

Creating Motivating Environments: Part I

Robert Brooks, Ph.D.

In my workshops for both parents and professionals I am frequently asked questions pertaining to motivation and achievement. Parents wonder about the most effective ways of motivating their children and maximizing their opportunities for success in an array of activities. Individuals in managerial positions seek advice for enhancing employee motivation, job satisfaction, and performance. Teachers search for strategies to generate excitement and perseverance in the learning process. Youth coaches ask for techniques to facilitate the acquisition of skills as well as the fun that should be an integral component of a youngster's involvement in sports. Therapists ponder how best to assist patients to consider and initiate different strategies to modify unsatisfactory or self-defeating patterns of behavior.

These questions invite additional questions, including:

If we are to create what I have called “motivating environments,” that is, environments in which those involved are eager to participate and cooperate, what are some of the key features associated with the cultivation of motivation and accomplishment?

How do we reinforce these features in others and ourselves?

In light of these questions I was interested in an article that appeared in the November 14, 2005 issue of *Time Magazine* written by Jeffrey Kluger. It was titled, “Ambition: Why Some People Are Most Likely to Succeed” and featured brief vignettes about a number of well known, high achieving individuals from different fields such as Bill Clinton, Tom Cruise, Condoleeza Rice, Donald Trump, Oprah Winfrey, and Tiger Woods. The research reported in the article has major implications for the ways in which we raise children and the ways in which we conduct our own lives. It also resonates with the writings that my colleague Sam Goldstein and I have done about the theme of resilience.

Interestingly, attributes of determination and persistence, which are fundamental underpinnings for achievement and success, seem to be based, in part, in our genes and brain functioning. Studies of achievement motivation in identical twins separated from

birth compared with those growing up in the same home found that each twin's profile overlaps 30% to 50%, which as the article notes is quite significant. "But that still leaves a great deal that can be determined by experiences in infancy, subsequent upbringing, and countless other imponderables."

The *Time* article also reported research undertaken at the University of Washington to measure a trait they call "persistence—the ability to stay focused on a task until it's completed just so—which they consider one of the critical engines driving ambition." The researchers gave students a task while conducting magnetic resonance imaging (MRIs) of their brains. They discovered that those students who scored highest on a persistence measure also displayed the greatest activity in the limbic region, a region that has been identified as the part of the brain most associated with emotions and habits.

Kluger adds a cautionary note. "It's impossible to say whether innate differences in the brain were driving the ambitious behavior or whether learned behavior was causing the limbic to light up. But a number of researchers believe it's possible for the nonambitious to jump-start their drive, provided the right jolt comes along."

Psychologist Dean Simonton at the University of California at Davis provides a thought-provoking observation, "Energy level may be genetic, but a lot of times it's just finding the right thing to be ambitious about."

Simonton's comment triggered a couple of thoughts. The first, which Sam Goldstein and I have addressed in several of our writings, is that while one's genes play a noteworthy role in our psychological make-up, they are not the sole determinant of who we become. The input of parents, teachers, and other caregivers is significant in directing each child's development. Second, as caregivers do we believe that all children have within them a receptivity to respond to the "right jolt" that comes along? If we subscribe to such a belief, which I do, then we can ask, "For any particular child, even one who does not seem very ambitious or motivated, what is the right jolt?" Or, worded somewhat differently, "What conditions must we create for each child so that she or he will persevere at different tasks and be more successful?" This last question parallels those raised at the beginning of this article.

The issues pertaining to success and accomplishment are made even more complex by the culture in which a child develops. Some cultures emphasize ambition

and achievement, but at the same time they produce individuals who become overly anxious. Kruger observes, “The U.S. has always been a me-first culture, as befits a nation that grew from a scattering of people on a fat saddle of continent where land was often given away. That have-it-all ethos persists today, even though the resource freebies are long since gone. . . . The American model has produced wealth, but it has come at a price—with ambition sometimes turning back on the ambitious and consuming them whole.” As I write this article, I cannot help thinking of the paths taken by Kenneth Lay and Jeffrey Skilling, former executives of Enron, whose trials have just begun. Many former Enron employees would argue that not only did ambition consume Lay and Skilling, but it destroyed the hopes, dreams, and earnings of those who worked for Enron.

