


HOW

CUSTOM

CAN

RALLY

TROOPS



Adam M. Grant (grantad@wharton.upenn.edu) is a management professor at the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School.

End users can energize your workforce far better than your managers can. *by Adam M. Grant*

How did a five-minute meeting motivate university fundraisers to increase their weekly productivity by 400%? How did a photograph drive radiologists to improve the accuracy of their diagnostic findings by 46%?

Was it managers who inspired such enormous results? Perhaps they gave an amazing speech or set clearer goals or tracked performance more carefully. In fact, in both situations, managers were not the catalysts. They did not assume that they alone had to bear the burden of motivating employees with inspiring messages. Instead, they tapped in to a powerful force that encouraged workers to go the extra mile. They *outsourced inspiration* to those who were better suited to the job.

A growing body of research shows that end users—customers, clients, patients, and others who benefit from a company's products and services—are surprisingly effective in motivating people to work harder, smarter, and more productively. A brief visit from a student who had received a scholarship motivated the fundraisers to increase their efforts. A photograph of a patient they had never met inspired the radiologists to read X-rays more accurately. By serving as tangible proof of the consequences and value of employees' efforts, end users such as these can be important allies for leaders in motivating and inspiring their workforces.

Facebook flies in users from around the country to meet with engineers and share how the site has reconnected them to family and friends.

Studies have shown that employees are highly motivated, satisfied, and effective when they work in jobs that have a positive impact on others.

Outsourcing inspiration to end users focuses employees' attention squarely on the ultimate impact of their products and services. At Wells Fargo, for instance, managers show bankers videos of people describing how low-interest loans rescued them from severe debt—a vivid reminder to the bankers that they are striving to serve their customers, not their managers. But the power of end users goes beyond their ability to put a name and a face to employees' efforts. Organizational psychologist David Hofmann and I have found that employees generally see end users as more credible than leaders as sources of inspiration. When leaders attempt to deliver inspiring messages, many employees react with skepticism, questioning whether leaders are just trying to get them to work harder. Indeed, researchers Phil Mirvis and Donald Kanter have found that in many companies, the majority of frontline employees are cynical about leaders' motives and intentions. End users, however, can deliver convincing testimonials of their experiences with the company's products and services, showing that leaders' messages are more than rhetoric. Outsourcing inspiration to end users can also keep the content fresh: Leaders can call on multiple customers to deliver distinct messages.

For these reasons, leaders should abandon the notion—popularized in the mainstream business press—of themselves as lone heroes who must rally their employees to do great things. Leaders need help bringing their visions to life, and end users are uniquely suited to this task. In this article, I show how leaders can take full advantage of opportunities for connecting employees to the people affected by their work. Outsourcing inspiration is not about eliminating leaders from the picture; it's about cre-

ating a partnership that can enhance the meaning employees derive from their jobs and move them to do their best work.

Employees Without a Cause

The most powerful evidence I've gathered that connecting employees with end users yields motivational benefits comes from a series of experiments with university fundraising callers. These callers, whose sole responsibility is to convince alumni to donate money, face motivational challenges common in many sales and service jobs: repetitive work, low autonomy, and rude customers. A large portion of the donated money is used to fund scholarships, but the callers don't see or meet the recipients. One caller had posted a telling sign on his wall: "Doing a good job here is like wetting your pants in a dark suit. You get a warm feeling, but no one else notices." Annual turnover rates in this field can exceed 400%: In a typical three-month period, the entire staff quits, creating exorbitant hiring and training costs.

As part of my research, I have invited several thousand executives to propose ways to motivate the callers to increase their efforts to bring in donations. Most executives start from the assumption that employees are ultimately self-interested, proposing performance incentives such as pay increases, promotions, recognition, food, and breaks—interventions that the fundraising managers had already tried, to no avail.

Rarely do executives suggest imbuing the work with greater meaning and purpose. In fact, fewer than 1% say that managers should show the callers how their work makes a difference. This is consistent with the attitudes of the managers themselves: They give the callers no information about how the donations are used or who benefits from them. Like the executives, they assume the callers are driven by self-interest and simply don't care.

But there's a wealth of evidence that people want to do meaningful work: In national surveys over the past three decades, the vast majority of Americans have identified meaningful work as the single most important feature that they seek in a job. And numerous researchers have found that people are concerned not only about themselves but also about doing work that benefits others and contributes to society.

