


Building Genuine Motivation

Stan Emelander



Motivating followers is part of a leader's role, but often both leaders and followers are confused about the nature of motivation.

Motivating followers is a leadership imperative for several reasons. Motivated, engaged employees are recognized as a strategic advantage, the engine that carries firms of all types toward their most important goals. Managers and executives, obliged to seek competitive advantage as agents of the firm's owners (including taxpayers) should attend to this advantage. In this era of budget constraints, with an emphasis on providing better services with fewer resources, building an engaged workforce is an ever greater imperative for leaders in the public sector.

Engagement with work is related to innovation and is considered an essential element of organizational success. Leaders, agents of change

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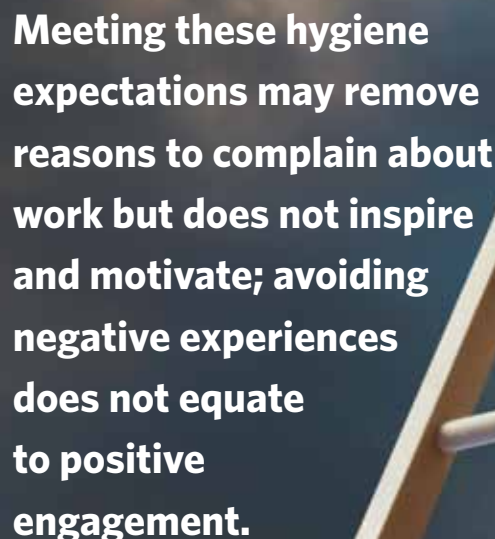
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by definition, must motivate followers in order to accomplish innovative breakthroughs and exceed expectations in both the public and private sectors. Motivation matters to team leaders as well: The highest-performing teams are those with deeply motivated and engaged members—who are absolutely committed to success. These high-performance teams deliver the most creative solutions and can overcome obstacles to success, effectively providing more value to organizations. Often, though, both followers and leaders misunderstand the nature of motivation and heed information that may detract from attaining high worker engagement.

Some common workplace interactions show that motivation is misunderstood, sometimes confounding a leader's good intentions. Picture an acquisition program team leader, aspiring to develop a high-performance team, who calls a meeting and announces to the group, "I want to know what's keeping you from being motivated." The discussion begins slowly, then builds momentum as team members gain confidence to discuss what bothers them about work: "There's not enough meeting space; cubicles and work spaces are cramped; this place is noisy; we spent too much time dealing with rules, regulations, and bureaucracy." The leader carefully records the team's thoughts, and by the end of the meeting has a list of items for future action—mission accomplished! The team members leave feeling they finally have had an opportunity to express some grievances—well done! The problem, though, is that the leader and followers have not really discussed motivation. They may have been distracted because they did not understand the nature of motivation and how it can differ from addressing common workplace problems.

Motivation is a topic with significant benefits from understanding some behavioral science and theory. A key to fostering motivation is the recognition that there is a significant difference between eliminating reasons to dislike work and creating reasons to be engaged by it. Very often, problems with work are related to workers' concepts of minimally acceptable working conditions, termed hygiene factors. Hygiene factors are built around what we expect, feel we deserve, or think is fair. They include considerations such as physical comfort, pay and benefits, safety, and non-abusive interactions with others. These are workers' baseline expectations and must be met for them not to find the work environment objectionable. The learning point is that meeting these hygiene expectations may remove reasons to complain about work but does not inspire and motivate; avoiding negative experiences does not equate to positive engagement.

True motivation (also called "intrinsic motivation") relates to having positive experiences that give pleasure, support growth, and satisfy needs. The sources for healthy motivation are broad, including intellectual challenge, skills attainment, confirming or building a positive self-image, and developing relationships with others. Motivation is viewed as something that develops in stages throughout life (e.g.,

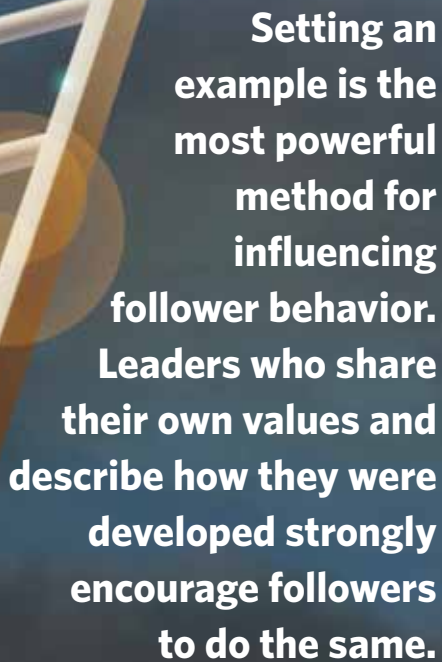


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Maslow's hierarchy of needs) and as originating from universal needs that are parts of our mental makeup.

