

Stories about **LEADERSHIP**

A STORY ABOUT EMPLOYEE MOTIVATION IN A CRISIS



Monday feels like a stone in your shoe. Not huge, but constantly noticeable.

I'm standing in the hall at 6:10 a.m., take off my jacket, and look at the whiteboard. The reject rate has risen again. Not dramatically. But in the kind of "again" that shows we're in a downward spiral. The sickness rate hasn't recovered in four weeks. Overtime has become the silent norm. And there's this dull indifference hanging over the team, a feeling I haven't been able to shake for days.

It's not the loud discontent. It's worse: the quiet discontent.

"It doesn't matter anyway," Tobias had said on Friday when we were talking about changing the shift patterns. It sounded like a joke, but it wasn't. "It doesn't matter" statements are a warning sign. When motivation is gone, you don't notice it by the volume of the conversation, but by its absence.

I walk to station 2. Sven is standing at the machine, hands in gloves, gaze focused. He's doing his work. But I can see that he's no longer present inside.

"Morning, Sven." "Morning." No glance up. No angry tone. Just absence.
"How are you?" He shrugs. "I'm okay."

That's the phrase that's everywhere in the team right now. And I don't know how to break it up without sounding hollow.

I sit down in the office and look at the plan for the week. I could rush back to the shop floor, redistribute resources, reduce quotas – and hope that motivation will eventually return on its own. But motivation doesn't return when people only see themselves as a resource.

The coach's statement rings in my ears. I had jotted it down months ago when we were discussing leadership in difficult phases: "Motivation doesn't arise from appeals. It arises from meaning, participation, and experienced effectiveness."

Meaning. Participation. Effectiveness. That sounds grand. And yet, it's concrete in everyday life.

At 9 a.m., I call a short team meeting. Not the whole hall – just the shift representatives and two or three informal contacts. I don't want to "motivate" anyone. I want to understand where we stand.

We're sitting in the break room. Coffee, tired faces, quiet anticipation.

"I don't want to talk about numbers today," I begin. "I want to talk about you. I sense that we're currently in a phase where many of you are running on fumes. Is that right?" Silence. Then Miriam says quietly, "Yes." "What's hardest for you right now? What's wearing you down?" Marco looks at me and says gently, "That we're just reacting. Every day it's like putting out fires. And never seeing things get better." Tobias nods. "I stopped hoping anything would change at some point." Sven says nothing. But his gaze is like an affirmation.

I'm leaving this as is. Not to flagellate myself, but to make reality visible.

"Okay," I say calmly. "Then let's turn the question around. What would have to happen for you to feel that we're making progress again? Not perfectly. But noticeably."

Miriam pauses to think. "A plan that works. And no new stopgap solutions every other day." Marco: "And that we have influence. If we see something that isn't working, then it will be heard."

Tobias: "A realistic goal. Not constantly raising the bar when we're already stretched to the limit." I'm taking notes. No discussion.

"Thank you," I say. "I take this seriously. And today I want to suggest three things to you. Not as a finished solution, but as a starting point."

I keep my gaze on them, deliberately calm.

"Firstly: For the next three weeks, we have defined only one goal: to sustainably reduce the rejection rate at stations 3 and 4. No side projects. No additional program. Only this goal."

"Secondly: Every Wednesday we have a 20-minute improvement meeting – your suggestions, your priorities. We implement two of them every week, visibly."

"Thirdly: I will ask management today for a clear buffer: no further increase in production volume for the next four weeks. We need to stabilize first."

I see a shift in the room. No cheers. But attention. Perhaps a spark of belief in its effectiveness.

"And what if those up there say no?" asks Tobias.

"Then I'll tell you honestly," I reply. "And then we'll consider what we can still stabilize. But I won't pretend everything's okay." Sven looks up for the first time. "That would be something." "I know." I nod. "And I mean it."

After the meeting, I go straight to the plant manager. I explain the situation to him: quotas, sick leave, morale. Nothing dramatic, just clear.

"Florian, we're under pressure," he says. "The client—" "I know," I interrupt calmly. "But if we keep increasing production now, we'll lose people and quality. Then we'll definitely lose the client. I'm asking for a four-week buffer for stability. No further increases." He looks at me, appraisingly. "And what do you guarantee me in return?" "No guarantee," I say. "But a stable plan and visible effectiveness within the team. And the likelihood that we'll be stronger again in six weeks." He sighs. "Okay. Four weeks. But then I need results." "You'll get them," I say. "And so will the team."

On Wednesday, I stood in the break room with a stopwatch. Improvement round. The team chose two suggestions themselves: a minor modification to station 3, and a simple change to the checklist during handover. We implemented them the same day. Not a big effort, but noticeable.

Friday's results are marginally better. Marginally. No wonder. But we deliberately post the result on the board, with a sentence underneath: "First step – achieved together."

On the second Wednesday, Miriam suggests a rotation for the most demanding station. Marco adds a small change to the material supply. Again, we implement two things.

After two weeks, we haven't solved everything. But we have something that is invaluable in times of crisis: movement. And movement makes hope tangible.

In the third week, Sven comes to see me during the break. He doesn't seem euphoric, but more alert.

"You know," he says, "this thing with the improvement rounds... It feels good. We feel like we can actually do something again." I nod. "That's exactly the point."

Motivation is not a flash in the pan.

It is the feeling: I am part of a movement that makes a difference.

Takeaway inspiration

Employee motivation

Motivation in a crisis doesn't arise from empty slogans of perseverance, but from meaning, participation, and experienced effectiveness. Leadership means making hope a tangible reality.

If your team seems uninterested, start small: set a focused goal, ensure weekly participation, and implement two quick, visible improvements. Effectiveness is the strongest motivator.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS ABOUT EMPLOYEE MOTIVATION IN A CRISIS

1. Where does my team appear tired or indifferent – and what is the real reason behind it?
2. Where can employees experience genuine effectiveness again?
3. What small, visible change can I make in the next 7 days?



Feel free to contact me anytime::

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