

The Complexities of Motivation: The Uncertainty of

Predicting Behaviors

Part II

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Last month I discussed Daniel Pink's impressive new book *Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us*. Pink highlights the work of a number of researchers, including psychologists Edward Deci and Richard Ryan at the University of Rochester in New York. Deci and Ryan have contributed significantly to our understanding of the differences between extrinsic motivation (i.e., motivation based on external rewards and punishments that may lead to a feeling of being controlled) and intrinsic motivation (i.e., motivation based on what Deci terms "authenticity and responsibility" and a feeling of having choice).

I reviewed studies that produced results that may have seemed counterintuitive, namely, when children or adults received a reward for engaging in an activity they experienced as enjoyable and stimulating, the introduction of a reward actually lessened rather than reinforced interest in that activity. Pink observes that a prediction that the reward would heighten involvement in the activity is based on what he labels "The Motivation 2.0 Operating System," namely, that the way you encourage people to do what you want is to reward them for the behavior you seek and punish them for behavior you do not want to appear.

In contrast to the principles of Motivation 2.0 is the self-determination theory (SDT) advanced by Deci and Ryan in which they contend there are three basic, innate, psychological needs that we all have: the need to belong or feel connected, the need to feel competent, and the need for autonomy or self-determination. Pink writes, "When those needs are satisfied, we're motivated, productive, and happy. When they're thwarted, our motivation, productivity, and happiness plummet."

Pink adds, "Human beings have an innate drive to be autonomous, self-determined, and connected to one another. And when that drive is liberated, people achieve more and live richer lives."

I ended my February article by posing several questions, including:

How best to liberate the drives for autonomy, self-determination, and connectedness, especially in environments such as our schools and workplaces?

Are there situations in which the application of Motivation 2.0 is indicated? If so, under what conditions has this approach proven most successful?

Questions to Ponder

I received a number of thoughtful responses to last month's article. A few educators reported that the article prompted them to question whether activities that appeared enjoyable and highly motivating to students required a reward. As an example, one educator described a project in which students were involved in enhancing the physical appearance of the school by creating murals or paintings or planting flowers. The project was cast not only as a way of improving the "look of the school," but also as a competition with a prize going to the "best" display. Since the educator reported that the students were highly motivated to engage in this project for its own sake I cautioned whether it was necessary to introduce competition and an award into the scenario.

Several educators and parents inquired how one might motivate students who are struggling in school to persevere with tasks that they experience as burdensome, exhausting, and often resulting in failure. In such a situation intrinsic motivation seems to be a lost commodity with little possibility of satisfying the needs for competence and self-determination. One parent wondered if a tangible reward represented the only possible source of motivation for her son with learning difficulties to complete his schoolwork—schoolwork that he "detested" doing.

Not surprisingly, especially when a complex topic such as motivation is involved, these questions do not lend themselves to simple answers. I continue to struggle with understanding those factors that nurture what I have called "motivating environments" (please see my February, March, and April, 2006 articles), often asking, "What interventions will prove most effective in what situations to create conditions in which people are motivated to engage in different tasks?" Or, as Deci has proposed, "How can people create the conditions within which others will motivate themselves?" Or, as several of my readers asked, "Are there situations when extrinsic motivation or external reinforcers are indicated and, if so, what are these situations?"

Parameters for Applying Motivation 2.0

Pink addresses the place of Motivation 2.0 or extrinsic motivation. He notes, "Carrots and sticks aren't all bad. If they were, Motivation 2.0 would never have flourished so long or accomplished so much. While an operating system centered around rewards and punishments has outlived its usefulness and badly needs an upgrade, this doesn't mean we should scrap its every piece."

In reviewing research findings, Pink asserts, "For routine tasks, which aren't very interesting and don't demand much creative thinking, rewards can provide a small motivational booster shot without the harmful side effects. In some ways, that's just common sense." In capturing the limitations of Motivation 2.0, Deci, Ryan, and Richard

Koestner posit, “Rewards do not undermine people’s intrinsic motivation for dull tasks because there is little or no intrinsic motivation to be undermined.” Dan Ariely, author of *Predictably Irrational*, found that when a task required “even rudimentary cognitive skill, a larger reward led to poorer performance. As long as the task involved only mechanical skill, bonuses worked as they would be expected: the higher the pay, the better the performance.”

Pink refers to tasks that are “routine” as “algorithmic, rule-based functions.” He notes, “For some people, much of what they do *all day* consists of these routine, not terribly captivating, tasks.” When this situation exists, Pink advocates the introduction of the “Tom Sawyer Effect, that is, attempting to turn work into play—to increase the task’s variety, to make it more like a game, or to use it to help master other skills.” He recognizes that it is not always possible to implement these changes and when it is not, the application of Motivation 2.0 is an option. However, Pink identifies three practices in the workplace that will increase the probability of Motivation 2.0 and rewards being effective. He writes:

“Offer a rationale for why the task is necessary. A job that’s not inherently interesting can become more meaningful, and therefore more engaging, if it’s part of a larger purpose.

“Acknowledge that the task is boring. This is an act of empathy, of course. And the acknowledgment will help people understand why this is the rare instance when ‘if-then’ rewards are part of how your organization operates. (“If-then” represents the carrot and stick approach, namely, “if” you do this, “then” you will either be rewarded or punished.)

“Allow people to complete the task their own way. Think autonomy not control. State the outcome you need. But instead of specifying precisely the way to reach it, give them freedom over how they do the job.”