Once they are armed with this knowledge, executives often suggest that managers deliver inspiring speeches about how the donations are used. But are

Idea in Brief

Leaders who connect employees with end users motivate higher performance,

measured in terms of revenue as well as supervisors' ratings. Research shows that when leaders are the sole source of inspiring messages, employees often question whether the messages are true. End users, in contrast, are seen as credible sources who can deliver convincing testimonials of

their experiences with a company's offerings.

Customers, clients, patients, and others who benefit from a company's products and services motivate employees by serving as tangible proof of the impact of their work, expressing appreciation for their contributions, and eliciting empathy, which helps employees develop a deeper understanding of customers' needs.

Leaders can "outsource inspiration" to end users (both past and present) by collecting their stories, inviting them to the organization, introducing them to employees, and recognizing employees who make a difference in customers' lives.

such messages more powerful coming from a person who benefited from the donations? To test this idea, I invited one scholarship recipient to visit a group of fundraisers who worked in an office filled only with telephones and fellow callers. The student spent five minutes describing how the callers' work had funded his scholarship, how it had made a difference in his life, and how much he appreciated their effort. One month after this visit, the callers showed average increases of 142% in weekly time spent on the phone and 171% in money raised. Callers in two control groups, who did not meet the scholarship student, showed no significant changes in performance. In a second study of callers contacting alumni who donated more frequently to the university, the performance effects following a visit from a scholarship recipient were even more striking: A month later, the callers had on average more than doubled their calls per hour and had achieved average weekly revenue increases of more than 400%, from \$411.74 to \$2,083.52. In a third study, one group of callers met with a scholarship recipient, another met with a manager who described a student who had benefited from the callers' efforts, and a third group had no intervention. Only the first group experienced any performance improvement.

The Art of Motivation Maintenance

The high-burnout field of fundraising might feel like an extreme example, but my research suggests that outsourcing inspiration is effective in a wide range of settings. Three basic mechanisms are at work. The first is *impact*: Employees see for themselves how their work benefits others. This is readily apparent in companies whose products save lives. At Medtronic's annual holiday party, for instance, patients are invited to share their stories about how the company's medical technologies helped them. The stories humanize the work for the engineers

Gratitude from end users is a powerful reminder of the value of continued quality improvements.

and technicians behind the scenes. But employees who make less dramatic contributions can also be inspired by real-life examples of the impact of their work. At Wells Fargo, when bankers hear a customer describe how a loan has enabled her to buy a house or pay off major debts, they gain a richer understanding of how their work makes a lasting difference.

The second mechanism is *appreciation*: Employees come to feel valued by end users. At Let's Go Publications, where teams of editors revise travel books, managers circulate letters from readers who have relied on the company's advice to navigate foreign countries and experience new cultures. These signs of gratitude let editors know their efforts are appreciated. Similarly, at Olive Garden, leaders share with staff members letters from customers describing how they chose to celebrate meaningful events at the company's restaurants. Even though employees know intellectually that their contributions make a difference, gratitude from end users is a powerful reminder of the value of continued quality improvements and innovation.

The third mechanism is *empathy*: Employees develop a deeper understanding of end users' problems and needs and thereby become more committed to helping them. For example, researchers Rajesh Sethi and Carolyn Nicholson recently found that when product development teams had contact with customers, they were more likely to create offerings that exceeded projections for sales and mar-

When You Can't Find End Users

Connections between employees and end users are most powerful when they are face-to-face. How can leaders build those connections when they lack access to end users or can't find any with inspiring stories? Research suggests three options:

Show pictures.

Even a snapshot of an end user can be powerfully motivating. Consider the case of radiologists who study X-rays to diagnose illness without ever meeting the patients. A study by Yehonatan Turner and colleagues showed that radiologists who saw photos of patients increased the length of their reports by 29% and improved the accuracy of their diagnoses by 46%. Microfinance organization Kiva uses the same approach, showing potential donors pictures of the social entrepreneurs requesting funding.

A note about choosing effective photos: Research by Deborah Small and Nicole Verrochi suggests that people are more likely to empathize with end users who appear sad or neutral and thus may be signaling an unfulfilled need.

Circulate inside stories.

