

How to Inspire Others to Peak Performance

By Nido Qubein

It's probably true that most people who work with us will never care as deeply as we do about building our business and serving our clients. If they did, they'd probably be working for themselves.

Yet there's a great deal we can do to raise the level of their commitment and inspire them to peak performance. The operative word in the preceding sentence is inspire. You can demand that people who work for you be punctual, or that they perform at a certain level of output, or even that they do things reasonably well. Yet real commitment can only be inspired. And, inspiring people is what great leaders like John F. Kennedy and Lee Iacocca did best.

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How do great leaders such as these inspire others to commit themselves to their goals? It's not just that they have charismatic personalities, or that they give a lot of high-powered motivational talks. What they do is communicate their vision so forcefully that other people adopt it as their own vision.

For example, in the early sixties, President Kennedy set his sights on putting a man on the moon, and told the American people "We can do it!" He said it with such conviction that masses of people believed it, and committed themselves to making it happen. And, sure enough, in less than a decade, the first human being had walked on the moon.

Lee Iacocca stepped into the ailing Chrysler Corporation and said "We're going to turn this company around!" With clear goals, a solid plan of action, and a strong conviction, he was able to inspire enough commitment from the U.S. Congress that he secured the largest loan ever made to a private company. Then he inspired enough commitment in thousands of Chrysler workers to enable the company to pay back the loan ahead of schedule.

That's the formula for any leader to inspire commitment -- clear goals, a solid plan of action, and a strong conviction. If you can communicate that to the people who work with you, you will have the kind of loyalty that makes them go the second mile. And the third and fourth miles if that's what it takes to get the job done.

Of course, it takes more than inspiration to run a successful sales function. The people who work with you have to consistently perform at very high levels. And, to get that kind of performance, you have to gain their trust. They have to believe that you will always be fair in your dealings with them, and that you are concerned about their best interests.

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One of the most helpful insights I ever learned about leading others is that people do things for their reasons, not for your reasons or for mine. So the goals, the plan of action, and the strong conviction has to be communicated in a way that directly answers the question: "What's in it for me?"

When people honestly believe they will benefit directly from their efforts, and that the more they give the more they will benefit, they will perform at peak levels. So it's crucial that you show people how they will grow as they work individually and together to make the company grow, and then back up all your promises with solid actions.

People don't back good causes. They respond to clear opportunities for personal and professional growth. If I may paraphrase the Hallmark slogan, when people care enough, they'll give their very best!

But how can you move past the empty rhetoric and translate your vision into concrete actions your people can identify with and get excited about? Let me suggest ten proven techniques for building a solid team:

1. Tie compensation, in every conceivable way, to the income people create. Profit sharing is one way you can do it, but that tends to reward everybody equally, regardless of how much effort they put into making the company profitable. A better way is to structure all or a part of everyone's pay, from the janitor to the president, around a mutually beneficial incentive plan. That way, the better job they do, the more money they'll make.

2. Give constant public recognition for outstanding performance. The fact is that we all like to look good in the presence of our peers. So, if you can document that someone has done a job very well, give him or her a public pat on the back. If it's really good, throw in a tangible benefit. It will make everybody feel like giving more of themselves to the team effort.

3. Constantly ask for input and ideas. People are usually much more enthusiastic about supporting decisions and plans they help to make. So it helps a great deal to get ideas and input from any staff person whose job will be affected by any upcoming decision. When your staff members quit talking about the company, and start talking about our company, you know you've got a team.

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4. Promote people on the basis of abilities, not just because they've performed well or have been around a long time. Make sure that anyone you promote has the skills and knowledge they need to do well in the new position.

5. Assume that everyone needs to be trained for every new assignment. If you're lucky, you'll have one or two people who can plough into almost anything and do well at it. But most people need initial and on-going training.

6. Constantly play the role of coach and mentor. Encourage people to keep growing and taking on new challenges. Guide their growth in ways that benefit your organization. Deal with mistakes and problems quickly, tactfully and forthrightly.

7. Practice good human relations. Make people feel valued and important by treating them with dignity and respect.

8. Provide plenty of opportunities for people to grow, both personally and professionally.

9. Keep your personnel policies simple, clear and fair -- then firmly enforce them. It doesn't help to have policies that no one understands, and it's even worse to let people constantly get away with violating them.

10. Weed out the prima donnas and poor performers before they spoil the whole team.

It takes a lot of patience and effort to build a solid team of people who will share and help you fulfill your vision, but the results will be well worth all you put into it.

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