Creating Motivating Environments: Part III
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In the past two articles I described research examining the concepts of success, achievement, ambition, and motivation. Last month I focused specifically on the work of Dr. Marshall Raskind and his colleagues and their identification of "success attributes," namely, those qualities that are most related to measures of accomplishment in one's adult life. I also suggested strategies for promoting these attributes in both our children and ourselves.

In the first two articles I asked, "If we are to create what I call '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?" In this, the third and final article in the series, I will delve further into a theory that I have found very helpful in designing "motivating environments." Such environments allow for and encourage a wide spectrum of expressions of success and achievement but without losing sight of such moral and ethical values as honesty, respect, kindness, and compassion.

A Theory of Self-Motivation

As a parent, psychologist, educator, lecturer, and consultant I have been keenly interested in understanding and applying those variables that energize people not only to define realistic goals but to initiate plans for achieving these goals. In reviewing different theories of motivation, I have been especially impressed by the work of Dr. Edward Deci at the University of Rochester in New York. His research and ideas in the area of motivation have proved very useful to me in my work. His book, *Why We Do What We Do: Understanding Self-Motivation,* is an excellent resource and summary of his approach, an approach that has similarities to those advanced by Dr. William Glasser (author of *Reality Therapy* and *The Quality School)* and Drs. Larry Brendtro, Martin Brokenleg, and Steve Van Bockern (co-authors of *Reclaiming Youth at Risk: Our Hope for the Future).*

Instead of posing the question, "How can people motivate others?" Deci asks, "How can people create the conditions within which others will motivate themselves?"

This is an important distinction as it shifts the focus away from extrinsic motivation (i.e., motivation based on external rewards and punishments and the possibility of feeling controlled) to intrinsic motivation (i.e., motivation based on what Deci labels "authenticity and responsibility" and a feeling of having choice). His framework has broad application in all areas of our lives. In *Why We Do What We Do: Understanding Self-Motivation* he writes, "This book is full of hope, for it speaks to what we can do for ourselves, and what we can do for our children, our employees, our patients, our students, and our athletes—indeed, what we can do for our society." I would concur with this assessment, having applied his approach in my clinical and consulting work with parents, educators, business leaders, and coaches.

Deci proposes that self-motivation will thrive when people are in environments in which significant needs are being met. He has highlighted three such needs, including (a) to belong and feel connected, (b) to feel a sense of autonomy and self-determination, and (c) to feel competent. In my professional and personal activities, I keep these needs in view as I attempt to establish conditions that will nurture motivation and change. Although the primary focus of this article is on nurturing these needs and self-motivation in youth, the ideas are equally relevant for adults.

To belong and feel connected: I have written many articles about the importance of connectedness. It is an integral concept in the books about resilience that I have co-authored with my colleague Dr. Sam Goldstein. Children and adolescents will feel increasingly self-motivated in those environments in which they feel welcome and in which they sense that adults care about them. This need is very important in schools, reflected in the oft-quoted statement that "students don't care what you know until they first know you care."

Educators should ask themselves, "How do I help each student to feel welcome in my classroom?" When I queried students of all ages about actions they thought a teacher or school administrator might take each day to help them to feel welcome, the two most frequent responses were being greeted warmly by name and having a teacher smile at them. Obviously, seemingly small gestures can go a long way to help students feel welcome.

A study about safe schools issued by the U.S. Department of Education noted, "Research shows that a positive relationship with an adult who is available to provide support when needed is one of the most critical factors in preventing school violence. Effective schools make sure that opportunities exist for adults to spend quality, personal time with children."

The power of connections and a feeling of belonging also impact on a student's academic and social success at school. A Massachusetts Department of Education report emphasized, "Possibly the most critical element to success within school is a student developing a close and nurturing relationship with at least one caring adult. Students need to feel that there is someone within school they know, to whom they can turn, and who will act as an advocate for them."

As a therapist I have witnessed youngsters become less defensive and more willing to reflect upon and change self-defeating behaviors in the context of their relationship with me. For instance, providing them with my professional card should they need to contact me, or sending them a note in response to a significant event in their life or, when indicated, attending a high school play in which they appeared are but a few examples of expressing to youth that they are important to me and that there is a connection between us. I experienced the same dynamic as a youth basketball coach. I made brief phone calls to different players after each game (in the course of the season each player received several calls); during the phone conversation I offered appreciation for the child's involvement. Parents reported that the children valued these calls, enhancing their motivation to improve their skills; e.g., several parents observed their child practicing different basketball drills without being reminded to do so.

Obviously, the importance of feeling you belong and are a valued member of a group or organization is as powerful a motivator for adults as it is for children. This is true in the workplace and in other settings.

To feel a sense of autonomy and self-determination: At the core of Deci's theory of motivation are the concepts of ownership and self-determination. If our goal is to create environments in which children are self-motivated, then we must make certain that they feel their voices are being heard and respected and that they have some control over what transpires in their lives. If youngsters believe they are constantly told what to

do and that their lives are being dictated by adults, they are less likely to be enthused or motivated to engage in particular tasks. If anything, their main motivation may be to avoid or oppose the desires of others; a power struggle, uncooperative behavior, and anger are likely to ensue.