Research also supports the identification of distinct motivational needs related to satisfaction and well being. These needs are described by various drive theories, such as the three drives identified by Daniel Pink in his book *Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us* (view his TED talk at www.ted.com/talks/dan_pink_on_motivation.html). These drive theories are closely related to Self Determination Theory, which holds that people have a need for autonomy (freedom to choose and act), competence (demonstrating mastery), and relatedness (engaging in significant relationships). While these drives can be hindered or misdirected through life experiences, normal and healthy development entails their fulfillment, and workplace activities that support these needs are thought to be intrinsically motivating.

While it is important to identify and eliminate hygiene-level problems, the quest for motivation goes deeper. Rather than focusing solely on problems with work, leaders, including program and project team leaders, can encourage discussion of experiences that provide development, satisfaction, and fulfillment. Because such conversations occur so rarely, workers may be unprepared for the encounter, requiring patience and persistence to advance the conversation. Leaders must be prepared to encounter and endure a "discomfort phase" that often occurs when people are presented with an unfamiliar task or new information that requires processing. Focusing on the areas suggested by motivation models, such as developing competence, exercising freedom of decision, and the opportunity to develop significant relationships, can help employees reflect on and identify engagement factors in those areas. For instance, acquisition team members may realize they highly



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prize leading a portion of the effort, developing new professional contacts, or gaining competence in a new area. Conditions that interfere with satisfying drive-related goals, also may be identified as a part of this conversation. Decisions about eliminating these problems, along with providing opportunities for engagement, get to the heart of the discussion about motivation that leaders may really want.

Clarity about motivation opens other possibilities for building job satisfaction and growth. Identification and achievement of motivational goals can be an outcome of the firm's performance evaluation process. While the dominant goal of performance evaluation systems is to boost employees' contributions to the firm, managers also have an interest in using the process to build engagement with work, leading to higher productivity and lowering the potential for turnover.

There is room, when setting performance goals, to negotiate between the firm's priorities and the individual's needs. One challenge in fulfilling motivational drives is recognizing their existence. A supervisor or team leader may have to assume the role of a coach, encouraging employees to explore and understand their own drives and how they might be fulfilled at work. After employees have identified some engagement goals, work can begin on integrating them into a coherent development plan. Creativity and concentrated effort, as with all true negotiations, may be required to accommodate both the team's and the employee's needs, but that is part of the leader's responsibility. When the plan succeeds, the benefits will be worth the effort for all parties.

Intrinsic motivation and engagement at work are related to another often discussed, and often misunderstood, subject: values. Not to be confused with ethics or morals, values are the deeply held beliefs that guide our behavior and give life a

sense of meaning. Similar to motivational drives, values usually require some introspection and self-observation to be clearly understood. Although the expression of values can be thwarted or obscured, people generally are capable of developing healthy values that support the growth of greater capabilities, expanded awareness, and richer relationships, thereby contributing to satisfaction with life.

Recognition of values also is important at work. Values such as a sense of adventure, prizing stability, or dedication to family can obviously affect career decisions and attitudes toward one's job. The first step toward integrating personal and professional development comes from knowing one's values. However, similar to awareness of factors related to intrinsic motivation, the identification of individual values can be a major challenge. Leaders and managers can begin to overcome the challenge by identifying values as an important aspect of work. For instance, because setting an example is the most powerful method for influencing follower behavior, leaders who share their own values and describe how they were identified strongly encourage followers to do the same. Recognizing values and what aspects of work provide intrinsic motivation can go hand-in-hand at the individual level, and the development and expression of values also are important for organizations.

Similar to individuals, organizations have values that reflect a collective understanding about what is most important and how to achieve goals. These values are reflected in many areas, including the firm's strategy, leaders' behavior, and the organization's culture. The culture is built around a common perception of "what works" and includes a variety of factors, such as processes, rewards, artifacts, and norms for behavior, all affecting what employees perceive to be the rules for success. For leaders and managers, two key questions arise from the connection between values and motivation: Does the organization recognize its values, and are they aligned with employee values?

While methods for organizational value assessment and alignment are beyond the scope of this article, their relationship to motivation is clear. In summary, intrinsic motivation is a source of true engagement with work that arises from fulfillment of deep-seated, drives or needs. These drives also are manifest through our individual values, the preferences that guide our behavior. Organizational values can be aligned with individual values, fostering intrinsic motivation, which results in higher engagement with work and performance. A leader's quest to learn what motivates workers can start with either values or intrinsic motivation, but ultimately will include both. A part of the leader's task may be to help employees identify their own drives and values, concepts with which many may be unfamiliar. The good news is that by focusing on the positive, enriching aspects of work, many negative hygiene factors will be addressed, as well. &

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