

THE EXECUTIVE
ROUNDTABLE®
Great leaders make the difference



Economically tough times make for unpopular decisions in the workplace. Motivated teams are crucial to making it through a slump, but how can a leader keep their team motivated when everything is working against them?

*Executive Roundtable member, **Simon Jennings**, President of La Presse Group*

Sales, starts his strategy for maintaining a focused team—even before Day 1.

MENTORING MATTERS

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“Our business is under a massive amount of pressure and it’s been going on for a few years. There’s been continuous change in our industry and it’s increasingly tough to hit our targets. How do I keep my team motivated when the cards seem stacked against us?”

This question contains two statements blended into one. You've been experiencing pressure for a long time, which has been making things difficult. You are also dealing with a period of constant change and it feels like it's been impossible to achieve whatever goals you set in front of you. You're looking to increase motivation against those two factors.

The question presupposes a few things:

One, that the level of pressure is inherently new. In my life, I've actually never noticed a pressure increase. However, I've always worked in the new economy space, so it's possible that I've never noticed an increase in pressure because it's always been like this!

The second part is interesting. The constant state of change is making it difficult to figure out how to achieve budgets. But it's not necessarily the constant change that creates more pressure, it's the rate of the constant change or the magnitude of the change that becomes disruptive. Fundamental changes and completely new innovations make it almost impossible for people to feel like they know enough about what's going on. No sooner do they learn something then something changes and what they thought they learned becomes something completely new.

So, how do you motivate a team in these conditions?

Find the right people for the job.

I pin the initial responsibility on the hiring managers. Whether you're creating a new company or job, or whatever, if you're the head of the company or at any level where you have oversight for managing, your accountability is to find the right people for the job. Your primary responsibility is not trying to deal

Take the hiring process seriously. It's your first responsibility to your team as a leader.

with people who are freaking out and spiraling because they can't handle the pressure or because the stress is too much. Your responsibility is to pick the right people for the roles so they don't end up in a situation where that's going to happen to them.

Make sure you've got farmers in the field and hunters armed with bows and arrows and not the other way around. Otherwise, you're going to fail. No amount of motivation is going to get you out of a bad hiring decision.

Focus on education, not motivation.

'Motivation' is kind of a 1980's term. It is almost unnecessary as an isolated practice if you can focus more on general education. Every time I sense that my team is overwhelmed, it is usually it's because they feel threatened by something that they don't know. Their lack of motivation or their pressure or their stress is usually based on fear or something that they don't understand.

Very rarely is this fear of number, like they're \$100,000 short of their million dollar target. It's that, say, money in the budget has suddenly moved to social media and they don't understand why, or how, so they're out there trying to figure out why that money went away and that's causing them stress.

Instead of just telling them to 'grab the oar and row a little harder', we spend a lot of time reducing the fear. My definition of fear is 'not knowing.' Here's a hypothetical example of how to combat this: In the case of social media, we might bring in people from Facebook to explain what social media is, or bring in some other third-party social media provider to explain their service. In these sessions, you can watch the folks figure out how, why, and what they're fighting against. It seems the more you educate them about

the unknown, the more confident they get. They develop an understanding on whether their plan is attainable or not. That reduces the pressure, reduces the fear and that refocuses them to get more tactical about how to get to their end. For the most part, this strategy has always worked. Reducing the unknowns makes the pressure kind of go away and then the team can get pragmatic and tactical about where they want to go. They can assess the problems on their plate and either they'll be solvable problems or they won't be, but they'll understand why the problem is solvable or it's not. Then it's not just something that goes bump in the night or a monster in the closet they can't rationalize.

Give your team the knowledge they need to see their path clearly.

Clear the smoke.

I will fairly regularly bring in leaders from businesses that aren't really even related to us to talk to our group in a totally unofficial, unstructured conversation where it's almost like they're pitching us. We had a person come in to talk about apps—we knew nothing about apps but now the team understands the platform and the technology behind it. They feel a little smarter, they understand more about the peripheral challenges in their space, and it helps them demystify what they perceive to be the big daunting number or challenge in front of them. They know more about what everyone else is doing around them, and then from there, it's a lot easier to navigate your path. Otherwise, I could give you a million dollar target and you can lose half of it to another company and you not understand what the company is or why you're even losing to them because they're not in your space. If you hate Google but you don't understand why, you'll be afraid.

Another thing we do (sort of irregularly) is we'll have someone bring in a cool thing (something they've seen, an article they've read, a technology they've used) that they want to talk about. This encourages people to go out and find out what's new in technology

and it gets the sales pressure out of the meeting and lets them talk about technology and how people are using it.

We have the regular tools to manage the numbers, we identify our top three accounts and we block and tackle all that stuff very pragmatically so people understand the path and the possible outcomes—I think that’s a key part, the possible outcomes. We don’t talk about a 20 million number and say, “How short are you?” We talk about the buckets where it’s going to come from, the stuff that we know we can control and the stuff that we can’t.

Don’t try to solve pressure with more pressure.

I hire to achieve a goal, I hire people to help me achieve the goal, and then we share the goal. We share the challenge. And everybody we hire, whether it’s my assistant or my head of sales or whatever, we’re all trying to achieve the same thing. So it’s a lot easier to hire people who you know that can thrive in an environment where everyone takes a bit of ownership for it. We all accept the possible outcomes and we all have each other’s backs. We all know what we’re trying to do, we all do it together—it’s full disclosure, whether we’re up or down, everyone knows where everyone is and it works well.

The idea of the number-crunching way to manage sales or “50 calls out with a 10% success rate,” all that kind of stuff, these tactics don’t actually work. These systems of measurement anticipate failure before they accept possible success. We remove that from the discussion because it puts pressure on people to feel like they have to go through the motions, go through processes We’ve created this entire science behind this and all these tools—CRM tools, sales tools, sales management tools, just a whole lot of stuff people need to try and focus on while losing sight of actually doing their job. You never get to celebrate anything other than if you achieve this preconceived benchmark, which basically means you’re always chasing and you’re always running. I just think that’s not helping.

*Lead your team through
shared purpose,
not under threat.*

I've always resisted applying an unnecessary level of stress on a job that's already stressful. I think that's usually the shortcoming of most sales organizations—and of organizations in general. They set a goal and then they apply pressure because they think the pressure's going to make their people get there. It's almost like a threat: You hold up someone's ability to pay their mortgage or to feel proud, and then label these tactics under this title of motivation—but they're not motivating at all.

Hire smart people and find ways to get them the knowledge they need to excel. It purely comes down to aptitude and attitude.



Simon Jennings is a well-known media industry professional with more than 20 years of experience. He launched Olive Media in 2006 and, as founding President, grew it from a start-up into Canada's online advertising market leader. He has also held key positions with many major corporations, including Yahoo!, DoubleClick, Postmedia and Torstar Digital. He is currently the President at La Presse Group Sales. As a leader, Simon is committed to picking and empowering good people, challenging teams to include innovation as a constant option, focusing on data, welcoming disruption, falling down a lot, and choosing reason over tradition. He was a recipient of the Ad Club's Career Award of Merit in Internet Advertising.



Glain Roberts-McCabe is passionate about the art of leadership and supporting ambitious mid-career leaders. She created **The Executive Roundtable** to provide emerging leaders with the navigational skills, tools and savvy needed to manage increases in scope, pressure and leadership complexity.