever. Remember, people think on logic, they act on emotion.

Motivating others requires action.

### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Joe Takash, author of the newly released "**Results Through Relationships: Building Trust, Performance and Profit through People**," (Wiley, 2008) is a business consultant and keynote speaker. As founder of Victory Consulting, Joe helps clients such as American Express, Prudential and General Motors, build morale, results and profits through relationships. A syndicated columnist, Joe has also been interviewed in Entrepreneur, Selling Power, Crain's New York and MSNBC.com.

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