

Managing People Who Are Already Motivated

By Justin Locke
January 11, 2011

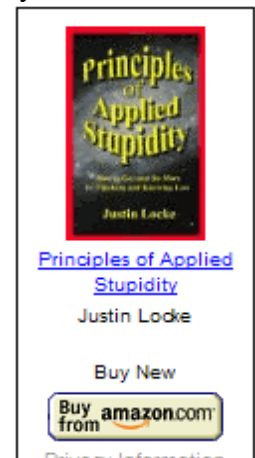
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As a professional speaker, I am often confused by audiences who want to understand the secret to motivating their employees. Most professionals, including financial advisors, aren't constrained by workers who lack motivation. Their challenge is harnessing their employees' pre-existing energy and drive, and directing it toward a common goal.



Earlier in my career, when I managed a professional orchestra, I had this second problem. The people that I hired were already highly motivated, in some cases obsessed with achieving the highest standards. My biggest worry was how to not mess up as a manager and de-motivate my charges.

I knew only too well how easy it was to squander individual potential. Sadly, when I was a musician, conductors, personnel managers, and other people in authority often did rude or offensive things that deflated my enthusiasm, at times dissipating it into nothingness. When I became a manager of these hyper-motivated people myself, my biggest challenge was to avoid doing any of the many things that might de-motivate them. I took great care to maintain the pre-existing motivation that these people brought to the job each morning.



The most important lesson I learned was to be constantly respectful of the emotional fragility of these highly motivated individuals. You can't really separate the two concepts; people who are committed to their absolute best work are that way precisely because they put their heart and soul into what they do. If they sense that management does not respect or appreciate their added effort, they will eventually cut back out of sheer emotional necessity, and by then it's too late; no motivational speaker can resuscitate their drive.

Here's an example of how this worked. For several years, I managed an orchestra's recording sessions. I had an established group of four French horn players, who were ideal in every way. They played beautifully, both individually and as an ensemble. They got along, they all respected each other, and there were no simmering conflicts among them, like who should be first and who should be second. The pecking order was established and everyone was happy. They were a team.



One year, my client wanted to record “Jupiter” from Holst’s “The Planets,” a piece that calls for six horns. I asked my four horn players for recommendations. This was much easier than auditioning, as every horn player knows the exact capability of every other horn player. It also gave them responsibility over who would be added to their little group – yet another display of respect for them, which always pays off down the road. Unfortunately, out of all the people they recommended, I could only find one horn player who was available for the gig. I asked for more suggestions. Finally, one of them said, “Why don’t you call Frank Johnson?”

This was a little bit like suggesting that I hire Yo-Yo Ma to play in the cello section, as Frank Johnson is a pseudonym I am using for one of the best horn players in the world. “Are you nuts?” I asked. “Why would he play this gig?”

The horn player’s response: “Well, he’s basically semi-retired now, and he’s just teaching a little and hanging around the house with his kids. Who knows? You have nothing to lose by asking him.”

A little sidebar here. One of the reasons I loved my four horn players is that they would recommend performers who were better than they were. They put quality ahead of politics, and I always respect that.

Anyway, he was right. Even if the guy said no, the worst thing that could happen was that I would be right back where I started from, so I called him up.

“Frank,” I said, “I’m desperate. I need a sixth horn for ‘Jupiter.’ For you, it will be 20 minutes on Monday, 20 minutes on Tuesday, and I’ll pay you for the whole six hours of the session. What do you say?”

“Sure,” he said. “I would love to do that. Sounds like fun.”

I now had six horns. Good ones, too. Problem solved.

The first day of the recording session went fabulously.

On the morning of the second day, the head engineer came up to me. This guy was one of a rare handful of people who do high-end classical recording work. He travels the world, overseeing the recordings of most major orchestras and classical ensembles.

I’m calmly eating my bagel, and he says, “Justin, I noticed that you have Frank Johnson playing this gig.”

“Yeah,” I said between bites.

The engineer said, “He’s one of the best horn players in the world.”



“Pretty cool, huh?” I responded.

And then this engineer said to me, with just a little bit of hesitation for fear of saying something offensive, “I do have one question. You’ve got one of the best horn players in the world. Why ... is he sitting ... SIXTH CHAIR?”

I could see his point. After all, in standard by-the-book orchestra culture, it is *de rigueur* for the best player to sit in the principal/first chair slot.

“Here’s the deal,” I explained. “I have four guys who have been with me from the beginning, who have been coming in here day in and day out, doing fabulous work. What kind of reward would it be, and what kind of long-term response would I get, if, after all their consistent hard work, I essentially demoted them all?”

“Moreover,” I added, “playing principal is a lot of added work and responsibility, and I don’t have enough money to get Frank Johnson to do that for me.

“And, finally, if I put Frank Johnson in the sixth chair, and you’re the horn player sitting third or fourth chair, what does that communicate to you, a rank-and-file player, about what I, the management, think of your playing, and what I expect from you?”

The engineer nodded his head silently.

“By the way, this horn section sounds absolutely fabulous, doesn’t it?” I said with a grin.

This guy knew what a good horn section sounded like. “Yes, it does. It really does.” And he walked away.

Justin Locke is a speaker based in Boston. He spent 18 seasons playing the bass with the Boston Pops, and he is the author of several books, including “Real Men Don’t Rehearse” (a musical memoir) and “Principles of Applied Stupidity,” a look at how to be more productive and effective by going against the conventional wisdom. See more by visiting his website at www.justinlocke.com.

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