

Autonomous Motivation

(Self-Determination Theory)

CONTEXT

The environment organizations operate in is :

- Rapidly changing
- Unpredictable
- Complex
- Global (and virtual in many cases)

This means that 'standard recipes' often fail and we expect people in organizations to respond immediately to customers or emergency situations, in an innovative and autonomous way. No time to 'push decision up' into management silos and 'just applying the rules' doesn't work anymore either.

Managers should empower employees, foster decision participation and support self-initiation and autonomy. It sounds like old news but putting it in practice is still a challenge.

Walking the autonomous motivational walk often requires questioning organizational assumptions, and taking risks. To avoid these risks, managers too often take the easy way : Talking the politically correct talk but walking the over-learned walk.

The Carrot and Stick approach can create short-term productivity increases by controlling people's behavior, but the resulting motivation is unsustainable and can create other negative consequences such as cheating, fraud, no attempt to excel,

Food for Thought

(excerpt from *Annie Hall*, Woody Allen)

"Doc, " he says, "you must help me. My brother thinks he's a chicken."

"Bring him in, " replies the doctor. "I'll convince him he's not a chicken. "

"No," the man exclaims, "we need the eggs!"

Managers, too, act like they 'need the eggs'. So they apply carrot and-stick motivational strategies, despite the fact that promoting autonomy actually yields more 'eggs' (i.e. motivation).

Stone, D.N., Deci, E.L., & Ryan,R.M. (2009). Beyond talk: creating autonomous motivation through self-determination theory. *Journal of General Management*. 34 (3), 75-91.

WHAT & WHY

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) describes the core principles underlying sustainable motivation and it gives us an interesting model to "build work situations" in which people can develop **AUTONOMOUS MOTIVATION**..., willingness & engagement ... without pressure from a manager present or strict rules and procedures.

This job-aid is a 'checklist' that can be used to :

- Create jobs, tasks and work situations
- Reflect on your own managerial practices
- Analyze issues about lack of autonomy, initiative, motivation in people and teams

DEFINITIONS

SDT focuses on three core psychological needs:

- **Competence** is the belief and assurance that one has the ability to influence important outcomes.
- **Relatedness** is the experience of having satisfying and supportive social relationships.
- **Autonomy** concerns the experience of acting with a sense of choice, volition and self-determination. This is not the same as independence, for people may well be dependent on others while acting autonomously.

The general idea is that when those three needs are met, people develop self-fueled and sustainable motivation at work.



BASIC IDEAS

- SDT focuses on, and nurtures an interest in, the intrinsic importance of work.
- Externally regulated employees perceive workplace rules as externally imposed, and their motivation is to obtain rewards that are external to the work itself (e.g. praise, promotion, financial bonuses, etc...) or to avoid external negative consequences and blame. But deep down doubt and silent resistance against the rules and external pressure remain.
- Evidence suggests that changing the work climate to support autonomy, competence and relatedness changes the extent to which employees "internalize" work rules, standards and procedures and act creatively, proactively and of their own volition.
- Humans are inherently motivated to grow and achieve and will fully commit to and even engage in uninteresting tasks when their meaning and value is understood.
- Evidence suggests that human needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness are universal, although additional investigation is needed to understand the cross-cultural differences.
- Emphasizing personal accountability of managers for the results of their reports creates command-and-control reactions (David Weinberger calls it 'accountabalism')

SIX STEPS

SDT proposes a six step process to introduce Autonomy, Relatedness and Competence in the Organization

1. Ask open questions and **invite participation in problem solving**
2. **Actively listen** and acknowledge employee perspectives
3. **Offer choices** within structure including the clarification of responsibilities
4. Provide sincere, positive **feedback** that acknowledges initiative and factual, nonjudgmental feedback about problems
5. **Minimise coercive controls** such as rewards and comparisons with others
6. Develop talent and **share knowledge** to enhance competence and autonomy

MODEL

Underneath you find a few very concrete suggestions to develop Competence, Autonomy and Relatedness.



- Make them Responsibility & Accountable
- Clarify expectations in terms of 'outcome' but DO NOT prescribe the WHAT and the HOW
- Don't create rules, approval systems, etc...
- Eliminate all the 'easy ways out' (if you don't do it or don't decide nobody else will do for you !)
- No 'control' or 'reporting' from/to central department
- No 'parallel' hierarchical line / behavior
- No initiatives from the central department if workers are not 'active customers for it'
- ...

- Learning Networks
- Intervention & peer feedback
- Employees create their own job-aids
- Employees can access internal Consulting & Support
- Team and Project work
- Coaching & Feedback available
- Mistakes are not "sanctioned" but used to learn from
- Solve problems together
- Brainstorming for new opportunities or solutions
- ...

- Develop Vision, Mission & Strategy with Employees
- Create feedback and information on results of the organization and the contribution of teams and individuals
- Cross Departmental projects (better understanding of processes and internal customer supplier links)
- Give people a 'supra local role'
- Shared tools, shared language, shared events, ...
- Network as a 'relational / social' reality
- Acknowledge people's performance and give them visibility in the organization
- ...

