

## Motivation—On the Ground

BY KARL E. BURGHER AND MICHAEL SNYDER

“Motivation—On the Ground” is a more practical and applied and “how to” than theoretical discussion. In this article, we consider actions you can take right now to help get your people fired up and moving along a successful project completion trajectory. Recall that we are primarily about work, not thinking about and planning work. We need to motivate our people to accomplish objectives and complete projects using the tools we have described in our previous articles. Motivation requires spirit and fire and a love of people. When done properly, it is a gateway to good work.

Motivation can be a difficult and finicky practice; it is often talked about at seminars, but rarely is it executed well. As with management and leadership, there is no shortage of literature, discussion, or opinion about motivation. It is everywhere: Google “motivational quotes” and you will have a quote to read every day for the next decade. Zig Ziglar said that motivation, like bathing, should be done regularly. We suggest that it should be a daily point of focus as it tends to be a highly temporal asset. Employees need to know that they are appreciated every day (or so) of the week. It is also worth noting that motivation can be even more fleeting unless some permanent changes results. As humans, we find it quite difficult to change permanently; very few managers know how to

effect permanent change via motivation; and we all find it difficult to self-motivate day in and day out, year in and year out.

That said, motivation can open people’s minds and hearts to permanent change and spur them to action. Keep this in mind as you manage by walking around: Not only should you encourage and cajole, but you also should use these interactions to teach, to imprint a positive attitude in your people, and to instill in them a desire to deliver and accomplish great things. Remove their limits. You should almost always be the one to go and visit your people; always making them come to you stifles their self-worth. You need to see where they work and what their working conditions are like in order to be able to better motivate them. Napoleon and Mother Teresa always worked and ate alongside their people.

A note of caution: Be careful not to pile on the work and expect to accomplish it purely through motivation. You must clear a place for the new in order to affect sustainability. Effective motivation requires prioritization of work. So dig a bit, get organized, get prioritized, and then help motivate your staff to do the important work every day. We all need to be motivated at some time or another. And as managers, we need to make clear that a good attitude is simply the beginning of greatness, not greatness itself.

What follow are our “first ten.” Why not our top ten? Because we do not pretend to know the thousands of things that might motivate your staff. Human beings are complex, and there is no one size fits all. Nevertheless, our “first ten” list is a good place to start. Do these, and attitudes will improve, the machine will hum, and you increase your chances for promotion. This is hard to undertake every day, thus takes considerable practice and energy.

The “first ten”:

● **Sit with people. Do not look at your watch. Turn off your phone!** Time is of the essence. “In Time” is a Sci Fi movie about time as currency (very well done actually in our opinions.) The film provides a nice example about just how precious our time is, particularly as we get in situations in which there is less of it. You should give it a look... Time also has been likened to a roll of toilet paper: The closer you get to the finish, the faster it swings around. Spend quality time with your people. Remove distractions and do not look at your watch. During our work days, the only time we ever schedule back-to-back meetings is when we need an excuse to get out the door because we think something is unproductive. Instead, we budget time for a meeting and then add a little time—an extra half hour or so—to review the one and to prepare for the next. We never want folks to feel they are being rushed, and we always want them to know that we care about them and have prepared as such.

When an employee’s boss gives her undivided attention, it is a natural motivator. Motivation results when staff members know their boss is interested, not in a rush, and will let them say their piece. And once they understand that the boss will give them time, they know she cares. This leads to feelings of security. As they become more secure, they will not need to come back as often. Ultimately, this will mean fewer meetings overall and more time available for work. So think of time as currency, as in the sci-fi movie “In Time” does. Business is about time and money, and money equals time, so it is all about “time squared.” Give time to your people, and they will require less of it.

