



## HOW TO MOTIVATE YOUR TEAM: NEW RESEARCH

### Use SDT principles to motivate your team (and yourself)

Here are a few practical tips for applying SDT principles.

1. To promote a sense of 'autonomy', make others part of your decision making and work allocation processes. Even where you have a good idea of what needs to be done, asking others who might be given the task later will increase the chances they'll see the work as personally meaningful.
2. To target the need for competence, think about what needs to be done and who in your team might be best suited to the job. Ideally the task should be 'optimally challenging' for them – not too easy but also not unattainable. It may help to spend a little time thinking about various aspects of more complex tasks, especially if you're an expert and do the work effortlessly (and without much thought) as a result.
3. To promote 'relatedness' (or belonging as UGM has relabelled the term), be sure to demonstrate that the contributions your people are delivering are valued. Give unexpected, public praise soon after their good work. Also, be sure you express appreciation even more often. Some organisations treat their people as if they were volunteers, recognising that even when people get paid to do a job they still choose how much of themselves they give in exchange.

### *Old, embedded motivational approaches need updating*

Prior to scientific investigation there were many untested, often fanciful, theories about the human condition, including motivation. BF Skinner (judged in a 2002 survey as the most influential psychologist of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century) and his forerunner, Nobel Prize winner Ivan Pavlov (salivating dogs fame), changed that. Taking an 'experimental analysis of behaviour' approach, they and colleagues developed ideas on motivation that are today embedded in 'common knowledge'. For example, ideas on reinforcement and feedback are pervasive in performance management.

But, while they still have some value, many of the ideas were developed using pigeons, rats, dogs and other non-human animals. Sure, human brains do have many brain structures found in those animals. However, being human has meant that other parts of our brain (and our experience) have developed quite differently. As a result, behaviourism is considered to fall short in terms of completely explaining human motivation.

The next wave of motivational studies looked at the human condition. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, for example, has 'self-actualisation' as its top tier motivational state. While interesting, there is actually very little evidence that supports the ranking of Maslow's major categories of needs. Cross-cultural researchers have also shown that perceived needs (what is important and how needs are expressed and satisfied) vary considerably according to culture. There are of course many other similar theories of human motivation, each with limitations that constrain their usefulness. But, at least we know their strengths and weakness because they have been subjected to rigorous scientific testing.

### *New research on human motivation*

A search of the internet surfaces many new and different ideas on what motivates people. However, living in the age of 'fake news' means that many of the theories out there are fanciful, untested ideas, no different from the unsubstantiated theories of pre-scientific eras. Back then people would have labelled these 'new' ideas as 'snake oil' – promises to cure the world but they don't actually deliver anything!

In the context of psychological research, a decade is no time at all. Even a theory that emerged 40 years ago is considered fairly recent. If that theory is also continuously and rigorously tested and updated, then it has credibility and is worthy of attention.

And so it is with Self Determination Theory (SDT), developed over the past few decades by psychology professors, Dr Richard Ryan and Dr Edward Deci. SDT ranks among the 'newest' theories about personality and motivation. SDT focuses on the motivation behind choices that people make without

external influence and interference. In 2016 independent researchers, interested in how well theories translate into real life, examined SDT in a practical context. The theory translated well.

### *A high-level overview of SDT*

SDT suggests that every human being has three basic psychological needs. These are autonomy (a sense of directing own behaviour), competence (feeling effective) and relatedness (feeling understood and cared for by others). These three essential drivers are vital for psychological growth, personal integrity and well-being. They have been shown to motivate individual's behaviour.

### *Source of motivation matters – a lot*

A major contribution of SDT is the important distinction between internal (intrinsic) motivation and external (extrinsic) motivation. Internal motivation is also referred to as autonomous motivation. It occurs when people feel that their actions are due to their own choosing. They are motivated out of personal interest, perceived challenge of the experience, or because the context is meaningful.

External motivation is alternatively titled 'controlled' motivation. Under these conditions, the primary source of motivation does not come from deep within the individual. Rather, it is located (and manipulated) externally. Even if it is positive, for example working for a wage, there is an underlying sense of pressure arising from the external behaviour regulation and control. These controls include externally-located rewards (or avoidance of sanction/punishment) or demands (formal expectations) or internally-located pressures such as pride, guilt or shame that relate to behaviours driven by external factors.

### *Quantity versus quality of motivation*

SDT also highlights the matter of quantity and quality of motivation. In the industrial era, a core lever of profitability was building scale to reduce cost. Unit cost for 1000 units was usually exponentially lower than making a unique item once only. In the digital/knowledge economy, value comes from the quality of ideas, thinking, decision making etc. More (quantity) does not guarantee better (greater value). From a motivation perspective, research shows clearly that internal motivation provides far superior innovation, decision making, thinking etc. than external controls.

### *Looking at motivation with new eyes*

SDT provides a fresh approach to human motivation that has 'being human' at its core. It highlights three key needs (autonomy, competence and relatedness) that all individuals must have fulfilled. If you're working with others, or even thinking about yourself, you'll need to find ways of satisfying these needs.