When employees share with one another their stories about experiences with end users, they can create a venue for mutual inspiration. At Ritz Carlton hotels around the world, employees meet daily for 15 minutes to share “wow” stories about going the extra mile to make a difference in customers’ lives. In sharing these tales, employees inspire not only one another but also themselves. It turns out that the simple act of sharing a story about benefiting others can reinforce one’s conviction about the purpose of a job. In one study, Jane Dutton and I found that employees who kept a weekly journal about how their work made a difference worked harder and achieved higher performance.

Share outside stories.

Employees such as bank examiners, airline pilots, and nuclear power plant workers do jobs that are designed to protect people, but they rarely see the impact of their work. Stories from outsiders can help. When I gave lifeguards a few short news stories about other lifeguards who had rescued swimmers, they showed improvements in the month following: They viewed their jobs as more meaningful and valued, volunteered to work more hours, and spent more time and energy protecting the safety of swimmers—as measured by their supervisor’s ratings. Lifeguards who read stories about only the personal benefits of the job showed no improvements. The director was stunned. Lifeguards surely know that their actions can save lives, but they don’t feel it viscerally and emotionally until they’re directly exposed to vivid examples of how their work can affect living, breathing human beings.

ket share. And at Microsoft, leaders learned that a personal connection can help software developers adopt the perspectives of end users. A Microsoft lab manager interviewed by researchers Michael Cusumano and Richard Selby explains that after seeing an end user, developers “immediately empathize with the person. The usual nonsense answer—‘Well, they can just look in the manual if they don’t know how to use it,’ or ‘My idea is brilliant; you just found ten stupid people’—that kind of stuff just goes out the door.” A face-to-face connection with end users appears to elicit empathy among the developers, motivating them to design software with users in mind.

Even simple reminders of the existence of end users can increase employee motivation. Consider an experiment that David Hofmann and I recently conducted in a hospital. Medical professionals are aware of the importance of hygiene, yet many studies suggest that they wash their hands only about a third as often as they should. We placed signs on units around the hospital near soap and gel dispensers available to doctor and nurses. The first sign read, “Hand hygiene prevents you from catching diseases.” The second sign replaced “you” with “patients.”

We then tracked soap and gel usage for two weeks after the signs were introduced. We were surprised to find that the second sign yielded average

increases of 33% in soap and gel usage, whereas the first sign had no effect. Why? Research shows that medical professionals are overconfident about their immunity to disease but are much more realistic when evaluating the risk to patients, who are often highly vulnerable. This study suggests that a mere mention of end users can make the consequences of one's work more vivid and produce an increase in beneficial behaviors.

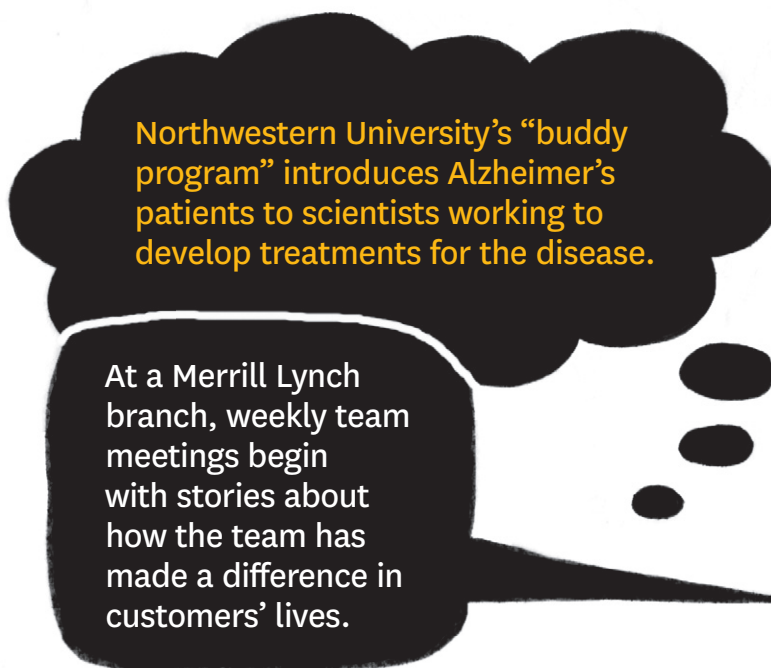
A Leader's Guide to Outsourcing Inspiration

Relatively few companies seize opportunities to create motivating connections between employees and end users. Many leaders are simply unaware of those opportunities; others may be concerned about abdicating their roles as visionaries. But as I noted earlier, strong leaders are essential in effectively outsourcing inspiration. In my recent studies of sales and government employees, I found that inspirational leadership and connections to end users operated in tandem to motivate higher performance, measured in terms of revenue as well as supervisors' ratings. End users complemented rather than substituted for leadership, bringing the leader's vision to life and strengthening employees' beliefs that their contributions mattered.

