Irrationality is a basic part of being human. A classic example is buying something we would never otherwise have spent money on — and will never use — simply because it’s a great deal. So when it comes to motivating employees to change, it should be no surprise that leaders who rely on rationality typically spend time and energy on the wrong things, send messages that miss the mark, and create frustrating unintended consequences. Yet most do it anyhow. As part of the research for Beyond Performance, we’ve come to understand how leaders can leverage social-science research about decision making to motivate employees more effectively.

Employees don’t care as much about the company as you think they do. Leaders, rationally enough, appeal to the company’s circumstances when making a case for change. But social science points to five sources of meaning for humans at work: the impact of the work on society, the customer, the company, the team, and “me.” Most people are motivated by one of these more than others, and in large groups there are more or less equal shares of people motivated by each. So rational leaders don’t tap into the primary motivators of up to 80% of their workforce. To do so, they need to communicate in ways that powerfully touch on all five sources of meaning. It’s not as hard as it sounds. Take a cost reduction program at a mortgage company, for example. It is of course about ensuring expenses don’t outpace revenue growth (company), but it can also be about helping put more people in homes (society), improving quality and service by reducing errors and streamlining operations (customer), achieving far more working together than any individual could alone (team), and as delegating more and creating more attractive jobs (me).

Less can be more when it comes to incentives. Money is the most expensive way to motivate employees, but it’s still many leaders’ first choice. Our experience and numerous studies, however, show that big bonuses are less effective than smaller, unexpected gestures, because gifts create a relationship while bonuses are purely transactional. Consider how pleased you are when a friend brings a bottle of wine to your house for dinner and how different you’d feel if he offered to pay you for the meal. In the office, small gestures create a similar friendly feeling. When Gordon M. Bethune was leading a turnaround at Continental Airlines, for example, he sent an unexpected $65 check to every employee when Continental made it to the top five for on-time flights. John McFarlane of ANZ Bank sent a bottle of champagne to every employee one Christmas with a card thanking them for their work on the company’s change program. In both cases, employees ended up feeling far more connected to the company than the relatively small financial investment would otherwise have implied.

Listen more, talk less. When people choose for themselves what to do instead of just being told, social-science research shows, they are more committed to the outcome by a factor of almost five to one. So although as a leader you likely feel a responsibility to explain your views, you’ll do better by asking people questions that will help them reach their own conclusions about how to improve. David Farr, CEO of Emerson Electric, is noted for asking every employee a short list of questions such as “How do you make a difference?” “What improvement idea are you working on?” and “When did you last get coaching from your boss?” Together, the answers help employees discover how their role links to the overall company direction, puts a sharp focus on continuous improvement, and highlights how much coaching and development is valued by the organization — all crucial in times of change.

Don’t forget the good stuff. Focusing on problems tends to create fatigue and resistance, many studies have shown, whereas looking for opportunities to build on strengths leads to inspiration and motivation. This doesn’t mean ignoring problems. But it does mean that the rational idea of pointing out to employees just how bad things are doesn’t work. Instead, focus on how your organization’s, or individuals’, strengths can be used to overcome your challenges. Consider one U.S. financial services company that traditionally eschewed creating close relations with regulators. The new normal, however, made having such relationships a requirement for success. How did the CEO motivate other senior leaders to spend time in Washington? By asking them to bring their already strong capability for creating deep relationships with customers to this new set of relationships.
The corporate poet David Whyte once wrote, "Work, paradoxically, does not ask enough of us, yet exhausts the narrow part we bring to the door." Simple steps like those above will help you at least partly resolve this paradox by reaching employees as human beings.