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Why does “motivation” fail to last?

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Sustained motivation is the holy grail of business but how can we motivate our staff to perform better? The bad news is *you* can’t motivate a person - motivation is internal and must come from the within the individual. You can however help to create the conditions whereby someone can better recognise and express their motivation.

To help you understand how to do this let’s explore motives.

Motives are what drive human attitudes and behaviour to act in a particular way. They are internal (sometimes referred to as intrinsic motivation) and they work from the inside out.

A wealth of research is now urging caution against the traditional ‘carrot-and-stick’ approach employed within business. The author Dan Pink explores this area in his wonderful book *Drive – The surprising truth about what motivates us*¹. He warns that the traditional methods, in which companies use a particular incentive - e.g. money - as a conditional reward for a task (external motive or extrinsic motivation), are not only ineffective for motivating employees, but potentially harmful. Pink offers up new models for corporations that he says will tap into *true* motivation, yielding higher satisfaction among employees and delivering stronger results.

The book spans forty years of current research and exposes the mismatch between what science knows and what business currently does. The traditional reward and punishment may have worked in the 20th Century World but not so for today’s challenges especially within a knowledge economy.

Pink identifies what he calls *The Seven Deadly Flaws* of Carrot and Stick approaches.

1. They can extinguish intrinsic motivation.

‘People use rewards expecting to gain the benefit of increasing another person’s motivation and behaviour, but in so doing, they often incur the unintentional and hidden cost of undermining that person’s intrinsic motivation toward the activity.’ Pink suggests that this is *‘one of the most robust findings in social science – and also one of the most ignored.’*

¹ Daniel H. Pink, 2009. *Drive – The surprising truth about what motivates us*. Cannongate, Edinburgh.

After examining three decades of studies conducted on this topic, behavioural scientist, Edward Deci, stated, *“Careful consideration of reward effects reported in 128 experiments lead to the conclusion that tangible rewards have a substantially negative effect on intrinsic motivation.”* In other words, when you focus on short-term results, you do so at the expense of long-term motivation.

2. They can backfire and diminish performance.

In recent years, several high profile studies for the Federal Reserve Bank of Boston, USA and a meta-review of 51 studies by the London School of Economics have reached the same conclusion *“We find that financial incentivescan result in a negative impact on overall performance.”*

3. They can crush creativity.

Several classic experiments have shown that introducing reward or time pressures significantly hinders creativity. Pink shares the findings of Karl Dunker’s simple candle experiment from the 1930’s that has been repeated countless times in similar forms and nearly always with the same conclusion: Rewards brings more mistakes or delay. Many other creative experiments support this finding. Pink concludes, *“For artists, scientists, inventors, schoolchildren, and the rest of us, intrinsic motivation—the drive to do something because it is interesting, challenging, and absorbing—is essential for high levels of creativity. But the 'if-then' motivators that are the staple of most businesses often stifle, rather than stir, creative thinking.”*

4. It can crowd out good behaviour.

In a famous Swedish study, researchers tracked a percentage of people who would donate blood voluntarily. With no incentive, other than good will, 53% of the test group chose to give blood. When a paid reward was introduced, the percentage dropped to 30%. Why? According to the authors *“It tainted an altruistic act and crowded out intrinsic desire to do something good.”* However, a similar study in Italy found that when the reward was paid time from work to give blood then such donations increased. So the nature of the reward might influence the behaviour but too few businesses take the time to understand and harness this information.

5. They can encourage unethical behaviour.

Goals set by oneself that include an element of mastery are usually healthy; however, goals imposed externally such as sales targets or quarterly performance figures can be damaging. Goals narrow focus and concentrate the mind but this can leave us blinkered and too focused on the *what*, at the expense of the *how* and *why*? *“Most of the scandals and misbehaviour that have seemed endemic to modern life involve shortcuts. Executives game their quarterly earnings so they can snag a performance bonus. Athletes inject themselves with steroids to post better numbers and trigger lucrative performance bonuses.”* Intrinsic motivation doesn’t fit with this model. When the reward is the activity itself—deepening learning, delighting customers, doing one’s best—there *are* no shortcuts.

