

How to Motivate Someone You Don't

The odds are pretty low that you'll like *everyone* you have to manage. And while you may think that disliking an employee or two isn't something to be concerned about (after all, making friends isn't the point of being a manager), it can actually interfere with your job. A caring manager is [key to employee engagement](#). When you have negative feelings toward an employee, chances are that person will feel less motivated. That disengagement can, in turn, affect your entire team and the outcome of important projects – which ultimately reflects badly upon you.

In my experience, it's almost impossible for managers to motivate people they don't like (except perhaps with fear, which is not ideal). So, for the sake of employee engagement — and your own mental health — it's important to invest some energy in learning to like at least *something* about each of your direct reports.

Before you even try to motivate a person you don't like, take ownership of your feelings and assumptions. If the phrase “He makes me so angry” or “She drives me nuts” ever plays in your head, you need to change your thinking. Recognize that anger, frustration, or mistrust is *your* reaction and that no one has the ability to make you feel something without your consent. Be curious about why you react the way you do and see if you can get to the root of the issue. You need to own your dislike; your team member does not.

Once you have a sense of what behaviors or characteristics you're reacting to, employ one or more of the strategies below:

1. If you feel uncomfortable around an employee, increase your time together. It may sound like counterintuitive advice, but if you feel awkward, frustrated, or angry around one of your employees, you probably try to avoid her and may even struggle to make eye contact when you're together. Imagine how demoralizing it can be for the employee whose boss won't even look her in the eye!

To change the dynamic, you need to actually create *more* opportunities to be together, so you can get to know the person's back-story. This will have two benefits: First, you'll get used to her quirks, which will make you more comfortable with them. Second, you'll learn about what makes her tick and how you can tap into those values as a source of motivation. Try opening up a conversation by saying, “You and I haven't had much of an opportunity to get to know one another. What are the most important things to know about you?”

2. If you find an employee's habits annoying, focus on the positive. Constantly focusing on what you want the person to change can really be a downer (for both of you). Instead, redirect your attention to what you *do* like and respect about the person. Think about one trait or habit that impresses you—even if it's a strength that is sometimes over-applied. Does the person plan diligently? Is he a fan favorite among customers? Does he bring attention to the risks inherent in your strategies? Pay more attention to the positive contributions that you want to encourage. The employee will be motivated by hearing how the team is counting on his strengths to be successful.

Imagine a sales associate who is being pushy with clients. If you reframe the pushiness as persistence, you can encourage that behavior while opening up a conversation about when it's appropriate to back off. You could say something like "I've been watching you on the floor today and you are really giving it your all. I admire your persistence. At the same time, I've noticed that it doesn't seem to work with everyone; when do you think it might be best not to approach someone a second time?"

3. If you think your employee acts disrespectfully, get to the root of the behavior. If the source of your dislike for an employee is bad behavior, (e.g., bullying, self-promotion, disrespect) you won't be able to motivate the person unless you have some empathy. Most bad behavior is not intentionally destructive; it's self-protective. Figure out what the person is trying to protect. Does he have fragile self-esteem? Is she worried about something? Dig deep. Ask open-ended questions such as "What's going on for you?" or "What did this discussion trigger?" or "What are you concerned about?"

When you figure out what's beneath the behavior, you'll have a better sense of how to motivate good behavior. For example, if you uncover a self-esteem issue, you might determine that an employee needs more opportunities in the spotlight, or that another might be more motivated by small, manageable assignments that allow room for growth without taking undue risk.

Regardless of the source of your dislike for an employee, motivating him or her will be very difficult until you can improve the connection. If you want to be direct about it, you can express your desire to improve the relationship with a statement such as, "I feel like we got off to a bad start and I'd like to change that." If you want to be more subtle about it, you can signal that you are open to changing your relationship by slowly including the person in more activities, using her as a positive example when talking to the whole team, or just by using your eye contact and body language to be more inclusive.

It's not your job as a manager to be everyone's friend. But if a sour relationship is affecting your ability to motivate an employee, the risk is that he will fail, and so will you. Take ownership of your relationships with your direct reports and make the small changes that will help you reframe how you think about them. Even if you don't end up becoming friendly, your relationship will at least be strong enough to keep the other person motivated.

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