To outsource inspiration effectively, leaders must build and leverage their networks to find end users, collect their stories, invite them to the organization, introduce them to employees, and recognize workers' contributions. How can they accomplish this?

Identify past, present, and future end users.

Many leaders mistakenly assume that they know who their end users are. For example, researcher Michael Tushman writes of senior managers at a large food products company that sold jars of pureed, strained, and chopped foods, such as meats, fruits, and vegetables. The managers were marketing the jars as baby food, assuming that their customers were parents of infants. But during a routine trip to a grocery store, one of the Florida sales team members discovered a hidden end user: elderly people, who were buying the products because they needed food that was easy to eat and digest. In addition to opening up a new market segment, this discovery alerted the company to a new category of end user who valued the company's products. To connect with the broadest possible range of end users, ask leaders, managers, and employees at different levels of the organization to identify various groups of clients,



customers, suppliers, patients, and other recipients who have benefited, currently benefit, or could benefit from the work that employees do.

Dig up feedback from past end users. Many organizations regularly collect useful information from focus groups and customer surveys that ends up trapped in silos or viewed strictly as marketing research to facilitate customer outreach and product development. This kind of feedback, no matter how old, can provide powerful examples of a company's impact on end users. For example, when Bob Austin joined Volvo in 1970 as a customer service representative, he received many unsolicited letters from people who had been in accidents and were writing to say that medical professionals and police officers had told them that they would have been killed if they had not been driving a Volvo. Two decades later, Austin became the head of public relations and created a club for Volvo drivers who believed that one of the automaker's cars had saved their lives. He tracked down past letters and invited the customers to join the club. Since then, Volvo's contributions to customers' lives have been more visible. Similarly, in my studies with fundraising callers, I discovered that the organization had a database of thank-you letters from grateful scholarship recipients. Managers had simply never considered sharing the letters with the callers.

Seek out new stories. When employees lack a strong sense of impact, appreciation, and empathy,

Hundreds of studies have shown that people who have contact with a member of a different racial, ethnic, age, functional, or occupational group exhibit decreased prejudice toward that group. This suggests that direct interaction can help employees see end users in a more-positive light.

“All Medtronic employees have a ‘defining moment’ in which they come face-to-face with a patient whose story deeply touches them,” writes former Medtronic CEO Bill George.

or when a particular group of end users is invisible, managers and employees can go into the field. At Medtronic, more than two-thirds of procedures using the company’s medical devices are attended by an engineer, salesperson, or technician. As former Medtronic CEO Bill George explained to me:

Employees need to remember when they get frustrated that they’re here to restore people to full life and health. If I’m making semiconductors, how do I get to see the impact on patients? If I’m doing software development and there’s a glitch in a defibrillator, people could be harmed or killed. Put it in those terms, work becomes very personal...It’s very important that employees get out there and see procedures...it’s a way of communicating what we’re all about.

Of course, these stories are most effective when they are shared not as vehicles for maximizing the bottom line but as genuine efforts to bring greater meaning to the work. Leaders who consider it their moral responsibility to help employees see the actual and potential consequences of their work are likely to inspire their employees; those who attempt to connect with end users just for a performance boost risk fostering cynicism and skepticism among the workforce.

Set up events and meetings where end users can share their experiences. My research shows that although stories and letters can be motivating, a face-to-face connection with end users has a stronger

emotional impact on employees. These sessions are most inspiring when they include end users whom employees do not normally see. For example, Deere & Company invites farmers who are buying tractors to visit the factories with their families. Assembly line employees get to meet the farmers, hand them a gold key, and watch them start their tractors for the first time. At Raytheon, military troops speak at divisional meetings, describing how a division’s product saved their lives. An employee reflected that “putting names, faces, and stories with the individuals using our products certainly portrayed the point of our mission.” (See the sidebar “When You Can’t Find End Users” to learn how to outsource inspiration when face-to-face meetings aren’t possible.)

