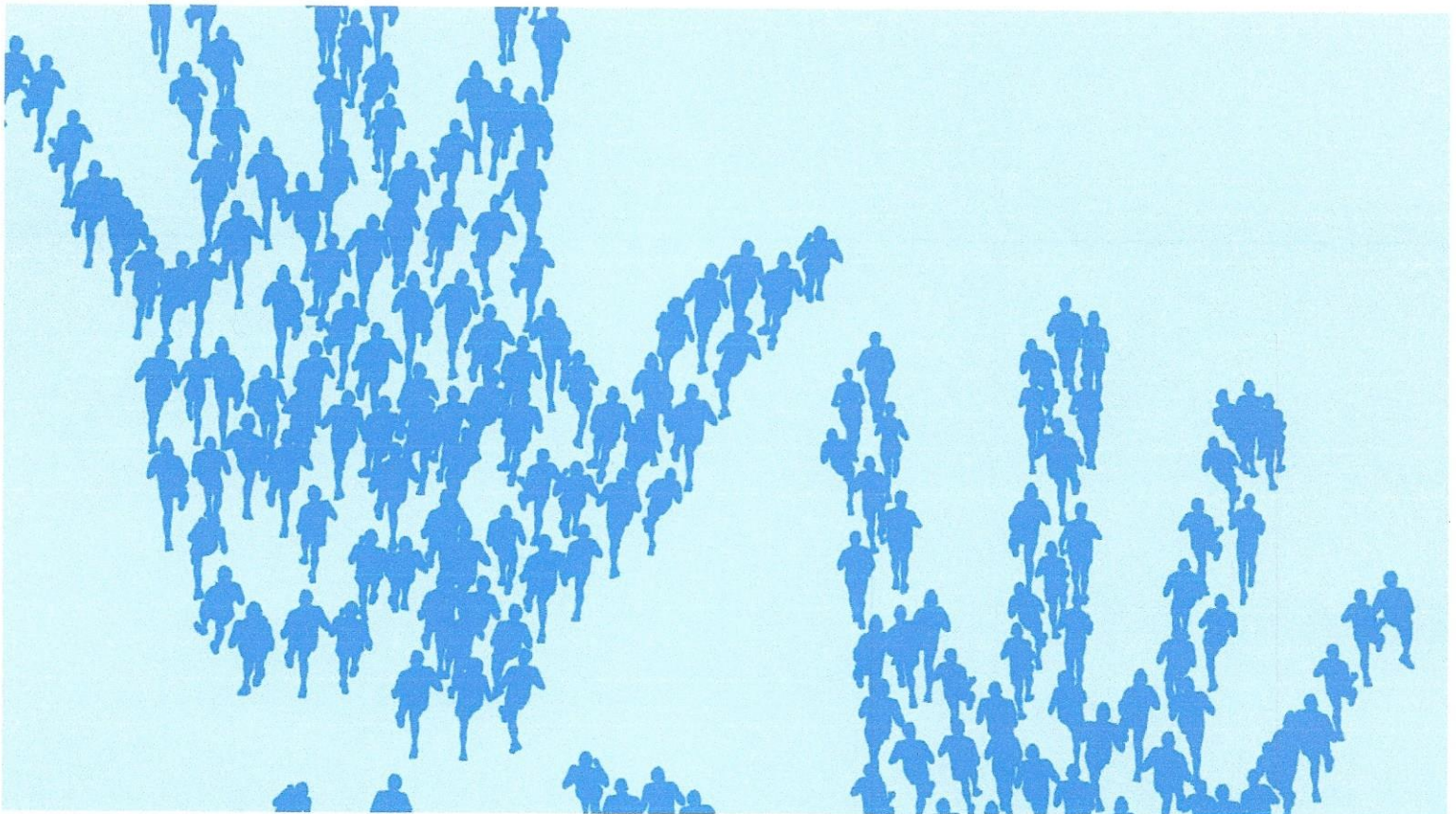LEADING TEAMS

Motivating People Starts with Having the Right Attitude

by Monique Valcour

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Most leaders know what strong motivation looks like. When I ask leadership development clients to describe the type of motivation they'd like to see in their teams, they mention qualities such as persistence, being a self-starter, having a sense of accountability for and commitment to achieving results, and being willing to go the extra mile on projects or to help other team members. But many leaders have little idea of how to boost or sustain that level of motivation.