This third practice is evidently based on the premise that even when a task is routine and is reinforced by a reward, people will be increasingly motivated to complete the task in a quality manner when they feel a sense of control rather than feeling that they are being controlled.

Implications for the School Environment

I certainly appreciate Pink’s insights about those instances in which Motivation 2.0 might heighten one’s motivation to do routine or boring tasks, especially in the workplace. However, as I reflected about these three practices, my mind quickly shifted to their application in the school environment. Without wishing to simplify the three practices, I had difficulty imagining that many students would be receptive to the first

two. In my experience if students are not interested in the subject matter or the style of the teacher, their enthusiasm and interest in completing the requirements will not be strengthened if, for example, they are told that the class is necessary for future success. Of course, if they are told (warned?) that passing the class is a prerequisite for graduation, it might serve as a motivator to do the work; such a situation would epitomize the “stick” side of the Motivation 2.0 system.

I was intrigued by the third suggestion. Not every class can be exciting to all students, but I believe that if teachers can design strategies to enhance a student’s sense of ownership then student engagement and motivation would be enriched (please see my December, 2003 article in which I address the importance of ownership). As I thought about student engagement, several questions arose: “In addition to building in a sense of ownership, can subject matter that is mundane to certain students be transformed into more stimulating, satisfying activities in school?” “For those students who struggle with learning, can course requirements be modified to lessen the boredom of rote learning or the ongoing fear of failure?” Or, to quote Deci once more, “How can people create the conditions within which others will motivate themselves?”

Further Complications about a Complicated Subject

As one might surmise from my writings I am a strong advocate of practices that promote intrinsic motivation. However, I attempt to keep an open mind to views and practices that differ from my own and to understand when these practices yield results that do not necessarily support my philosophy. Thus, I was drawn to a brief article in last week’s issue of *Newsweek* written by Tony Dokoupil titled “Why Paying Kids to Study Works in Texas.”

Dokoupil reports, “Backed by private donors, hundreds of schools nationwide have tried a pay-for-performance approach in the last decade. But even as the practice has spread, psychologists have attacked it as short-sighted, saying it doesn’t cultivate a lifelong love of learning. Legislators, wary of the optics, have steered clear, citing the need for further research.”

Such research may now exist. A long-term study has recently been presented in a working paper published by the National Bureau of Economic Research. Dokoupil writes, “According to the report, Texas high school students who earned cash for passing Advanced Placement exams showed not only better GPAs, but also bumps in college attendance, performance, and the likelihood of earning their degrees. The effects were most pronounced among minorities, with African-American students 10 percent more likely to enter college, and 50 percent more likely to persist through graduation.”

I have not read the report and was not able to access it on-line. I did read other reports, most of which questioned the efficacy of paying students to achieve in school. I assume that the research design of the Texas study was sound, controlling for different variables that might account, in part, for the results (e.g., extra attention shown the students who received the stipend; having a comparable “control group” that did not receive payment).

The cost of the program averaged only about \$200 per student. Kirabo Jackson, a Cornell professor and author of the study, offers an interesting observation. “If you have a million dollars, this is a pretty good way to spend it. It gives cool-minded kids an alibi for success. ‘I don’t like math; I’m saving for an Xbox.’”

Jackson’s comments triggered memories of my experience as principal of a school for inpatient children and adolescents at a psychiatric hospital. On several occasions students came to speak with me about a particular issue. In the course of the conversation they “slipped” and mentioned some planned negative behaviors that were to take place. I responded that I would have to inform the teachers and inpatient staff since we could not allow such behaviors. In each instance the student basically said, “I shouldn’t have told you. Now I’ve got to tell the other kids I let it slip out and we can’t do it.” One time the moment the student left my office I overheard him inform one of the other adolescents, “I really goofed. I accidentally told Brooks about our plan. We better not do it.” I felt it was obvious that the student was motivated not to engage in the negative actions to begin with but required an excuse not to do so in order to avoid being seen as cowardly by his peers. Better to look foolish for inadvertently disclosing a plan than refusing to involve yourself in the plan.

While the underlying motivation for each group of students may be very different, I believe there are some similarities. The students who came into my office were apparently motivated to avoid involvement in what hospital staff termed “inappropriate behaviors.” Their motivation may have consisted of a mixture of extrinsic (“if I do this I will be punished”) and intrinsic (“this is not the right thing to do”) motivation, but they required an excuse to avoid ostracism by their peers (I actually thought their peers may have been relieved when I found out about the planned actions). I think it is sad if many of the students in Texas needed an excuse to do well in school. But even so, the fact they accepted that excuse suggests that their motivation to succeed was already in existence. The financial payment served to remove an obstacle and allow the drives for competence and self-determination to find expression.

Additional Questions to Consider

During the past 30 years, the more I have delved into the concept of motivation the more I recognize and appreciate the nuances and complexities of the subject. Studies such as those undertaken in Texas do not invite easy answers or interpretations. In February's article I wrote that in my next article I planned to share ideas of how best to meet the needs for self-determination, connectedness, and competence in different environments such as our schools and places of work. However, as I was writing this article and describing important insights from Pink's book about those situations that may lend themselves to external rewards, I realized that I will need a third article to examine in greater detail the factors that contribute to the development of "motivating environments." I will do so next month.

The feedback I received in response to February's article was very helpful. I welcome your comments and insights about this article.

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