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*Of course motivation is not permanent. But then, neither is bathing; but it is something you should do on a regular basis.*

— ZIG ZIGLAR

● **Practice empathy.** Great managers care about their people. Active listening has historically been all the buzz, but in our opinion, it is often much buzz about false appreciation. Do you really think people cannot tell when someone cares so little about what they have to say and has to work to stay engaged in a conversation? When you really care and are genuinely interested in a person’s thoughts and feelings, you do not have to practice active listening. Everyone has something to contribute, some-

thing to teach, or something of interest they are (and should be) truly proud of. Look for it. Find it. And then cultivate it. You may have to manage if conversations veer too far off topic too often, but it should not be work to show care and compassion. And compassion is empathy in practice. When your employees know that you legitimately care about them, their lives, and their work, they will be motivated to deliver for you. They will want to make you proud, and they will take pride in themselves and their work.

Some will struggle with this. Some people just don’t like people enough to practice empathy. If you are a manager who truly does not like people, with all their blessings, issues, and faults, then you likely are in the wrong line of work. But if you are a great manager, then you do care, and you demonstrate it. You know your people. You invest your time in their lives. You may need to spend time talking with them, or perhaps you sometimes write a quick note to let them know you are paying attention. Recently, we sent notes to ten of our project managers to thank them for their work and to wish them an enjoyable break. We do not need them to respond, nor do we need to consider whether they would do the same for us. We simply took time to maintain the relationship and to practice empathy—and, imagine this, to get a little work done. Do not expect your employees to reciprocate or to be as good at this as you should be. It is not up to them; it is up to you. It is what you are paid to do: manage. Someone has to “go first,” so let it be you. Develop relationships in part by learning empathy and compassion; it helps get the work done.

- **Praise in meetings, praise in public.** Praise is another concept that is often preached but rarely practiced well. Learn how to respectfully praise your people. Learn how to look them in the eye and say, “Great work,” “Nicely done,” or “I am proud of you/this.” Do this publicly, and do it in truth. Do not praise falsely or insincerely. Insincere praise does not motivate; in fact, it makes everyone else on the team or in the room angry. Unjustifiable praise will do more to wreck a team than just about anything else. It is extremely unproductive.

That said, find reasons to praise, and praise often. Praise out loud, and as it is deserved. Practice this, as it can be difficult. Giving praise is emotional. It shows vulnerability, and some will view it as weakness. But human beings are not machines. Practice being vulnerable, be confident in it, and give your praise and power away. It just may motivate as well as anything else you could do. If you are uncomfortable with this, do it anyway. Do it often enough that it becomes more comfortable. You are the manager. Be the bigger person, and get it done. Praise.

- **Insist on quality.** How does insisting on quality help to motivate? Once your people know that they can perform at a level they previously thought impossible, there will be no going back. They will be proud, they will feel good about their work, and they will do more of it so long as you praise as appropriate and continue to insist on a high level of delivery. Quality begets more quality, and employees will come to better understand what is meant by quality. Teach your folks how to accomplish a particular task in a high-quality way; teach them how to error check, both systematically and randomly. Point out to them that doing work in a high quality way actually reduces rather than increases their workload.

As employees come to understand that when they deliver to a high degree of quality the first time they will not get pushed back at, they will be motivated to deliver consistently at a level commensurate with your expectations. A job well done will lead to another job well done as folks’ motivation to perform increases as each high-quality product is delivered. When was the last time you told someone that her last effort at work was “beautiful?” It seems a little weird, eh? Sel-

dom does anyone label something “beautiful” in the workplace. But we do say it often in other settings: “What a beautiful move to the basket”; “what a beautiful catch at third”; “landing that fish was beautiful”; “what a beautiful dinner.” If we can compliment professional athletes, fishermen, and restaurateurs, then we ought to be able to compliment our peers, bosses, and subordinates. Insist on quality; insist on beautiful work. Motivation will follow.

