

Your guilt-trip guide to managing

You rarely hear about one of the most powerful motivators: guilt.

While you don't want to overuse this delicate tool, it can work well in certain situations. Examples:

Extract payback. Say you've bent over backwards for an employee. Maybe you've given him extra time off or provided the cross-training he wanted.

Now you need this worker to deliver in a crunch. Don't list all the favors you've done. Instead, appeal to his sense of obligation, saying: "I've tried my hardest to be there for you and now I need you to come through for me."

Anticipate and delight. Whenever employees drop hints, pick up on what they want and give it to them. Saving them from having to ask you outright will make them indebted to you.

Say an employee mentions that she can't afford to buy a phone for her car. Use company money to buy it for her and let her pay off the loan on favorable terms. She'll seek ways to repay you.

Take the hit. Shield your employee from a senior exec on the warpath. Deflecting or absorbing the blame for a minor screw-up entitles you to the worker's loyalty. Ways to do this include guiding the senior exec to consider more important issues or pointing out flaws in the process that you will fix. Warning: Only protect the employee if you're sure it won't tarnish your reputation. And do let him know you cut him a break.

Set an example. If you and your colleagues make visible sacrifices for the company, conscientious employees may feel guilty unless they, too, share the pain. If they have a shred of decency, you won't have to say a word to motivate staffers to look within themselves and step up their commitment.

When guilt pays off

Here are two tests to ensure that employees will feel better, not worse, about themselves by complying with your request:

1. Choice or coercion? If your appeal to guilt is too transparent, they may feel manipulated. Allow them the freedom to act as they see fit.

2. Minor obligation or crushing burden? Ideally, you want people to act because they feel a healthy pang of conscience. But if they're fighting off the overwhelming weight of disproportionate sacrifices that you've made, their guilt may overtake them.