My thoughts were echoed in the *Time* article. Kruger voices concern about ambition gone amok. “Grand dreams unmoored from morals are the stuff of tyrants—or at least of Enron. The 16-hour workday filled with high stress and at-the-desk meals is the stuff of burnout and heart attacks.” What is as disturbing is that a surplus of ambition is evident in our youth and the results are harmful. One study, conducted by anthropologist Peter Demerath of Ohio State University looked at 600 students at what was judged to be a high-achieving high school where many of the students were taking advanced-placement courses and involved with sports and after-school jobs. Not only were a large number of students suffering from stress, but their moral compass and that of their parents was way off course.

Kruger writes of Demerath’s research, “It revealed the lengths to which the kids and their parents were willing to go to gain an advantage over other suffering students. Cheating was common, and most students shrugged it off as only a minor problem. A number of parents—some of whose children carried a 4.0 average—sought to have their kids classified as special education students, which would entitle them to extra time on standardized tests.” It is obvious that the actions of these parents represent a distorted view of success and happiness and works against the development of what Sam Goldstein and I refer to as a “resilient mindset.”

I have written extensively about the steps we can take to help our children to be more motivated and passionate but never at the expense of their physical, emotional, and moral well-being. I have experienced first-hand in my clinical practice the seeming

transformation of children and adolescents who were initially labeled “unmotivated” but eventually took pleasure in tackling and persevering at a challenging task. I have also witnessed children who strive for success while maintaining an attitude of caring and compassion that actually fuels rather than short circuits their accomplishments.

In next month’s article I will explore in greater detail research that not only provides guideposts for creating motivating environments but also examines those attributes that are most associated with accomplishment and success. However, before ending, I should like to offer a few thoughts that will serve as a preview for my next article.

Kruger writes, “A growing number of educators and psychologists do believe it is possible to unearth ambition in students who do not seem to have much. They say by instilling confidence, encouraging more risk-taking, being accepting of failure and expanding the areas in which children may be successful, both parents and teachers can reignite that innate desire to achieve.” I should note that these are all characteristics of a resilient mindset.

Kruger cites the work of Carol Dweck, a psychologist on the faculty of Stanford University and a well-known researcher in the area of motivation. Dweck emphasizes, “You have to teach students that they are in charge of their intellectual growth.” This statement resonates with Dr. Mel Levine’s approach as captured in such books as *A Mind at a Time* and *The Myth of Laziness*. Levine highlights the process of “de-mystification” in which students learn about their learning style with the result that they feel more in control of the ways in which they process, retain, and apply information. Students will be more motivated and successful when they understand their unique learning strengths and vulnerabilities.

Similar to Levine whose *Schools Attuned* program has been adopted by many schools, Dweck has put theory into practice by helping to run an experimental program with New York City public school seventh-graders. The program has been given the name Brainology and it focuses on teaching students how the brain works and the ways in which it develops throughout life.

Lisa Blackwell, a research scientist at Columbia University who has collaborated with Dweck, emphasizes, “The message is that everything is within the kids’ control, that

their intelligence is malleable. Parents can play a critical role in conveying this message to their children by praising their effort, strategy and progress rather than emphasizing their ‘smartness’ or praising high performance alone. Most of all, parents should let their kids know that mistakes are part of learning.” I would add to Blackwell’s observation by noting that educators are also in an influential position to reinforce this message.

A feeling of control (or what I often refer to as “personal control”) serves as a foundation for motivation and perseverance whether in schools, homes, or the business world. Personal control is associated with ownership, responsibility, realistic expectations, hope, and resilience. As we reflect upon the mindset we wish our children to develop, it would be advantageous to consider our definitions of motivation and accomplishment as well as how to assist our children to lead more satisfying and successful lives. I will offer views about this topic in my next article.