Self-motivation will be nurtured in those environments in which adults seek and respect the input of children and adolescents. This statement should not be interpreted as my recommending that youngsters be permitted to do whatever they wish, but rather that we convey a willingness to listen to their ideas even if we should disagree with them. A benefit of a dialogue with youth is that it allows us to offer our own perspective during which we can articulate the ethical and moral values that guide our actions.

A belief in eliciting the views of children and adolescents also requires that we provide opportunities to strengthen their problem-solving and decision-making skills. I recall one group of students with special needs. They were engaged in conducting research about existing charities. Based on their research findings, they determined which charity to support and the most effective ways of raising money. These activities enhanced their self-esteem, reinforced their academic skills, and, as importantly, nurtured an attitude of compassion and caring for others.

The importance I accord self-determination and autonomy has prompted me to ask both faculty and students in schools, "What choices or decisions have you made about your job or your learning in the past few months?" If faculty do not feel they are afforded choices about their work, it is difficult for them to provide different options to their students. A sense of ownership is compromised in environments in which directives come from administrators or managers who demonstrate little appreciation for the wishes or ideas of those who report to them. This is true not only in schools, but in all kinds of businesses as well.

Even the provision of seemingly small choices has a major impact on self-motivation. In one school I visited teachers provided students a choice of which homework problems to do. For instance, if there were eight problems on a page, students were told, "It's your choice. You have to consider all eight problems, but you do the six that you think will help you to learn best." In feedback I received from the faculty at the

school, they reported receiving more homework of higher quality when allowing their students some choice.

The feelings of choice and ownership are closely associated with the success attributes identified by Raskind such as "proactivity" and the research of Dr. Carol Dweck noted in my last two articles, research that captures the significance of promoting a sense of personal control. Dweck advocates, "You have to teach students that they are in charge of their intellectual growth," and her colleague Lisa Blackwell emphasizes, "The message is that everything is within the kids' control, that their intelligence is malleable."

To feel competent: More than 20 years ago I introduced the metaphor "islands of competence," observing that too often we fixate on problems to be corrected rather than on strengths to be reinforced. I stated that every child and adult possesses these areas of strength, areas that are or have the potential to be a source of pride and accomplishment. I advocated that parents, teachers, and other adults assume responsibility for identifying and building upon these islands in children as well as in their own lives.

Deci together with other researchers and clinicians have emphasized the importance of reinforcing islands of competence as a catalyst for self-motivation. For instance, psychiatrist Michael Rutter, discussing resilient and motivated individuals, concludes, "Experience of success in one arena of life led to enhanced self-esteem and a feeling of self-efficacy, enabling them to cope more successfully with subsequent life challenges and adaptations."

If people are in environments in which there is little, if any, acknowledgement of their strengths and an inordinate focus on their weaknesses, they are more likely to feel defeated and even hopeless. When these negative emotions dominate, self-motivation and the desire to face new challenges will suffer.

As those familiar with my work are aware, there are numerous ways of helping children to feel more competent. For example, in the school setting, one must insure that we teach students in ways in which they can learn best, recognizing that all youngsters have different learning styles.

Another strategy for fortifying islands of competence and self-motivation is to provide youth with opportunities to help others. This kind of activity is equally relevant for adults. Individuals who are engaged in contributing to the well-being of others experience satisfaction, feelings of competence, and an increased motivation to involve themselves in various tasks, even those that have proved problematic in the past. Examples I have used in the school milieu include: older students with learning problems reading to younger children; a hyperactive child being asked to assume the position of "attendance monitor," which involved his walking around the halls to take attendance of teachers while the latter were taking attendance of students; and the use of cooperative learning in which students of varying abilities worked together as a team with each bringing his or her unique strengths to different projects. Contributing to the welfare of others also enhances noteworthy values such as compassion, respect, and caring.

One of the most far-reaching approaches to assist children and adolescents to feel competent is to lessen their fear of failure. In schools, this fear can be addressed directly when teachers ask their class, "Who feels they are going to make a mistake or not understand something in class this year?" Before any of the students can respond, teachers can raise their own hand to initiate discussion of the ways in which the fear of making mistakes generates feelings of humiliation and impacts adversely on learning. Educators can share their own experiences making mistakes when they were students and can involve the class in a problem-solving activity by asking what they can do as teachers and what the students can do as a class to minimize the fear of failure.

As Sam Goldstein and I have highlighted in *The Power of Resilience: Achieving Balance, Confidence, and Personal Strength in Your Life,* if adults are to lead a more resilient lifestyle, it is important that they identify their islands of competence and reflect upon the extent to which they engage in activities in which these islands are brought into play and reinforced.

Concluding Comment

Guidelines exist to answer Deci's question, "How can people create the conditions within which others will motivate themselves?" Environments will become "motivating environments" when our needs to belong and feel connected, to experience a sense of self-determination and ownership, and to have our competencies identified and

recognized are met. In meeting these needs we can also nurture "success attributes" and reinforce those values that are involved in leading a responsible and ethical lifestyle, values characterized by respect for oneself and others.

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