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[Mission](#)
[Services](#)
[Testimonials](#)
[Clients](#)
[About](#)

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[Case Studies](#)
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Making Employees Care

“Employees just don’t care like they used to!” grumbled Gomez, president of Addams Construction Company. “In the old days, a man gave you an honest day’s work for a fair day’s wage. These young whippersnappers today drive me crazy!” Lurch, Addams’ vice president of operations, sat impassively across from Gomez. He had heard this rant countless times. All our workers care about,” Gomez continued in a tone of escalating exasperation, “is payday and ...”

Suddenly, Lurch interrupted, “Boss, enough already!” Gomez’ long-time associate unfolded his lanky frame and stood, towering over his boss, and continued, “We’ve had this conversation a hundred times during the past two years, but nothing changes. So I met with a management consultant Pugsley knows. He specializes in these types of problems. Let me tell you what I learned from him.”

Lurch went on to explain that nowadays “making people care” is something managers must do so employees will work long enough and hard enough to get the jobs done. Gomez listened with increasing incredulity, and was astounded to hear his taciturn vice president discuss making messages “emotional” so people would care. Finally, Gomez said, “Lurch, have you forgotten what our workforce is like? They are blue collar tradesmen, not guys who want to get in touch with their inner self!” Then Lurch, with just a hint of a grin, began telling Gomez about Bubbas in Texas.

The state of Texas is big, and it had a correspondingly huge litter problem, Lurch explained. So the state hired the nation’s leading researcher on litter, Dan Syrek, who discovered the typical Texas litterbug was an 18-to 35-year-old pickup-driving male who liked sports and country music, whom he christened Bubba. Bubba didn’t like authority and he was unmoved by ads featuring cuddly owls spouting a “Give a hoot, don’t pollute” message. Syrek knew the only practical way to change Bubba’s litterbug behavior was to convince Bubba that people *like him* don’t litter.

The advertising campaign based on Syrek's research featured macho Texas men like Dallas Cowboy defensive end Ed "Too Tall" Jones and defensive tackle Randy White, Houston Oiler quarterback Warren Moon, and boxer George Foreman. Other "authentic" Texans included blues guitarist Stevie Ray Vaughn and Willie Nelson. The campaign tagline was, "Don't mess with Texas."

The Bubbas got the message. Litter declined 29% the first year, and during the first five years of the anti-litter campaign visible roadside litter decreased 72%; roadside cans declined 81%.

"You see, Gomez," Lurch concluded, "this campaign worked because the Bubbas came to believe that real Texans don't litter. According to Mort Moriarty, the management consultant Pugsley recommended, the magic of the anti-litter campaign was to harness Bubba's "group identity" as a real Texas man to make him care. As Mort said, it wasn't subtle but it worked."

Gomez frowned, and looked defiantly unconvinced. Before Gomez could dismiss the notion as inappropriate for *his* situation, Lurch continued smoothly, "And Gomez, here are ways we can improve productivity here at Addams Construction." In his most soothing tone, Lurch outlined the key principles to making employees care.

- Answer the ever-present question "What's in it for me?" with either a direct, tangible benefit or fulfilling a personal need or goal.
- Take advantage of people's need to be part of a group, and appeal to a group identity (like the Texas Bubbas) or group standards of behavior ("We're firefighters, and protecting people is what we do.")
- Help employees understand how their job performance directly affects others – including the end users. *Seeing something through another person's eyes* is a powerful tool, and often results in responses like, "Oh, I never realized ..."
- Explain the Big Picture. This provides the opportunity for workers to see their particular job as part of something *grand*.

"For example," Lurch continued, "remember that hospital addition we did last year?" "Do !!" Gomez exploded. "That job was a disaster!" "Right you are Boss," Lurch calmly responded, "and now I have some ideas how to prevent problems like we had there. You will recall we had a lot of rework because our superintendent Fester did not coordinate the work sequence of different trades." Gomez winced at the mention of Fester, and mentally asked himself for the thousandth time why he let Morticia talk him into hiring another family member. Then he began to rearrange the piles of papers on his expansive desk.

Lurch paused only briefly, and went on, "It wasn't *all* bad, Gomez. Remember how tricky the concrete pour for the new helicopter pad was? And how the two concrete truck drivers pitched in and helped reinforce that upper form section when it started to buckle? People who worked on that job, especially our employees, are still talking about that "save" like it was a World Series win in the last inning of game seven. I was there, and talked with the two drivers afterward. You know what they said when I thanked them? It was something like, 'You're welcome, but it's no big deal. That's just the way we do things here at Tombstone Concrete.' For them, that exceptional performance was all in a day's

Tombstone Concrete. For them, that exceptional performance was all in a day's work." Gomez looked up from his paper shuffling. "Huh," he said. "Their drivers said that? All in a day's work? I'm just trying to *get* a day's work out of our people." A puzzled look slowly animated his grim expression. "It's true," Lurch replied. "It surprised me too, so I talked with some people I know at Tombstone. Pitching in to help get the job done is what employees at Tombstone *do*. It's part of their company DNA – it's a behavior that defines who they *are*."

Lurch finally sat down. Gomez swiveled in his chair, stared thoughtfully out his office window, and thought, "I haven't seen that much enthusiasm from Lurch since he got recharged at his last rejuvenation." Then Wednesday poked her head in the doorway and chimed, "Dad, a man named Mort Moriarty is on the phone for you." Then she smirked and giggled, "He wants to talk with you about getting our employees to *care*." To Wednesday's great surprise, Gomez turned to her and said, "I want to take that call right now. Put him through at once!"

Tom Wagner

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