Having trouble motivating others?—a quick diagnostic

First reflect:
(1) Check your theory of motivation. "Having trouble motivating others?" is a trick question. You can't motivate others—at least if you want intrinsic motivation (defined as when people are fully willing and embrace a change out of interest and commitment).

Adults make their own choices. Trying to coax or arm-twist is likely to cause them to withdraw or just comply which leads to poor outcomes in complex tasks. Intrinsic motivation arises through partnership and collaboration. People have to "talk their way" toward taking on a change. The leader's task is to create the environment for collaborative relationships which can support robust conversations about change.

(2) Check your state of reactivity. If you are impatient or frustrated, you are likely to be in a reactive state and at risk for coaxing and arm-twisting. Find a way to get curious about others—use the five factors listed below to guide your questions. Find your way to trusting and respecting different decision-making processes.

(3) Check the context and state of relationships. For example, if you have previously fallen into pressuring others to change, it will take time to build trust as you shift to a collaborative approach. What other factors in the environment are influencing consideration of a particular change?

After reflection:
(4) Ask others questions to explore five factors for engagement with intrinsic motivation.

Understanding:
• What is your understanding of the change?
• How would you describe it to someone else?

Importance:
• What is most important/meaningful for you at work? What makes you most enthusiastic about your work? (Ask "why" five times.)
• How could the change we are working on benefit what is most important to you?
• What is at risk for you if it does not go well? What are your concerns?

Choice:
• Is there a specific action which would be a good place for you to start?
• How do you want to participate in design and implementation?
Confidence:
- How confident are you that we can mitigate the risks of this change for you?
- How could we do that? What might you do?
- How confident are you that you can be successful?
- What are barriers?
- Is there a barrier that is most important to work on right now?
- What action might you test right now?
- What actions might help from me?
- What help and support do you need (e.g. coaching, consultation, training)?

Ongoing support:
- How will we know if things are going well or not?
- When will we meet next to check how things have gone?

When considering a change, motivation does not usually happen overnight. Even with the most charismatic, inspirational speech, you are lucky if you inspire no more than about 20% of people to action. Most people need ongoing conversations, individual consideration, and collaboration to take new directions.

About Neil Baker M.D.

Neil Baker M.D. works with healthcare organizations to enhance leadership and team impact through Leadership and Team Development In-the-Moment. This means making development as efficient as possible by focusing on immediate work challenges—using any work situation, even the most complex and difficult, as an opportunity to achieve immediate impact on quality of work relationships and on progress toward results.

He has developed these approaches as a leader, speaker, consultant, and executive coach for 30 years. Past positions include serving as Director of Psychiatric Inpatient Services at the University of Colorado Health Sciences Center in Denver, Colorado; Medical Director of Quality at Group Health Cooperative in Seattle, Washington; and faculty and improvement advisor for ten years for the Institute for Healthcare Improvement (IHI) in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Currently, in addition to his consulting practice, he serves as faculty for the leadership track he created for the IHI—Project ECHO collaborative on improving access and office efficiency in primary care.

You can learn more and see client testimonials on his website at neilbakerconsulting.com