

# Secrets of motivating laggards

Turning slugs into gung-ho workers often calls for a less-is-more strategy. If you try too hard to motivate some people, they may resist even more.

Unwary managers tend to fall into the “hype trap,” in which they’re always hyping the latest contest or incentive. But some lifeless souls are immune to hype. When they see you pumping your fists and dangling rewards, they shrug and walk away.

Here’s how to awaken their passion:

**Apply the Premack Principle.** David Premack, a behavioral psychologist, found that you can use what people like to do as a lever to get them to work.

1. Observe what an employee does when given a choice. Example: You ask Jay to do research. He prefers the Web to the phone for gathering information.
2. Next time, use the employee’s preferred behavior as a reinforcer. Example: Tell Jay that after calling three experts, he can do Web research for the rest of day.

**Raise the bar.** Rather than try motivational techniques, simply demand more. Set an ambitious goal, define how you’ll measure it and give a deadline. Don’t spell out the positive or negative consequences; just confirm that the worker understands the project, answer any questions and step aside.

**Enlist help.** Level with a laggard. Say, “I want to do whatever I can to make this job fun and challenging for you. Since I’ve tried and failed, can you suggest anything I can do to support you in your job?”

## Avoid motivational traps

If you’re struggling to motivate a laggard, beware of making matters worse with desperate, foolhardy measures. Examples:

**Projection.** You assume that what motivates you will excite your employees, so you project your preferences onto them. Example: You get angry or impatient when you discover that a cash bonus (your favorite perk) doesn’t spur a lazybones.

**Delegation.** You tell a laggard’s peer, “You’re responsible for motivating this person. I give up.” While it’s fine to get others’ input, don’t walk away from your own responsibility.