Many leaders don't understand that they are an integral part of the motivational ecosystem in their companies. The motivational qualities listed above appear most frequently when employees feel valued, trusted, challenged, and supported in their work — all things that leaders can influence. For better or worse, leaders' attitudes and behaviors have a huge effect on employees' drive and capacity to perform.

One problem that gets in the way is a mechanistic, instrumental view of the human beings who sit at our companies' desks. Seeing compensation as the primary or only tool we can use to motivate high performance is like trying to build a house with only a hammer. What gets lost is that incentives, regardless of which ones are applied, filter through employees' brains along with every other aspect of the employment experience. How employees experience work from day to day has a bigger influence on their motivation than their compensation and benefits package.

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Another barrier to a leader's capacity to motivate is the widespread, mistaken belief that motivation is an inherent property of the employee — "they either have it or they don't." In fact, motivation is a dynamic process, not a stable employee characteristic. When we judge an employee to be irredeemably unmotivated, we give up on trying to motivate them. A vicious cycle ensues, in which our attitude and behaviors elicit exactly those behaviors we expect from an unmotivated employee, which in turn reinforces and justifies our verdict and approach. Everybody loses: The organization is deprived of the employee's full contribution, the leader acts unskillfully, and the employee grows increasingly disengaged.

Managers generally start out with the best of intentions. After all, whenever we hire someone new, we expect that they will be motivated. Later, if performance or engagement lags, we experience frustration at the "unmotivated, entitled" employee. It often goes something like this: "As a leader, I

started out caring very much about the emotional needs of staff. Unfortunately, all this brought about was overentitlement and making it OK to use your feelings to waste time and create a negative environment. I have evolved to care less about feelings and more about getting the work done, period. As long as my expectations are clear, people get paid, and they have a safe environment, there is no room for the rest of it in the workplace." I found this comment on a leadership article posted on the HBR Facebook page, but it could have come from the mouths of the countless leaders I've met during my career. Even if a leader feels perfectly justified in taking this approach, giving the impression that employees' subjective experience of work doesn't matter will only serve to dampen employee motivation.

It is entirely possible for leaders to learn to motivate even those employees they've given up on. As an example, I recently coached a leader who's responsible for a global organization's operations in an Eastern European country. A man in his fifties with a military background, he complained of being saddled with an underperforming team member he couldn't fire: "He's basically useless. All I can do is contain him so he doesn't screw anything up – and lean on my capable people to get our work done." The leader gave the employee routine, low-value work to do, didn't share important information with him, didn't bother to meet with him, and never sought his input or contribution to important projects. "Why bother with him? I can't change him, and I don't have time to waste on someone who's unmotivated," he insisted at first. Through coaching, the leader came to appreciate that these choices, which he initially saw as rational responses to a motivational deficiency in the employee, actually worsened the problem. He realized that seeing his employee as useless was only one of many possible perspectives he could take – and that it limited his leadership effectiveness. After shifting his approach from containment to facilitation, he saw substantial gains in the employee's outward motivation and performance, to the point where the employee became a valuable member of the team.

To make the shift that boosted his employee's motivation, this leader had to be fearless in examining his own thinking and patterns of behavior. He recognized and admitted that he didn't see his employee as a whole human being, but rather as an object and a problem. He had to develop curiosity about what the situation was like from the employee's point of view. He had to experience that valuing his employee's perspective opened up avenues for motivation. As he started talking

more with his employee, giving him challenging work, seeking his input, and including him in important projects, the employee responded with increased enthusiasm and commitment. "I can't believe what a difference it makes," he told me after a few sessions.

I believe that most interpersonal problems that arise in the world, whether in relationships, companies, or nations, come down to the fundamental difficulty humans have in seeing things from others' perspectives. When we make assumptions about what employees believe and value, interpreting their behaviors according to our assumptions, we reduce their humanity and their complexity. The very phrase "human resources" frames employees as material to be deployed for organizational objectives. While the essential nature of employment contracts involves trading labor for remuneration, if we fail to see and appreciate our employees as whole people, efforts to motivate them will meet with limited success. Instead of thinking about how we can control our employees, let's focus on how we can motivate them. A good place to start is by reflecting on the best boss you've ever had. How did this boss make you feel? What did this boss do to earn your admiration? Try to harvest some of that boss's motivational strategies and make them your own.

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