



# Mastering

BY JOE TAKASH

# Motivation

**LEGAL ADMINISTRATORS CAN FOLLOW FOUR KEY STEPS TO MOTIVATE THEIR ATTORNEYS AND STAFFS AND DRIVE BUSINESS SUCCESS**

**Question:** How do you motivate people in an economy that is highly unstable and perpetuates fear?

**Answer:** With encouragement, optimism, and honest communication.

This may seem counterintuitive to task-driven managers who focus on the news headlines and the bottom numbers in their ledgers. Granted, the economy is shaky, and companies in almost every industry, including the legal profession, are either feeling the tremors or getting hit head-on by the financial power outage. Things have changed dramatically and in a short period of time, leaving countless organizations thinking, "I have no control over this."

On the contrary. The market will go up and down, but obsessing over it often causes good businesses to make bad decisions. A prudent investment is to focus on building human capital, and it starts with influencing your people to perform at a higher level.

The need for legal administrators and other leaders to manage relationships with staff, attorneys, and even clients is greater than ever, but what specific actions are required? The following four steps, if implemented, can help tremendously.

**1. PRACTICE EMOTIONAL CONTROL.** It's easy to lead when times are good and business is flowing like fine wine. However, when times are stressed, does your impersonal autopilot take over put the business process before the welfare of your people? You may justify calculated decisions by saying, "it's business," but if you need people for business, remember this: People don't care how much you know until they know how much you care. Employee loyalty and trust are developed most effectively by those who can be relied upon to connect with others respectfully, timely, and competently. How you connect with others when times are hot says a lot about how they will respond to you when things go cold. The area where our thoughts and decisions filter through is typically emotional. True "thought leaders" are able to execute at a high level because they can demonstrate compassion and understanding, while maintaining clinical objectivity. A key action step is to be sure to get feedback – from attorneys, staff, and others – on how cool you are when times are heated.

**2. PROVIDE FREQUENT UPDATES.** Many leaders foster stress and resentment among those they manage because knowledge of the organization's status is not shared. In the absence of feedback, we will create our own, and it's often negative. When people are uninformed, they work from a place that does little for building trust or morale. A great way to keep teams and individuals informed is to designate time on your calendar to share your knowledge. These updates should be initiated by you, and they must involve honest disclosures of what you do know, what you don't, what you can share, and what you cannot.

A colleague named Jill is a brilliant business development manager. Recently, her firm was involved in a merger, and she was instrumental to the transition's success and seamlessness. Ironically, not a single partner on either side of the merger took time to meet with Jill and inform her about what role she would play when the transaction was completed. Jill inquired often, and the



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executives – self-involved and ineffective in communication – never provided a solid answer. When she finally gave her notice, you would have thought someone pulled the fire alarm, as every big shot made desperate attempts to woo her back and keep her aboard. But it was all in vain. Proactive communication is not only crucial for competent alignment within organizations, but it can have a significant impact on the retention of immensely talented contributors like Jill.

### 3. BECOME AN EXCEPTIONAL LISTENER.

Getting people to perform in tough times requires understanding. A checklist for this type of listening includes:

- **Encourage others to talk.** Get your attorneys and staff to talk about themselves by asking open-ended questions, i.e., “How are things going? How you are doing?” “What suggestions would you give to improve our current working situation?” or “What concerns or questions do you have that I have not addressed?”
- **When others speak, clarify for certainty.** You can accomplish this by repeating what people have said and then rephrasing their messages. “If I’m hearing you correctly, you’re telling me that ...” or “Let’s see if I completely understand what you’re saying ...” Paraphrasing shows respect for team members and client ideas and minimizes miscommunication.
- **Eliminate distractions.** Many leaders try to multi-task, which generally achieves little. It’s important to show focus on those you’re listening to by shutting the door, turning off your cell phone, turning away from your computer, or forwarding your office phone. Let the person know that his/her message is valued and respected.

**4. LEAD WITH (REALISTIC) OPTIMISM.** Jeff is a longtime client and CEO of what once was a thriving bank. Recently, however, his branch has taken repeated, devastating blows from the financial market’s swings. He is a positive guy, yet in a recent conversation with him, Jeff said, “It’s hard to smile when you keep getting kicked in the teeth.” Leading in turbulent

times can bring the sobering reality of negativity, anxiety, and stress. It can not only turn careers upside down, but also take a toll on home lives. And while you want to hear the straight story with no strings attached, think about this: Would you rather follow someone who is constantly preaching failures and bad luck, or someone who is persistent in finding opportunity? Attitude and the behaviors that go with it are contagious. Leaders need to paint pictures that are reflective of the truth, but they must also speak about possibilities. It’s easy to get swept up in the bad news, but the mettle of our character is how we get off the deck when we’ve been knocked down.

In the situation with Jeff, he remains optimistic that things at the bank will not only stay afloat, but rebound for the better. In talking to those who work for him, one bank employee said, “There is not leader I’d rather follow than Jeff. He’s been supportive of the worries of his employees.” Jeff remains resolute throughout, preaching, “Times are tough, but we must be tougher and realize that our success will be the result of our conviction to seek solutions and be persistent.” Again, it’s a heck of a lot easier to lead with optimism when the times are in line with the message. But now is when real leaders are challenged, navigating unfamiliar territory they’ve never been.

### THE BOTTOM LINE

In continued studies of how relationships impact business results, the need to establish and cultivate connections is greater than ever. Remember: People think on logic, but they act on emotion. Motivating others requires action. ✱

### about the author

**Joe Takash**, author of *Results Through Relationships: Building Trust, Performance and Profit through People*, is a business consultant and keynote speaker. As founder of Victory Consulting, Joe helps clients such as American Express, Prudential and General Motors build morale, results, and profits through relationships. Learn more at [www.joetakash.com](http://www.joetakash.com), or call: (888) 918-3999.