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Why treat your staff like dirt? Because they are

TOBY MOORE

You'll get just as much from your employees if they're unmotivated, scared, unhappy and insecure — and they'll cost you a lot less, says a new book

::nobreak::

MY FRIEND from Barnsley is aggrieved. She runs a coffee and food shop, part of a chain in London, and has just had a bad management motivation day.

"I wasn't 'clap-happy' enough," she tells me. What? "It's about being upbeat in front of staff. And I also use the word 'but' too much. They said it makes people feel bad about themselves when you're assessing them."

Well, "Jane", as it might be prudent to disguise her, has certainly been motivated: she is moving to a company with less of an interest in clapping-style industrial relations. "It's not the only reason for going, obviously, but they never did these sort of things before. If staff are no good, help them, tell them to get their act together, or sack them. That's how it should work."

Her comments will be music to the ears of Professor Lawrence Kersten, an American academic-turned-entrepreneur who believes that employees are having an easy life in the West these days.

Kersten, who taught business communication at City University, New York, is challenging what he describes as the "noble employee myth"; the notion that workers are naturally good and productive, rather than soft-option-seeking slackers. He argues that companies should stop putting energy into making staff happy, motivated and rewarded. Fear, low self-esteem, moderate expectations and despondency also get good results, and cost nothing.

But the main target in his book, *The Art of Demotivation: A Visionary Guide For Transforming Your Company's Least Valuable Asset, Your Employees* is motivation courses — a \$5 billion annual industry in the US.

One of the most famous practitioners there, Anthony Robbins, charges \$150,000 a day (more than £80,000) and the business is

growing in Britain. Speakers regularly pick up £8,000 cheques for a single lecture to audiences paying between £500 and £1,500 each to hear them.

Kersten dismisses this edifice of talks and team workshops as no more than an inflation of platitudes, pandering expensively to the egos of workers and encouraging delusory personal expectations. He also thinks that management books, including *Who Moved My Cheese?* — which has sold 270,000 copies in Britain alone since 1999 — make the problem worse, treating workers “like children” (the book is a parable about two mice). One in a hundred books now sold in the UK is motivational, according to *The Bookseller*, comfortably outselling those on faith and spirituality. Kersten, however, thinks that the motivation industry, which includes 20,000 speakers in America alone, is on far weaker foundations. “Any business leader who has jumped on the self-improvement treadmill in the hope of improving employee performance has learnt that it is no more effective than using a treadmill as a means of transportation,” he writes.

Many employees now have “a sense of entitlement, but not the necessary skills” to work properly, Kersten says from his home in Texas. “I think much of the motivational industry discourages people from acquiring skills necessary to succeed. Instead, it replaces them with emotional gas.”

Kersten starts his contentious argument by tackling “the noble employee myth”. Most of us, he says, are, at best, average in our abilities; this is why only a handful of companies ever dominates a market. Logically, then, workers are not the biggest asset for a firm, but the biggest liability. “Employees create just as many problems as they solve. They bring their personal problems to work, they immerse themselves in petty politics, they actively search for reasons to resist the company’s initiatives, they complain about every minor difficulty and continue to demand more and more from the company.”

And yet the main aim of “the motivational industry” is “to stoke the fires of your employees’ narcissism so that they fall in love with themselves all over again, just as they did when they saw their own beauty in the distorted reflection of their mother’s adoring gaze”.

Slacker-chic is evidently establishing footholds. Last year several books were published celebrating sloth (*In Praise of Slowness*, by Carl Honoré) or berating the work culture (*Willing Slaves: How the Overwork Culture is Ruling Our Lives*, by Madeleine Bunting). Corinne Maier, an economist at the state-run French electricity operator, produced a bestseller with *Bonjour Laziness*, the essential how-not-to guide for workers.

Kersten’s book has sections to teach executives to crack the whip — skills for what he describes as “radical demotivation” that he thinks necessary to disabuse workers of the “narcissistic fantasies” to which they cling.

The use of impersonal references when talking helps to maintain anxiety and create “emotional distance” between employer and employee. “You can substitute ‘I think this is a good idea’ with ‘the idea appears to be good’. Instead of ‘Let me welcome you to the

company,' use 'The company welcomes you'."

Taking credit for their good ideas is very important for managers, though. "It will reinforce the reality that it is employees' contributions that are important, not the employees who make them."

But discouraging too many ideas is also crucial to Kersten's demotivation. He recommends a "deconfirmation" process, which is the reverse of "confirming" the value of a worker, by responding to messages in a way that makes clear that you are not listening, usually by answering irrelevantly. "Very simply, this tactic involves responding to an employee's comment with a comment of your own that explicitly fails to take into account whatever the employee said." If an "impassioned" member of staff offers an idea at a meeting that seems "ego-driven", the secret to slapping them down is to "change the subject by turning to another staff member and asking a question".

Giving out "unimportant, demeaning" tasks is another trick, along with exploiting the way that e-mail messages are constructed. "Create an anxiety in an employee simply by making his name the last one to appear in the 'cc:' list."

So far, so Swiftian; especially the suggestion that managers "cleanse" after shaking hands with a worker, even by simply wiping your hands on clothing, just to reinforce to them that they represent a contamination. The kernels of truth in Kersten's book are surrounded by the sweetness of parody, however. *The Art of Demotivation* is, after all, published by a company named Despair Incorporated.

Kersten and two friends started it after losing their shirts in the dot-com bubble and bust of the late 1990s and, by chance, coming across the bric-a-brac of uplifting jargon on the very morning that their own dreams of fast fortune crumbled to dust. "We got together to compare notes. It was pretty bad that day," Kersten said. "One of the guys had just gotten a motivational products calendar in the mail, and we started making fun of it. We thought these products were so absurd, given our experiences. It's literally how we got started."

Those in the motivation business have themselves been motivated to disagree with Kersten. Brendan Barns, founder of the London Business Forum, dismissed the idea of demotivation as "poppycock". Firms with happy staff demonstrably get far more out of them, he says. "It's those businesses and leaders who can inspire people to go beyond what they need to do which guarantee success." Yet even Barns, one of the most innovative British motivation seminar organisers (he accepts no corporate sponsorship), concedes that American courses are ripe for satire and would be "nauseating" to British audiences. "All this 'we'll give you roots to grow and the wings to fly' stuff. It's crap."

One person who may be starting to fly is Kersten himself. He has been getting calls to speak at motivation events since his book was published. "I am beginning to entertain the idea," he admitted. "But, obviously, it is a little weird."

TOP TEN TIPS

Meetings None of us is as dumb as all of us

Goals It's best to avoid standing directly between a competitive jerk and his goals

Blame The secret to success is knowing who to blame for your failures

Planning Much work remains to be done before we can announce our total failure to make progress

Consulting If you're not part of the solution there's good money to be made in prolonging the problem

Mistakes It could be that the purpose of your life is only to serve as a warning to others.

Dysfunction The only consistent feature of all your dissatisfying relationships is you

Demotivation Sometimes the best solution to morale problems is to fire all the unhappy people

Ambition The journey of a thousand miles sometimes ends very, very badly

Get to work You aren't being paid to believe in the power of your dreams

- The Art of Demotivation by *Lawrence Kersten* is available only from www.despair.com