

3 Words That Really Work to Motivate Your Employees

When you think about your annual physical exam, you may be worried that your doctor is going to criticize your choices, deliver disappointing news, or find something frightening. Those are the kinds of concerns that prevent people from reaching out to their physician for help. But feeling judged, disheartened, or afraid isn't just for patients. It may be how your colleagues, clients or direct reports feel if you're not thoughtful about the words you use.

Doctors know that their words can be a part of the healing process - or deepen the hurting. And leaders in every industry need to recognize this as well.

In a workshop I led, 30 doctors shared what words they avoid using because they're likely to increase fear and decrease motivation. We then discussed what words they use instead, because they're more likely to increase hope and decrease resistance.

Based on that conversation, here are three substitutions that you can make:

1. Don't say "lazy", say "busy".

In your office: "Lazy" implies that someone is unwilling to do the work or make the effort. And while you may have a colleague, client or direct report whom you really think isn't willing to sweat (literally or figuratively), calling them "lazy" is not likely to inspire them to roll up their sleeves and become proactive. In fact, using the word "lazy" tends to make others feel judged and criticized.

Instead, acknowledge that your colleague is "busy", and empathize with the fact that they may be trying to manage multiple competing priorities. Then see how you can support them in removing some of the roadblocks, or re-prioritizing their workload, or even getting curious about when they think they can commit to tackling this task.

2. Don't say "ruin", say "wake-up call".

In your office: While telling your colleague that their lack of proofreading is ruining the deliverable - and your trust in them - might shame them into compliance, it's not likely to give them a sense of control over the future. When you see a small problem, address it immediately as a "wake up call" for your colleague to get it handled before it escalates into something bigger - with potentially permanent ramifications.

3. Don't say "can't", say "opportunity to..."

In your office: Your direct report wants to take on a new, challenging project - and "own it". You don't think they have the knowledge or the skill, to have the level of autonomy that they think they are ready for. You could tell them, "I can't let you run with it," which may undercut their enthusiasm. You could tell them, "You can't do this on your own yet," which may sap their confidence. Or, you could tell them, "Let's use this project as a learning opportunity. Let's partner together on it this time, with the goal of you being able to take it on yourself next time."

With a few tweaks to your language, you can engage, motivate and inspire others to make challenging changes less daunting.