Turn employees into end users. Employees who have little experience with the company’s products or services often contribute more after they spend some time in customers’ shoes. For example, at Four Seasons Hotels, employee orientations conclude with a “familiarization stay” in which housekeepers and clerks spend a night in their own hotels to experience the service firsthand. As a vice president of learning and development explained, “They’re learning what it looks like to receive service from the other side.” At outdoor gear company Cabela’s, retail employees can borrow fishing and camping equipment and write a review, which helps them understand the customer’s perspective.

Find end users inside the organization. Internal end users—such as a customer-facing team audited by backroom accountants or investment bankers who give client presentations prepared by junior consultants and analysts—are prime sources of feedback. For example, Francesca Gino and I found that when a manager from another department visited a call center to thank employees for their contributions, those employees increased their effort by 51% during the following week, whereas employees in a control group did not. Connecting with internal customers can be a powerful step toward reducing misconceptions and conflict between groups and departments.

Engage employees who currently do low-impact work. Finding ways to connect end users to employees who seem to deliver few direct, lasting benefits can require a bit more creativity. One way is to leverage their unique knowledge and expertise. For example, Best Buy has created

Homer Simpson or Ned Flanders: Which Employees Are Most Motivated by End Users?

Are all employees equally motivated by seeing their impact on end users? Not necessarily.

Consider the personality trait of conscientiousness: the degree to which people are responsible, disciplined, and goal-oriented (think Ned Flanders from *The Simpsons* animated TV series) versus carefree and spontaneous (think Homer Simpson). One might as-

sume that highly conscientious employees, because they prize dependability and responsibility, would care more about connecting with end users. In a recent study, however, I found the exact opposite to be the case. The Ned Flanders types tend to operate

at a high motivational ceiling, performing well regardless of feedback. The Homer Simpsons, on the other hand, depend heavily on external cues about why their work is important.

The good news is that connections with end users are most effective with the very employees who most need to be motivated.



HOMER SIMPSON
CAREFREE, SPONTANEOUS



NED FLANDERS
RESPONSIBLE, DISCIPLINED, GOAL-ORIENTED

CONSCIENTIOUSNESS

Twelpforce, a service that lets employees across the company, regardless of their job descriptions, use Twitter to respond to customers' questions and inquiries. In its first year, more than 2,600 Best Buy employees from across the company—including those who did not normally play customer-facing roles—joined Twelpforce and responded to more than 27,000 inquiries. At Whole Foods, employees whose jobs involve unpacking boxes and stocking shelves have the opportunity to educate shoppers about allergies, organic food quality standards, sustainable agriculture, and environmental preservation and recycling; some even teach cooking classes. Of course, it is important to make sure that employees have the knowledge, skills, and time to take on new responsibilities.

Spread the message. Outsourcing inspiration is in large part a communications task. It is useful to organize events with end users, create videos, and post their stories on websites and intranets. For example, St. Luke's Hospital hosts a Night of Heroes event, during which patients are reconnected with the trauma teams that saved their lives and all team members are honored for their contributions. Senior leaders speak at the event, demonstrating its importance.

Recognize high-impact contributions. Because leaders are often unaware of episodes of excellent customer service, coworkers can help identify them. Zappos, Google, Southwest Airlines, and Linden Lab all have peer bonus and recognition programs in which employees can commend and reward coworkers who have made outstanding contributions. When stories about these contributions go viral, they can be particularly potent: Spontaneity can signal that colleagues are genuinely motivated to make a difference.

OUTSOURCING INSPIRATION can have a significant, lasting effect on employees' motivation, performance, and productivity. When customers, clients, and patients describe how a company's products and services make a difference, they bring a leader's vision to life in a credible, memorable way. Employees can vividly understand the impact of their work, see how their contributions are appreciated by end users, and experience stronger concern for them. By connecting employees to end users, leaders can motivate through their actions, not only their words. Their inspirational messages become more than lip service. ♡

HBR Reprint R1106G



"It's all about who you've sniffed."

Harvard Business Review Notice of Use Restrictions, May 2009

Harvard Business Review and Harvard Business Publishing Newsletter content on EBSCOhost is licensed for the private individual use of authorized EBSCOhost users. It is not intended for use as assigned course material in academic institutions nor as corporate learning or training materials in businesses. Academic licensees may not use this content in electronic reserves, electronic course packs, persistent linking from syllabi or by any other means of incorporating the content into course resources. Business licensees may not host this content on learning management systems or use persistent linking or other means to incorporate the content into learning management systems. Harvard Business Publishing will be pleased to grant permission to make this content available through such means. For rates and permission, contact permissions@harvardbusiness.org.