

BusinessWeek

OUTSIDE SHOT September 24, 2009, 5:00PM EST

The No-Cost Way to Motivate

A manager's genuine interest in employees' lives pays off at every level, in every job

By [Patrick Lencioni](#)

"Now listen to me, all of you. You are all condemned men. We keep you alive to serve this ship. So row well, and live." Those were the words of Quintus Arrius in the movie *Ben-Hur*. And while he was speaking to Roman slaves, one can almost imagine a modern version coming from a manager today. "O.K., people, you all know that unemployment is at a 50-year high. You're lucky to have jobs. So work hard, and no more complaining."

Lost amid the justifiable concern about the 9.7% of U.S. workers who are unemployed is the well-being of the other 90.3%, many of whom are miserable. They feel they're out of options and that management has little incentive to make their work lives more meaningful.

Even well-intentioned managers—as most are—feel their hands are now tied when it comes to motivating and engaging their workers. Salaries are stagnant. Perks and benefits are only going to get slimmer. What can they do?

Plenty—and one important way to motivate and engage your team is just as available and cost-effective as it has always been. Perhaps it's overlooked because it's so ridiculously simple; it's something even the worst managers get and the best ones can forget. In fact, I am reluctant to write about it here because it is so patently obvious. But then I think about that quote from 18th century writer Samuel Johnson: "People need to be reminded more often than they need to be instructed."

So here's a reminder for managers: Take an active, genuine interest in the lives of your employees. (And since I'm doling out obvious advice, don't forget to wash behind your ears.)

One of the greatest causes of misery for employees is the feeling that the person they work for isn't interested in who they are and what goes on in their lives, personally or professionally. Regardless of how much money people make and whether their jobs suit them, if they feel anonymous they'll dread going to work—and return home deflated.

I see this in every industry, at every level. One woman I know of had a great job at a nonprofit she loved, so she was at a loss to explain why she felt unfulfilled. After she had her first child and returned to work, she realized why: For two months her manager failed to ask her about the arrival of her baby, the most important event in her life.

A manager needs to be interested in employees from a professional standpoint, too, not only in job details but also in motivation. And a big part of this is helping people figure out why their job matters to someone, somewhere, in some way large or small. For a brain surgeon, firefighter, or priest this is obvious, but for an accounts payable clerk or a pizza delivery guy, it requires a bit more thought. It's essential, however, to finding fulfillment at work.

It's amazing how many high-profile, highly paid employees are as miserable as anyone else when their managers don't seem interested in them. Take, for instance, professional football players. Based on my work with NFL teams, I can attest that misery is alive and well among the players. Most fans can't understand. After all, these athletes are paid

exorbitant salaries for playing a child's game for half the year.

Anonymity certainly shouldn't be the cause. Fans and the media dote on the players. But it's an employee's manager who needs to take an interest—and that doesn't happen often in the NFL. A few years ago I spent time with an NFL head coach who had just traded for a talented but troubled player. When I asked the coach, a remarkably decent guy, if he would get to know the new player, try to understand what made him tick, he said: "Nah. This is pro ball, Pat. We're adults. This is a job." The player was 24 years old.

Even among executives, I find that anonymity is a bigger problem than many will admit. So many CEOs and top executives convince themselves that the senior managers they hire are big boys and girls who don't need to be managed like employees anymore. They're shocked to find out later, often after someone leaves, how much their personal detachment affected that employee's work experience.

The truth is, whether we're managing executives in a global technology company, linebackers in the NFL, or rowers in the hull of a ship, if we can't find a way to take an interest in our employees as people, we're committing them to a miserable work life. And that makes ships go a lot slower.

Jack and Suzy Welch are off while Jack recovers from a back infection.

*Patrick Lencioni is the author of several books, including *The Three Signs of a Miserable Job* and *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*, and is the founder and president of management consultancy *The Table Group*.*