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How Busy Executives Inspire and Motivate Employees

No matter how personally productive you are on a daily basis, you can't advance your company's goals if your employees aren't inspired to do the same. As a business leader, your job is to motivate them.

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In order for a company to grow and thrive, employees need to embrace its values, understand its goals and be dedicated to its success. Financial incentives only go so far and it's the job of the CEO and other executive leaders to inspire and motivate employees.

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interviewed in this piece, communication is a top priority — and they're finding that a mix of methods is the most effective.

Connecting With Your Employees

Tony Prince founded IT security company LURHQ in 1996 with his wife in their garage and grew it to more than 100 employees. He sold it after a decade and has since ran a couple of other IT businesses. Recently, Prince became CEO of [PhishLabs](#), a cybersecurity company that is based in Charleston, South Carolina, and employs around 130 people.

Communication, Prince says, is not a “one-size-fits-all” approach, which is why he likes going beyond [formal meetings](#).

“Informal one-on-ones is what makes a difference,” says Prince, who meets with each of his top leaders, informally and impromptu, at least once a week, and has instituted these meetings across the company.

“I enjoy spending time with my leaders and making sure we have a shared vision,” he says.

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Employees need to feel connected, and to achieve that, senior leaders must regularly make themselves available, “be where the work is, be present while there and open themselves up to questions,” says Jeff Thompson, M.D., author of *Lead True: Live Your Values, Build Your People, Inspire Your Community*.

Thompson, a pediatrician, was the CEO for Wisconsin-based healthcare organization [Gundersen Health System](#) for 14 years before transitioning in 2015 to the role of CEO emeritus and executive adviser. The organization, which has six hospitals and 60 clinics, grew from 4,000 to 7,000 employees during his CEO tenure.

“Intentional [communication](#) is important, but don’t leave it to the chain of command,” he says. “That’s the weak link in communication.”



If you don't love what you're doing and don't have that passion, people pick up on that in a heartbeat.

—Alan T. Handley, CEO, Lakeshore Recycling Systems

Listening to ideas is empowering but what’s harder is to listen for what employees are not saying, says Cheri Beranek, president and CEO of Minneapolis-based [Clearfield](#). The company, which employs more than 200 people, manufactures fiber-optic management products.

“Sometimes the hardest thing for an employee to do is tell their manager they are wrong,” she says. “I am not as good at this as I’d like, but having thick skin and the ability to take upward constructive criticism will go much farther than any fancy scorecard.”

Creating a Culture of Trust

Alan T. Handley was hired as the CEO of Chicago-based [Lakeshore Recycling Systems](#) in 2013 after two family-owned businesses merged into one company with 200 employees. Since then, he has more than tripled sales and has grown the company to about 750 employees and seven locations serving the greater Chicago area. One strategy that’s worked through this kind of growth is building strong trust with those he interacts with directly.

He says when he worked for other people as a younger person, he “hated that sense of ambiguity” that came with not knowing whether he was doing a good job.

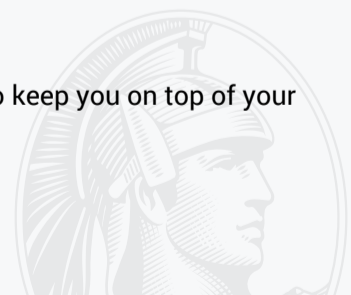
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“Nobody leaves my office every day wondering where they stand at the company,” he says. “They all know where they stand... and I look out ferociously for them, making sure they get the budgets, resources and people they need.”

Understanding employees’ motivations, vision of the future and challenges is paramount to building trust, Prince believes. This includes getting to know about their personal lives, families and interests outside of work.

"I routinely find myself talking about things outside of work too, because that's being real," he says.

For Thompson, building trust sometimes means going against unconventional wisdom. When his company's margins were down during the recent recession, he didn't want to lay off frontline staff. The decision wasn't popular with the board of directors and even jeopardized his job—Thompson says he was told he could be easily replaced. The staff were so touched, he says, that even years later some still talk about it.

"We did a lot of very hard things but we didn't pull the easy switch just to make the numbers look better," he says. "A value-based leader doesn't look for someone else to take a beating."

For some leaders, inspiring employees starts with themselves—and having passion for their own work.

That passion helps drive "a massively positive attitude" that's infectious, says Handley of Lakeshore Recycling Systems.

"If you don't love what you're doing and don't have that passion, people pick up on that in a heartbeat," he says.

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