

Ask An Expert: Motivating Staff in Lean Times

By [Linda Russell-Callecod](#), University Consulting Alliance Member



What can I do to motivate my staff in lean times?

Particularly during lean times, staff members feel the need to maximize their contributions and want assurance that their skills and contributions are valued. Your staff members know their department is operating with fewer people and resources, so they are looking (often anxiously) to you to make the decisions, to act in ways that will enhance their abilities—and therein lies the key to how to motivate them. Here are three tactics for doing just that.

1. Lead Louder

No, not louder volume—lead with greater visibility. Now is not the time for ambiguity or muddled priorities.

To lead louder:

- Provide more specific direction.
- “Fight” for your team members and let them see you doing so.
- Be “on it.” This will reassure them things aren’t slipping through the cracks and that their contributions are on your radar screen.
- Communicate your department’s Big Picture vision (the Why and What) so they know their actions contribute to a greater purpose.
- Push the decision-making process down to the lowest level possible and involve your team members in the “hows” of executing the plan.

2. Customize Recognition

Show that you care about them and that you care about success. Use the lean times to invest more time in getting to know your people better and to build positive relationships with them. Recognize their effort and show them appropriate appreciation in ways that will mean the most to them and will keep them engaged:

- Are they “**go getters**” who are focused on bottom-line results more than socializing? Then acknowledge their successes person-to-person, share business strategy with them, and give them greater responsibility and ownership.
- Are they **outgoing, fun-loving** socialites whom everybody seems to know and love? Give them public praise for their accomplishments and provide opportunities for them to share their creative ideas with you and other team members. Give them a fun people-project to work on.
- Are they **relationship-oriented** individuals who seem to know and remember everyone’s birthday and special days? Do they seem to know how the team is “feeling,” strive to keep

harmony between team members, and tend to avoid conflict? Then write them a hand-written note (not an email) expressing your appreciation for their successes and acknowledging them for being good team players. Tell them as much as you can about how and when changes are being made, and what their role is in the change. Ask these team members to keep you informed as to the temperature and stress-level of the team, and they will.

- Are they **detailed-oriented** individuals who are always asking questions and providing you with data and historical background? Do they seem to enjoy working alone and double-check all their work? Then privately acknowledge their work (in writing; email is fine) and explain why their contributions benefit the team and/or organization. Allow them to be your research and “check-and-balance” people; they can provide you with valuable background information when trying to navigate with limited resources.

3. Develop Everyone

Lean times are great times for development because everyone on your staff is motivated to appear more productive. They are more likely to be receptive to delegation and challenges you provide that will grow their skills. Here are a six ideas from the book *Love ‘Em or Lose ‘Em*.

- Combine tasks and cross-train when possible.
- Create self-directed work groups that can make a lot of their own decisions—they can redistribute work in ways that increase variety.
- Increase feedback and create mentorships.
- Nurture creativity by rewarding new ideas.
- Stay alert to opportunities for all your employees; encourage their thoughts and ideas, and develop enrichment projects when possible.
- Be willing to let go and share the control of power.

What kind of return on investment can I expect from motivating my staff?

Motivation is often perceived as something you do almost exclusively for your staff—but it also provides specific benefits to you as a leader:

- Loyalty—your ROI is retention.
- Team members are willing to “stretch”—you get a bigger bang for your buck.
- Greater creativity and energy towards results—you get “more, better, and faster” results.
- Increased focus—they think better and work smarter.
- Positive attitudes and increased energy—you get greater productivity with fewer complaints.
- Trust and increased feedback—your team will begin telling you what you need to hear and that will help you perform more efficiently and effectively.

Leaders are individuals who are able to see and articulate vision, pursue change through aligning people with resources, and organize people and systems to accomplish these objectives. They are influencers. The *true* power-holders in leadership are actually the followers and collaborators. Motivate them towards goal achievement, and the reward will be accomplishments that could not have otherwise been achieved, especially in times that are lean. This is your opportunity!