The Complexities of Motivation: The Uncertainty of Predicting Behaviors

Part III

Robert Brooks, Ph.D.

In my past two articles I have addressed the theme of motivation, drawing from Daniel Pink's thought-provoking new book *Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us.* Based on the large number of responses I have received to these articles it is obvious that this theme is of significant interest to parents and professionals alike. Prior to sharing some new thoughts, a quick review of several key points from the previous articles is warranted.

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).

Pink introduces the label "The Motivation 2.0 Operating System," a system that is predicated on the belief that the ways in which we encourage people to do what we want is to reward them for the behavior we seek and punish them for behavior we 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 possess: 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."

The Limitations of Motivation 2.0

Several of the questions I received in response to my first article in this three-part series asked if the application of Motivation 2.0 principles is ever indicated. I noted in last month's article that it was, but in a much more limited way than many may believe. Pink concurs, "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."

Pink adds, "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."

Creating "Motivating Environments": Type I vs. Type X Behaviors

Whenever Motivation 2.0 or the carrot and stick approach is employed, one must ask if an alternative practice would be more likely to nurture what I have called a "motivating environment," that is, an environment in which those involved are eager to participate and cooperate—not because of external rewards or punishments but based on intrinsic motivation.

Pink expands upon his views of Motivation 2.0 by introducing the concepts of Type I and Type X behaviors. He explains:

> The Motivation 2.0 operating system depended on, and fostered, what I call Type X behavior. Type X behavior is fueled more by extrinsic desires than intrinsic ones. It concerns itself less with the inherent satisfaction of an activity and more with the external rewards to which that activity leads. The Motivation 3.0 operating system—the upgrade that's needed to meet the new realities of how we organize, think about, and do what we do—depends on what I call Type I behavior. Type I behavior is fueled more by intrinsic desires than extrinsic ones.

> It concerns itself less with the external faction of the activity itself. . . . If we want to strengthen our organizations, get beyond our decade of underachievement, and address the inchoate sense that something is wrong in our businesses, our lives, and our world, we need to move more from Type X to Type I.

Subscribing to but modifying to some extent the three basic needs proposed by Deci and Ryan, Pink asserts that "Type I behavior depends upon three nutrients: autonomy, mastery, and purpose. Type I behavior is self-directed. It is devoted to becoming better and better at something that matters. And it connects that quest for excellence to a larger purpose."

Guiding Principles for Intrinsic Motivation

Deci and Ryan's research has been instrumental in my clinical and consultation activities for years and dovetail with what my colleague Sam Goldstein and I call a "resilient mindset," that is, a mindset associated with an outlook and skills that are necessary to lead a more hopeful, productive lifestyle. For instance, when I consult with an organization or business, I always ask myself, "Are the needs for connectedness, autonomy, and competence being realized here?" or "Does this organization focus on nurturing intrinsic rather than extrinsic motivation?" The same questions exist when I consult with schools and observe whether these needs are being met for all members of the school community—the students, staff, faculty, administrators, and parents.

Let's examine the three "nutrients" proposed by Pink. As you reflect upon these components of intrinsic motivation, you might ask yourself whether your school, organization, or business subscribes to meeting the needs for autonomy, mastery, and purpose. If not, what changes should be implemented so that these needs gain greater prominence in the day-to-day activities of your group. And we must always keep in mind that these nutrients are housed within the quality of our connections with others. Intrinsic motivation thrives in the context of a satisfying relationship.

Autonomy. I have written extensively about the importance of people feeling a sense of ownership and "personal control" for what transpires in their lives. As Sam Goldstein and I emphasize in *The Power of Resilience: Achieving Balance, Confidence, and Personal Strength in Your Life,* a sense of personal control is a driving component of resilience. Let's turn once again to the words of Pink:

> The fundamentally autonomous quality of human nature is central to self-determination theory (SDT). Deci and Ryan cite autonomy as one of three basic human needs. And of the three, it's the most important—the sun around which SDT's planets orbit. In the 1980s, as they progressed in their work, Deci and Ryan moved away from categorizing behavior as either extrinsically motivated or intrinsically motivated to categorizing it as either controlled or autonomous. "Autonomous motivation involves behaving with a full sense of volition and choice," they write, "whereas controlled motivation involves behaving with the experience of pressure and demand specific outcomes that comes from forces perceived to be external to the self."