- **Never blame. Find solutions. Never gossip.** There is no shortage of finger pointing in the workplace when things go wrong. Instead of immediately working to find a solution when things go south, too many employees often rush to make sure everyone knows it was someone else at fault. Imagine what your subordinates feel when you as the leader are always blaming others for your own weakness or inability to deliver. It seems in today’s self-esteem environment that we are never to blame for anything; instead, it is always some external factor, situation, or person that is causing the problem. Blame is destructive. It shows a lack of responsibility. It shows weakness. Sure, there may be some short-term benefit to pointing fingers, but in the long run, it is entirely destructive. It shows that you as a manager are not doing your job, that you are not in control, and that you are certainly not a leader.

Leaders do not blame—they fix the problem. They take ownership of the task at hand and work toward a positive outcome to all issues. Constantly bellowing “not my fault” or “not my job”—that is, constantly articulating blame—does no one any good—not you, not your people, and certainly not the customer you seek to serve. If your people do not believe that you have the power to control outcomes or deliveries, then you have lost. If you have lost control, you cannot motivate and you cannot lead. Certainly there is nothing wrong with speaking to the ‘enemy’—that is, the problem—and then attacking that problem. But do not blame. And do not make excuses in front of your staff, your peers, and most certainly your boss for why you cannot do what you are paid to do.

Like blame and perhaps a bit more personal is gossip. It should go without saying that gossip should be avoided at all costs. Gossip is a clear sign of weakness,

a sign that you need to exalt yourself by speaking ill of others. Instead, be positive all the time. At a minimum, never miss an opportunity to remain silent.

Encourage, motivate, and act and speak purposefully in order to be productive. Never take the opportunity to take a swipe at someone else in front of your team. Negativity is highly contagious and will catch like wildfire, particularly when a manager engages in it. No one is perfect, but practice this at all times: Do not gossip, and do not blame; doing so destroys motivation.

- **Explain why.** Be sure that your staff knows why they do what they do. Employees do not respond well when they do not understand the *why* of their work. If they begin to feel that there is no rhyme or reason to their effort, their motivation suffers. Recall that as knowledge workers, we need understanding and purpose in order to thrive. And yes, explanation takes time. But as we explained in number 1, above, time spent with employees up front reduces time spent on the back end. There will be less confusion about what is to be delivered, and motivation and product quality will be higher from the outset.

Sometimes there is no good reason why, and care must be taken in providing the explanation. Politics, another's finicky behavior, or an executive's iron-fist directive may be at issue. But there is still a "why," and your team needs to understand it (just be sure to avoid blame or gossip).

"Because" is just not sufficient reason anymore. We are engaging a new generation of young people, a new generation of knowledge workers. If they do not know or understand why they do what they do, you will lose them. They may not have the option of walking off the job site, but they surely will do so from a mental standpoint. So tell your people why they do what they do or at least why they are being asked to do what you want them to do. Motivation will follow.

- **Be a coach. Practice coaching.** Good coaches motivate full time—on the practice field, during the game, and after the game. To lead and motivate their teams effectively, today's managers need to think of themselves as coaches. Be aware that what you say and do and how you teach and explain is as critical as anything a coach might say during the World Series.

Your words and actions have an impact on people's lives. Be cognizant of what you say and do *at all times*. *Coach* at all times.

Because there is no shortage of good and bad opinions on coaching, we direct you to Wikipedia:

*[W]hen referring to getting coached by a professional coach, [coaching] is a teaching, training, or development process in which an individual gets support while learning to achieve a specific personal or professional result or goal. The individual receiving coaching may be referred to as the client or coachee, or they may be in an intern or apprenticeship relationship with the person coaching them. Occasionally the term coaching may be applied to an informal relationship between one individual who has greater experience and expertise than another and offers advice and guidance as the other goes through a learning process. This form of coaching is similar to mentoring. The structures, models, and methodologies of coaching are numerous and may be designed to facilitate thinking or learning new behavior for personal growth or professional advancement. There are also forms of coaching that help the coachee improve a physical skill, like in a sport or performing art form. Some coaches use a style in which they ask questions and offer opportunities that will challenge the coachee to find answers from within him/herself. This facilitates the learner to discover answers and new ways of being based on their values, preferences, and unique perspective.*

This needs to be you all of the time. Good coaching boosts motivation; bad coaching de-motivates people. Practice coaching. Motivate your people by being a good coach, a positive leader, and a fine example for all to follow.