6. It can become addictive.

Any parent who has ever thought of paying their children to take out the garbage knows that the chances of getting them to take out the garbage for free in the future are very slim! Rewards offered for positive behaviour often have to be subsequently increased to get the same level of performance. The reward becomes addictive. The book highlights research done in casinos on the ability of people to make good decisions when there are rewards at stake. The findings show when rewards are offered (even small ones), the likelihood of people switching from risk-averse behaviour to risk-seeking behaviour, increases significantly.

7. It fosters short-term thinking.

It makes sense that offering incentives will often produce short-term results. Several studies show that paying people to exercise, stop smoking, or take their medicines produces terrific results at first—*but* the healthy behaviour disappears once the incentives are removed. The wider health literature is littered with such results as well. Pink puts it this way, *“Greatness and nearsightedness are incompatible. Meaningful achievement depends on lifting one’s sights and pushing towards the horizon.”*

There are according to Dan Pink three elements of true motivation:

- 1) Autonomy - the desire to direct our own lives,
- 2) Mastery - the desire to continually improve at something that matters, and
- 3) Purpose - the desire to do things in service of something larger than ourselves.

We are not designed to be passive and compliant but rather active and engaged. Focusing on creating an environment that fosters these elements - *doing something that matters, doing it well, and doing it in the service of a cause larger than ourselves* - will create an environment where sustained and high levels of motivation can be nurtured.

For me, the final cautionary word on the subject of motivation should rest with the late great Jim Rohn, *“Motivation alone is not enough. If you have an idiot and you motivate him, now you have a motivated idiot.”* As already pointed out a real sense of purpose can help to motivate us and also inspire us. **Your personal mission should set your direction and your values should be your guides.**

Have you got a clear mission statement and values to support you? If not you could be drifting and feeling lost. Your mission and your values are expressed everyday by how you live, in what you say and do. If your **Knowing + Doing** is not matching up to what you believe you should **BE** then think hard about creating a personal mission statement.

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Exercise - How to write a personal mission statement

There is no right or wrong way to write a personal mission statement. A personal mission statement is simply a way of saying "these are my goals, and the code of ethics I'm going to use to live my life" So long as it's meaningful to *you*, then that's all that matters, after all, you're going to be living by it.

Work through the following three steps to help you prepare your personal mission statement.

Step 1. Introduction

Traditionally a Mission statement is written to guide a person or persons on the path of life or business as to how you/they want to live or work. It is not so much about what you want to accomplish, but how you want to live your life. Do you believe in values such as honesty, justice, equality, and self-reliance? These are the types of questions you need to ask yourself when composing your personal Mission statement. What ethics and morals do you want to govern your life?

This must be focused on what is important to you and not someone else.

Step 2. Morals and values

Make a list of what morals and values you hold to be good and true, and then examine your daily life, what morals are easy for you, which ones do you need to work on, and which ones do you want to have. Think about your current habits and how they reflect your morals or values or not as the case might be. Set and embed new habits, if needed.

Spend a few days reflecting over what you find, and then sit down to write. Stick to using recording words in the first instance and just write don't filter. Steadily start to work back over and review your initial thoughts and formulate a list that feels, looks or sounds right to *you*.

Step 3. Write out your statement.

From this list will come the necessary ingredients your personal mission statement. The key thing is start writing – likely it may take a few drafts but your mission statement is an important task. Help yourself by asking the question ...what is it that I want to promise myself? Do I want to promise to myself that I'll be a kinder person, a more truthful person, a spiritual person and what other questions seem relevant? Keep your statement short – it must be like a business aim it's the why not the how or the what. Once you're happy with it sign it and date it and keep it somewhere you'll be reminded of it every day.

Step 4. Live it.

As Mahatma Gandhi said "*Be the change you want to see...*" or in other words:

Knowing + Doing = Being