In my December, 2009 article, I discussed the practices of companies that were judged very high in employee satisfaction. Comcast was rated the top large employer and interestingly, the quality of autonomy was one determining factor mentioned by employees. Stephen L. Hackly, Comcast senior vice president for the Greater Boston region, captures this philosophy when he observes, "Employees are given wide discretion to solve problems and given the authority to keep customers satisfied. . . . Under a new guarantee program, a customer service representative or field technician can discount the bills or even give the customer three free months of a premium channel without approval. No questions asked."

Pink reviews a number of studies that confirm the significance of autonomy in the work setting. As one example he describes research undertaken at Cornell University involving "320 small businesses, half of which granted workers autonomy, the other relying on top-down direction. The businesses that offered autonomy grew at four times the rate of the control-oriented firms and had one-third the turnover."

I have found that in both the business world and in schools, autonomy helps to create "motivating environments." Affording employees, faculty, and/or students some choice does not minimize the authority of supervisors or managers. Instead I believe it enhances a sense of ownership, responsibility, and accountability in all members of that environment. As I have expressed in previous writings, intrinsic motivation is enriched when individuals are provided with opportunities to have their voices heard. So-called

"top-down direction" frequently triggers feelings of resentment, lessening any possible satisfaction or joy associated with the activity.

In my workshops I often pose the question, "Who in this audience likes to be told what to do and have no say or choice?" Although people may chuckle in response to this question, it is not unusual for some to speak with me privately during a break and share their discontentment about working in an environment in which they feel their opinion is not elicited and/or honored.

Mastery. I have frequently tied the concept of mastery to a metaphor I introduced almost 30 years ago, namely, that we all have "islands of competence." I contend that people will be more motivated to engage in those tasks that involve the application of their strengths or competencies. Success builds on success. True self-worth is based not on inflated grades or false praise but rather on realistic achievement and unconditional acceptance. Hopefully, we have all had the experience of succeeding at a challenging task and feeling a wonderful sense of accomplishment.

Pink cites the work of Mihaly Csikszentmihaly whose family fled Hungary during World War II. Csikszentmihaly eventually came to the United States and earned a doctorate in psychology at the University of Chicago. He began to study the importance of play and the ways in which engaging in certain activities was its own reward. He introduced a term that has become part of our everyday lexicon: *flow.* "The highest, most satisfying experiences in people's lives were when they were in flow."

Pink writes that in flow not only are goals clear but "the relationship between what a person has to do and what he could do was perfect. The challenge wasn't too easy. Nor was it too difficult. It was a notch or two beyond his current abilities, which stretched the body and mind in a way that made the effort itself the most delicious reward." Pink adds that in flow people were autonomous, but "more than that, they were engaged."

Not every activity, especially those that are more routine, can provide flow. However, Pink offers evidence that indicates it may be possible to turn work into play and produce the conditions for the emergence of flow. He states:

> Some tasks at work don't automatically provide surges of flow, yet they need to get done. So the shrewdest enterprises afford employees the freedom to sculpt

> their jobs in ways that bring a little bit of flow to otherwise mundane duties. Amy Wrzesniewski and Jane Dutton, two business school professors have studied this phenomenon among hospital cleaners, nurses, and hairdressers. They found, for instance, that some members of the cleaning staff at hospitals, instead of doing the minimum the job required, took on new tasks—from chatting with patients to helping make nurses' jobs go more smoothly. Adding these more absorbing challenges increased these cleaners' satisfaction and boosted their own views of their skills. By reframing aspects of their duties, they helped make work more playful and more fully their own. "Even in low-autonomy jobs," Wrzesniewski and Dutton write, "employees can create new domains for mastery."

As I read these intriguing suggestions, I thought about several of my patients who benefited from the support provided by school custodians and secretaries. One challenging student "checked in" with the secretary at the beginning of the school day, assisting with one or two tasks prior to reporting to his homeroom. His behavior improved noticeably and the secretary told me how much she enjoyed interacting with and assisting this student.

Flow can be exhilarating. I have experienced it while engaged in such diverse activities as therapeutic storytelling with one of my child patients, or presenting to a very warm and responsive audience (I know I have been in a state of flow while speaking when I look at the clock in an auditorium and discover than it is later than I imagined), or writing a number of pages for an article or book when the ideas seem to "flow" and find their way onto the computer screen.