- **Eat—yes, eat—with your people often.** This is a motivational tip for all to love! Eating is perhaps the longest of intimate traditions in all cultures. In our hurry-up Western society (particularly our U.S. fast food society, which translates to fast food relationships), we have forgotten the value of taking time to eat with one another. In many other cultures, no work is done prior to eating. Eating demonstrates that you can be polite, that you enjoy others' company, that

you are interested in their well-being, and that you respect them and their time. Feeding ourselves requires etiquette and manners, and when we act manfully in front of our people, we engender respect and foster motivation; as a result, our employees will seek to improve their work effort and to be better people.

Now take eating with your staff to the next level: try for at least 30 minutes to not talk about work. You will need to practice this. Because we always talk about work, it will be difficult not to. While you certainly cannot keep others from doing so, you can steer the conversation toward something else. It will show your people that you are interested in them, not just in their work. When they know that you care about their lives, they will feel that they are valued members of your team and thus will feel motivated to do more good work. Continue to show that you appreciate their efforts.

For example, we are closet geographers, so we like to talk about where folks grew up and have lived—it is an easy ice breaker..) Chat about your favorite non-work-related thing so you can speak with sincerity.

Recently we took a team to a local coffee shop for coffee and scones; you would have thought we had bought them a steak dinner and a round of golf! In 20-plus years of buying a whole lot of food, we have never seen people more grateful. The results were amazing: an offsite meeting that cost a whopping \$28 produced a sense of camaraderie that was invaluable. Just the idea that a manager cared enough to get a team out of its offices and to pay for a cup of coffee did more to increase motivation than a \$300, one-hour Carnegie webinar ever could have. (Please note: If you do not have an expense account, spend your own money; it will come back to you tenfold.) Eating with people shows that you enjoy their company, that you are willing to share your personal time, and that you value not only their contribution at work but them as people. Eating with others fuels motivation, as it has for cons. Eat with your people as Napoleon and Sister Teresa ate with theirs.

- **“Just say no” to negativity and despair; be positive at all (or almost all) times.** Negativity is an obvious motivation killer. There is hardly a worse behavior than being Eeyore in front of your team every day.

If you continually despair, why should anyone feel motivated to do work for you? People don't want to spend time with—let alone work for—someone who is constantly complaining about how bad his life is and how nothing is ever going to get better. If life is that bad, please talk to a professional outside of work; if you do not, you inevitably will drag your employees down with you.

Be positive—not a Pollyanna, but positive. Your people need to know that today is a good day that is worth being grateful for. They should know and feel from you that it is purposeful to have hope and faith that tomorrow can be an even better day. Despair is despairing—and absolutely no fun to be around. No matter how good a person's attitude, it will suffer once Dr. Negativity walks in the door. Worse, it will take time to restore people's attitudes, and productivity will be lost forever.

Today's economy is too competitive for us to sacrifice time by being negative. You are paid to manage your people efficiently and productively so they accomplish work that keeps your organization moving forward, competitive, and profitable. Lose the negativity.

- **Practice the motivational words for the meta-(wo) men: finding humanity.** How seldom do we hear such phrases as “way to go,” “nice,” and “perfect?” All humans should be required to be kind to all other humans (wouldn't such a rule be great?). Learn to use words wisely and often. Do not patronize your staff; rather, speak the words they have earned. Not everyone needs to practice this skill, but those who do (and you know who you are) should begin doing so immediately.

