

Motivating the Employee

From Job Design to Neuroscience

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When do employees exhibit the determination needed to achieve higher levels of performance? What makes employees who set challenging goals differ from those who are content with average performance? When

will individuals exert extra effort to achieve challenging objectives?

Motivation in pre-industrial agrarian society was a simple matter. On the farm, you either worked hard or went hungry. The industrial age changed that. The concept of “the employee” derived its contemporary meaning during this era. For the first time in history, large groups congregated and cooperated to *voluntarily* produce things as employees.

Satisfaction versus Motivation

It is important to distinguish between work motivation and other related concepts such as job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and employee engagement. Early in the study of motivation, there was a strong focus on job satisfaction. In practice, managers and researchers would ask employees how satisfied they were in their job. It was assumed those who reported general satisfaction would be motivated to work hard and be strong performers. It was later found that one could be satisfied in a role but not necessarily motivated to be a top performer. Conversely, one might be miserable but nevertheless perform at a satisfactory level.

Herzberg’s “Two-Factor Theory” says issues driving the reporting of satisfaction level are different from

those motivating one to perform. Factors that keep one satisfied include pay, working conditions, supervisor relationship, company policies, benefits, etc. These *external factors*, if at an acceptable level, can prevent one from being dissatisfied but do little to drive true motivation. The second factors, the *motivators*, are characteristics of the work itself and include sense of achievement, autonomy and responsibility, recognition, opportunity for growth, achievement, etc. So work-related social rewards, the opportunity to master skills, and perceived meaningfulness of the work increase intrinsic motivation and therefore drive stronger performance.

Therefore, managers, researchers, and practitioners adjusted jobs and the work environment to maximize the availability of these *intrinsic motivators*. Through job enlargement (the expansion of jobs to include a larger variety of tasks performed and skills employed) and job enrichment (the expansion of jobs to include tasks at higher levels of skill and responsibility), organizations could provide employees with enhancements to their work lives, like:

- **Skill variety.** The job requires multiple activities.
- **Task identify.** Job incumbents can clearly identify and complete a work piece that has a visible/meaningful outcome.
- **Task significance.** The job results in outcomes that have meaningful impact.
- **Autonomy.** Job incumbents are afforded independence and discretion in setting schedules, selecting techniques and procedures, making decisions, etc., thereby giving them greater responsibility for outcomes
- **Feedback.** Job incumbents have increased knowledge of the results of work.

How Do We Relate to Work?

While this view of work motivation fueled positive impacts in motivation and performance, it also led to a decades-long debate about the relationship between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. One clear example is found in McGregor's Theory X and Theory Y conception of the worker, which suggests leaders manage employees based on the belief they hold regarding human nature. Those who believe that work is not a natural activity for humans (Theory X) manage their employees as though they intrinsically dislike work and responsibility, and must be coerced to perform. Conversely, those who believe work is a natural activity for humans (Theory Y), tend to manage employees under the assumption that they enjoy work, are creative, seek out responsibility, and can exercise self-direction. The intrinsic versus extrinsic as well as the needs (push) versus incentives (pull) debates continued for years.

Cognitive and Goal-Oriented Approaches

One potential deficit with the approaches discussed to this point is framing employees as passive participants in the process being acted upon by biological or psychological drives or external events. Cognitive theory suggests the employee is an active agent in his or her own motivation. Victor Vroom's "Expectancy Theory" suggests employees consider three primary issues before expending the effort to perform at a particular level:

1. Will it lead to a desired performance level?
2. Will the anticipated level of performance lead to the desired outcomes?
3. Will the desired outcomes have the desired personal value?

The cognitive approach also leads to one of today's well-used techniques: goal-setting. Goals direct attention and action, help individuals mobilize effort, increase their persistence, and encourage the development of strategies to achieve them.

The first benefit of these approaches is a move away from the "intrinsic versus extrinsic motivation" debate and the provision of techniques that consider the employee as somewhat autonomous. It also moves

from the idea of the *satisfied worker* toward the *engaged employee*. It defines involvement and enthusiasm for work through employees' intellectual, emotional, and behavioral connectedness. Employee engagement has been consistently linked to such critical outcomes as productivity, customer satisfaction, profitability, retention, quality, and safety.

Looking Forward

Turning to the future, findings in such cutting-edge areas as neuroscience and evolutionary psychology are providing insights into effective employee management. Recent findings suggest leaders' behavior and company culture send signals that evoke brain activity that helps us process our social experiences. More specifically, there are connections in the brain for which we may be hard-wired and may have had some survival value as humans evolved.

There are at least five domains of social experience likely to cause increased activity in the brain's behavioral activating system (causing people to seek out rewards) or the behavioral inhibition system (causing people to avoid punishment): status, sense of certainty, autonomy, relationship with co-workers, and fairness.

Both leader behaviors and company culture can have a profound impact on the brain connections related to these social events. For example, a leader can provide very powerful signals to employees during times of change that will lead those employees to consider their status to be enhanced or decreased after change implementation. Similarly, a leader can have a profound impact on individuals' perceptions of fairness in the organization, thereby activating parts of the brain that lead to engagement or disengagement.

As the world of work continues to evolve, leaders must find better ways to engage employees intellectually, emotionally, and behaviorally to get them to take full ownership of their own professional goals, the strategic objectives of the company, and to consistently examine their roles to derive purposefulness and meaning from their work.