In considering the school milieu, while not every subject can be of interest to a student, I do believe that the way in which material is presented, the kinds of questions that are posed, and the learning activities that are introduced can play a large role in determining the presence or absence of flow. I recall an elementary school teacher who heightened my and my classmates' interest in math by showing us how understanding fractions and division would allow us to obtain the batting averages of our beloved Brooklyn Dodgers. As another example, I visited a high school classroom in which the excitement was palpable as the teacher engaged students in a discussion of "what might have happened if Hitler and the Nazis were victorious in World War II."

Purpose. I am very pleased that Pink emphasizes purpose as the third aspect of motivation. Purpose is related to commitment and meaning, important features of resilience. Pink elaborates, "The first two legs of the Type I tripod, autonomy and mastery, are essential. But for proper balance we need a third leg—purpose, which provides a context for its two mates. Autonomous people working toward mastery perform at very high levels. But those who do so in the service of some greater objective can achieve even more."

Years ago, while gathering data for my book *The Self-Esteem Teacher* I asked adults to complete an anonymous questionnaire. The first question asked them to describe briefly their fondest memory of school, a memory in which a teacher said or did something that boosted their self-esteem and motivation. The most common answer involved being asked to help out or contribute in some manner to the school environment. In our book *Raising Resilient Children,* Sam Goldstein and I contend that there is an "inborn need in children to want to help." I should emphasize that this need resides not only in children. In *The Power of Resilience* we report studies that indicate that elderly people who are actively involved in what we call "contributory activities" lead longer, more meaningful lives.

Although we know that cruelty exists in the world, I believe that most people are motivated to enrich the lives of others. As a principal of a school for inpatient children and adolescents in a psychiatric hospital, I discovered that even very angry youth were willing to help others when given the opportunity to do so. Studies in prisons that involved inmates learning to train puppies to serve either as seeing-eye or explosive detection dogs (please see my May, 2005 website article) demonstrated a high level of motivation among the inmates for this activity, an activity that enhanced feelings of responsibility and caring.

Contributing to the well-being of others is a notable, motivating force. In my workshops I have described this force as the "spiritual basis" of our work, defining "spiritual" as the belief that there are things over and above ourselves that add meaning to our lives. Thus, the following assertion of Pink's resonated with me: "The most deeply motivated people—not to mention those who are most productive and satisfied—hitch their desires to a cause larger than themselves."

In my December, 2009 article about companies that excel at promoting job satisfaction, I wrote about Winter Wyman, the firm ranked number one in the "Small Employer" category. One practice that contributed to this rating was Winter Wyman's emphasis on public service. More than 70 percent of employees participate in the company's outreach to the community. The specific kinds of charitable activities are chosen by a 15-person committee that encourages employees to offer their input and feedback. The company has established a "community service day" and an annual charitable donation instead of holding a holiday party. Each month the company provides funding and staffing for a birthday party at a local homeless shelter with the nonprofit group Birthday Wishes. A staff member notes, "The outreach keeps us grounded."

Pink summarizes the power of Purpose eloquently:

> The profit motive has been an important fuel for achievement. But it's not the only motive. And it's not the most important one. Indeed, if we were to look at history's greatest achievements—from the printing press to constitutional democracy to cures for deadly diseases—the spark that kept the creators working deep into the night was purpose at least as much as profit. A healthy society—and healthy business organizations—begins with purpose and considers profit a way to move toward that end or a happy by-product of its attainment.

Concluding Thoughts for the Present Time

I recognize that even in a somewhat lengthy three-part series, which is actually the second three-part series I have authored for my website about motivation, there is much more that I might have included. However, I hope that this series will prompt all of you to consider the complexities of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation and to reflect upon those factors that are instrumental in creating "motivating environments." I certainly encourage you to read Pink's book *Drive* for a more detailed discussion of this theme.

In ending, I should like to quote Pink one more time:

> We know—if we've spent time with young children or remember ourselves at our best—that we're not designed to be passive and compliant. We're designed to be active and engaged. And we know that the richest experiences in our lives aren't when we're clamoring for validation from others, but when we're listening to our

own voice—doing something that matters, doing it well, and doing it in the service of a cause bigger than ourselves.

http://www.drrobertbrooks.com