What is the best way in which to proceed? Make a list of the kinds of things you should say according to this tenth of our first ten items. Stick the list on your bathroom mirror if you must. The point is to practice affirming your staff out loud so you can hear what it sounds like. If you find it difficult to tell folks that they have done well, then you probably ought to consider your own ego and make some adjustments. Speak to the mirror, talk to your cat, shout at the dog:

“Way to go!” “Nice!” “Proud of you!” “Perfect!” “I am grateful for what you do.” “Keep it up!” “Please,

you are really helping the team with this.” “Way to go (oh, said that!)” “Great work; nice!” “Thank you.” “Thanks, I do not know what I would have done this week without you.” “I need you on this one.” “Help me get this done.” “We need to do just a bit better.” “Thanks a lot—now go get ’em.”

Ask questions as you motivate and manage: “Can I have that by [fill in the date]?” “Can you help me today?” “Let’s eat!” “Let’s go get coffee.” “What are your kids’ names?” “Do you have a dog?”

Practice saying these things, please! Too many managers do not know how to compliment their people. For that matter, many do not know how to accept a compliment, either. What a shame! If you are going to be a motivator, then you had better speak the language; most important, you must mean it. If you are just mouthing the words, people will figure you out quick.

On the other hand, we knew a man who complimented everyone all day every day. His compliments were meaningless because no one took him seriously. He did good work, but folks knew what was coming as soon as he approached.

Be proud to be a good manager. Take pride in what you do, and motivate out of kindness and sincerity.

In closing, celebrate!

Why do we close with a celebration? Because it is done too seldom, despite its necessity in keeping our teams interested in their work life. We must show our employees that doing great work is a great thing. Reaching a goal is no small accomplishment, and it should not be belittled by simply moving on to the next project or maintenance item. We must stop to celebrate with our faculty and staff both the micro-deliverables and the huge successes. Higher education is too often a world of rejection. When we win, we need to feel as though we have won, not as

though we are treading water. When we win, we must stop, take notice, and then celebrate. Do not let moments of accomplishment pass without recognition and celebration. Use celebrations to motivate and encourage. Think of them as the gasoline that fuels the car, the food that fuels their motivation. It is essential. And it, too, requires practice and repetition.

People need motivation. They are not machines. They need to feel good about their work, that it has a purpose, and that they are expected to do good work. Motivation must be practiced: Just as one gets good at hitting a baseball by practicing hitting, so management and motivation need to be practiced. Knowledge workers do not last long in any position if it is really just all about the money. Today’s workers are not mercenaries but must be motivated back into humanity and into excellence in the workplace. Look for greatness. Expect greatness. Motivate it. Recognize it. Celebrate it. Then sit back and enjoy it.

Until next time,  
Karl and Mike

## About the Authors

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**KARL E. BURGHER, PH.D., P.E.**, is the former Chief Strategy Officer and currently a Professor of the Built Environment at Indiana State University (ISU). Over the last four years, he managed the implementation of ISU’s current strategic plan, overseeing 45 teams and well over 300 specifically defined projects in a PM-like matrix fashion. Karl learned PM techniques “on the street” working in the construction industry for ten years as an explosives engineer. He then managed many federal research and education contracts as a Center Director and as a Vice President of Research. Karl earned a B.S. and an M.S. in mining engineering from Michigan Technological University and a B.S. in economics and a Ph.D. in mining engineering from the former University of Missouri-Rolla (now Missouri University of Science and Technology).

**MICHAEL B. SNYDER, PMP**, is the newly appointed Executive Director of Strategic Initiatives for Indiana State University (ISU). He has been a project manager for more than a dozen years, first in the Fortune 500 private-sector environment and in higher education for the past five. His current focus is the maintenance and growth of ISU’s strategic plan and the hardening of the enterprise-wide use of ISU’s CRM via the management of BI and IR. Mike earned his bachelor’s degree in computer science, specializing in business systems, from Pacific Lutheran University and expects to complete his M.B.A. at ISU in May 2014.

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