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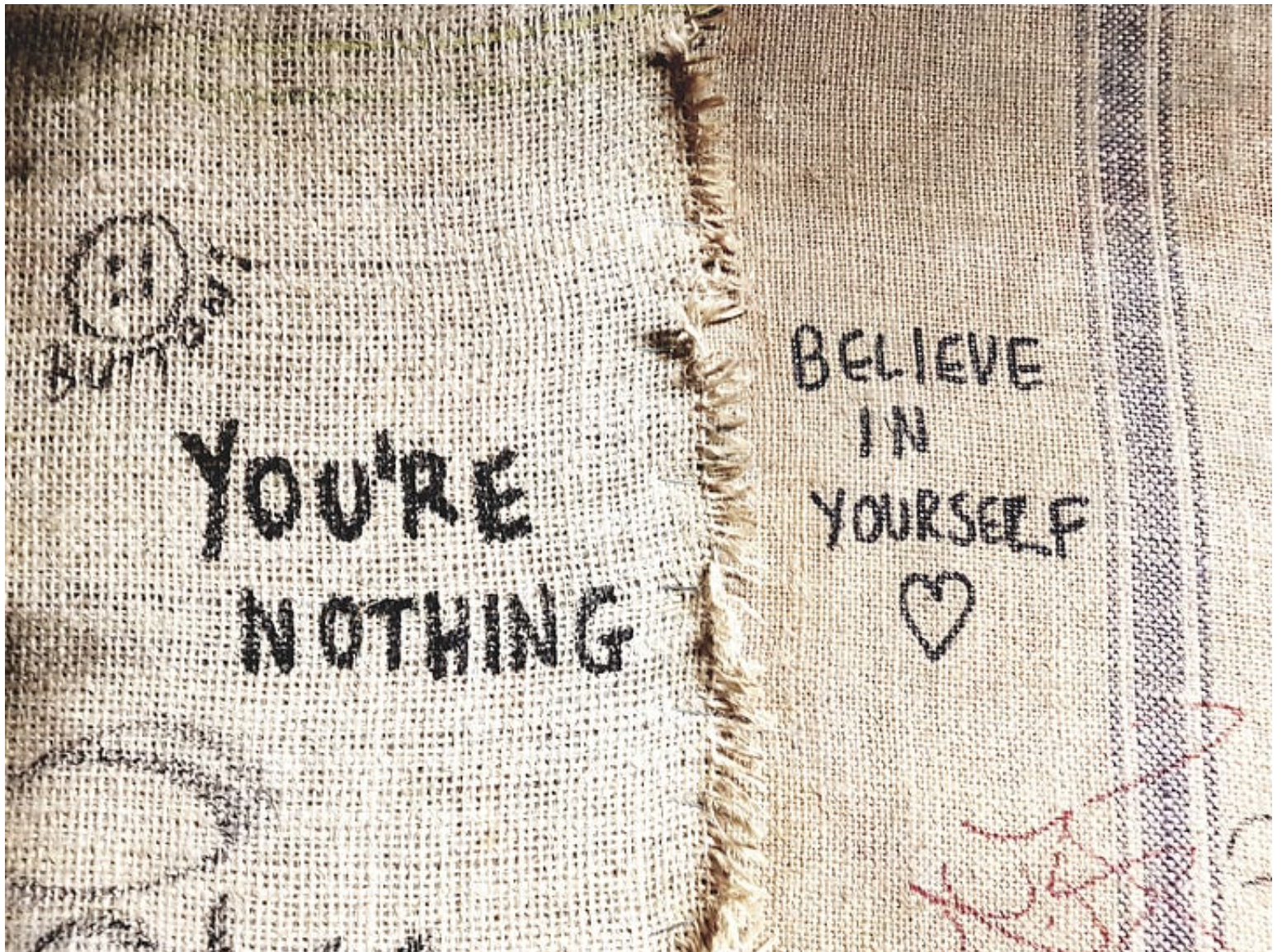
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Demotivating a (Skilled) Programmer

Based on a true story, but not mine.

Let's say you are a boss of some developers. And you've got this one guy who is way too motivated. He is making everyone else look bad. You want to force him to quit. I have no idea why you'd want to get rid of your one motivated good programmer, but you boss-type guys pull this kind of crazy stuff all the time, right? Anyway, let me explain how you, the boss, can suck the ever-loving life from this programmer and make him hate his job.

Things That Won't Work

Money

If a programmer really enjoys what he's doing, he's going to overlook the money. It's true. Good programmers aren't motivated by the money. They'd always take a cool job working on cool things over some percentage points worth of money (not to be confused with huge piles of cash). A smart programmer will know he's underpaid, after awhile he'll make his monetary demands known. This potential discontent, though, won't effect his performance. Eventually, if you keep refusing, he might get the point and leave. But he'll leave sad. Because he liked this job. At any rate, this method takes way too long (several years, probably) and can fail way too easily.

Acclaim

If you usually give verbal kudos to your good employees, and you suddenly cut him off, he probably won't notice. Here's the thing about really motivated programmers, they aren't really listening in that meeting with you. They don't much care for the meeting, in the first place. Having a lot more meetings, though, might work. But everyone will hate that. Probably not a wise idea. They know meetings are a necessity. It's the price of doing business. They just want to get out and go back to doing whatever cool thing they were working on.

Equipment

If he's using a 16-inch monitor and a 5 year old keyboard, that will probably make him miserable, right? Of course not. If he loves his job, he'll bring in two $100 monitors and his own keyboard. That's a tiny price to pay for a cool job, working on cool things.

Chefs, Bean bag chairs, XBox360, Ping Pong

If you cut off the chef food or the Guitar Hero lounge, he won't mind. I promise. The highly motivated people don't come to work to play xbox. They can do that at home. There's

something there worth doing and they want to do it. In fact, removing these things will probably annoy the lesser motivated people more.

The Secret

If you hadn't noticed the foreshadowing above, consider this your executive summary: **he is motivated because he likes the actual work**. That's the Achilles heel. Before you jump to the conclusion that you have found the solution to the problem, it is essential to note that the individual's definition of "cool" is likely to be far more intricate and complex than you might imagine. Smart people have a way of turning even the most seemingly mundane problems into something that is fun to work on. You could switch him into regression testing, and it might make him **happier**. Why? Because you have absolutely no idea what constitutes *fun* for a computer programmer.

The Secret to the Secret

Developers hate three things, above all else, in increasing order of painfulness…

1. Working on stuff that is easy

2. Working on stuff that is tangential

3. Working on stuff that no one will use

These are the three deadliest of deadly sins in the development world. Especially number three. Nothing will suck the life out of programmer faster than working on something he is certain no one will ever use.

These three form our process for crushing any programmer into oblivion. Switch him into a project that is highly tangential to the core product and that is almost certainly used by no one. Or, better yet, have him work on an internal application. That way you can ensure no one will use it. But, you may say, he may still find it fun. You are right, he might. At first. He's going to squeeze whatever hard problems are hiding inside his new project out. He's going to architect a solution and be really proud of it. Just pat him on the head, and keep requesting minor features. Once he's exhausted the supply of difficult problems, he'll choke on the never ending monotony of it.

And if, by chance, you are a boss interested in motivating your smart programmers, perhaps there's a lesson here, too. High salaries are nice. So are bean bag chairs. So are dual monitors and offices with closable doors. These things are ephemeral, though. If you don't have him working on the core functionality of your product, with tons of users, and an endless supply of difficult problems, all of the games of ping pong in the world won't help.

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