

# The 7 Worst Ways to Motivate a Lawyer to Engage in Business Development

By [LawVision](#) on September 25, 2015

If you really want to get someone to do something, you need to give him/her a reason—a gun to the face, a bonus at the end of the year, the threat of a job loss. We all know this. It's ingrained in our psyche and into society. Common knowledge says if you want someone to close a sale, rob a bank, squeal to the teacher or take the dare, you have to make it worth his while—the old carrot and stick. I either hit you with the stick or dangle that carrot in front of you (by the way, whoever came up with this carrot analogy needs to learn a little more about motivation—how about a Twinkie or an island vacation? A carrot? Sheesh!)

Daniel Pink, author of *Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us*, refers to the carrot and stick approach as an “if-then” motivator, as in “If you do something (or you fail to do it), then you get something.” Pink admits that this classic form of motivation is still very effective, particularly for simple, routine tasks that workers have performed for the last couple of centuries. (Haul this load of wood over to my house, and I'll give you a dollar.) But for creative, conceptual undertakings (like maybe ... I dunno ... business development), Pink's research says “if-then” motivators often don't work and, in fact, he argues they can do some harm.

Anyone who has tried to put a compensation program together knows that not everyone reacts to carrots and sticks in a rational way. As my college Econ 101 professor annoyingly and continuously assumed, people should be able to discern among all the options in front of them, accurately compute long- and short-term value and then choose the option that maximizes best interests—the classic rational human. Of course, it doesn't work that way. First, none of us is rational when we are too tired to work out or too in love with bacon and pie to prevent heart disease or too busy billing time to invest in our future by building strong relationships. And second, we all have different views about what it means to “maximize best interests.” Consider Pink's list of needs that comprise what he refers to as our “third drive”:  
Autonomy—the desire to direct our own lives; Mastery—the urge to get better and better at something that matters; Purpose—the yearning to do what we do in the service of something larger than ourselves.

Think about the lawyers at your firm. Are they typically motivated by money, power and fame (I know some are) or do their lists look more like Pink's? Don't the majority of your lawyers want more autonomy, mastery and purpose? And yet most business origination compensation plans are written for the few who are money motivated.

I spend a great deal of my time figuring out what motivates lawyers to go out and bring in business. With Pink's list in mind, here are 7 things I've found that don't work.

## 1) Treating all lawyers the same

Every lawyer at the firm has a different personality, practice and approach to business development. What motivates one might not spur on another. Motivation is a one-on-one sport. Don't assume one group training will spark the right nerve in every attendee.

## 2) Taking a mandated top-down approach

This is, of course, a non-starter. Lawyers score high in “autonomous thinking,” which is a fancy way of saying, “if it wasn’t their idea to begin with, it’s not that great of an idea.” Law-firm veterans know that most firm initiatives falter unless you’ve done the groundwork to build grassroots enthusiasm from the ranks.

### **3) Handing out money**

Big money incentives make rainmakers richer; they don’t turn everyone into rainmakers. For many lawyers, the additional discomfort of trying to go out and build relationships isn’t worth any amount you can offer. Instead, focus on Pink’s third drive: autonomy, mastery and purpose. The reward for bringing in business is being the master of your destiny and having the ability carve out a satisfying career. Money is nice, but not long-term sustainable for most.

### **4) Providing leashes rather than tools**

An effective motivator for newer attorneys is providing them with tools and organization—checklists, how-to’s, training, coaching, pipeline templates, business plan forms and the like. As you create these tools and processes for your lawyers, resist the urge to turn them into mandated, trackable tools that benefit the firm. One whiff of tools that benefit management rather than the individual lawyer, and your adoption rates will plummet. Give them a tool, not a leash.

### **5) Not promoting self-accountability**

Carrots and sticks work to a point, but no one can force you to want autonomy or to master a skill set or create a career with purpose. You have to want that for yourself. The best thing a mentor can do is create an environment where that is possible. Requests to judge one’s own performance, creation of self-accountability groups where peers hold each other to high standards and regular goal reviews all lead to creating a self-accountability environment.

### **6) Asking people to do more awareness activities with no short term ROI**

Nothing demoralizes a would-be business developer more than more conferences, speeches and articles that don’t show an immediate ROI. Activities geared toward building credibility and awareness are important, but unless you are showing lawyers how to convert those activities into relationships leading to business, they will tire of them quickly. Move your lawyers to relationship activities as soon as possible.

### **7) Threats**

Carrots may work for a few, but sticks are rarely effective for anyone. Threats, ultimatums and shame will give you the exact opposite reaction from what you want. The best reason a lawyer can give for not “getting out there” is that someone just told her she will lose her job if she doesn’t “get out there.” Her next call won’t be to a prospect; it’ll be to a headhunter.

Don’t be frustrated if lawyers aren’t responding to your carrots or sticks. Their lack of motivation may look irrational from the outside, but chances are it’s rooted in a deeper set of needs than mere money and fame. Try to understand fundamental needs and bring out motivation one lawyer at a time.