# Out with Motivation, In with Engagement

If their goal is to improve performance, organizational leaders who ask, "What can we do to better motivate our workers?" may be posing the wrong question. Experience and research show that motivation, which relies on manipulation and control, is a flawed concept that does not result in organizational or individual achievement. Engagement, on the other hand, is constructed on self-determination, interest, enjoyment, participation, and challenge. Stressing learning and involvement, it is a more valuable key to eliciting effective and productive work from today's knowledge workers. 

*by James W. Marcum*

Motivation is a virtual industry, with an army of "motivators" delivering inspirational seminars designed to turn peoples' lives around and make them more focused and effective. The concept lies at the heart of modern parenting, teaching, and stimulating effort on the job.

Interest in motivation is intense and historic. More than 12,500 doctoral dissertations deal with the subject. There are more than 1,200 books on motivation listed in *Books in Print*. Some 10,000 different titles addressing motivation rest on library shelves, according to one estimate. It's obvious that the subject is very popular and extensively studied.

Psychologists have produced much of the research on the issue, but perhaps the greatest interest comes from the worlds of business and education. There are over 500 articles written on the subject in mainline business journals each year and approximately 400 articles annually in mainstream academic journals. The concept of motivation is so prevalent that it has become a paradigm, a model of explanation that is so common that we accept it without question. Yet, it is a way of thinking that essentially amounts to manipulation.

Typically, the image that comes to mind when considering the essence of the concept is some version of the carrot and stick scenario. In this picture, if we can't move the subject with a reward, we resort to a whack to stimulate activity. A central figure in the scene is usually a jackass, or some comparable dumb beast. Therein lies the problem: Organizations strive to motivate people by treating them like animals. As Harry Levinson noted in a *Harvard Business Review* article more than 25 years ago, the time for that attitude has passed.

## FROM BEHAVIORISM TO COGNITION

There is a good reason for the prevalence of the carrot and stick image. Motivation theory has its roots in the behavioral school that dominated psychological inquiry at the start of the century. The influential work of J. B. Watson and Clark Hull stressed the role of appetites, instincts, and frustrations, inspiring extensive research on these matters. Sigmund Freud worked with an image of humankind that assumed a strong biological essence that evolved from lower animals. The stimulus-response theories of B. F. Skinner, based on studies of rats and pigeons, carried the influence of behaviorism well past the middle of the century. Behaviorism dominated psychology through its formative decades.

Psychologists began to shake off that model of human behavior with the rise of cognition theory in the decades after World War II. Gradually, they came to understand the central role of the mind and the part played by perception, values, social circumstances, and the development of the self in determining behavior. Many of these insights led to

* * *

Chief librarian and a professor at the College of Staten Island, CUNY, in New York, James W. Marcum, Ph.D., consults on issues of productivity and organizational learning and transformation. His background includes 20 years of college teaching and a decade as a small business owner/operator.


This article was originally published in *National Productivity Review*, Volume 18, Number 4. ©1999 John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

broad new fields of study and research. Researchers began to isolate certain issues or behaviors—self-determination, for example, or self-efficacy—in order to evaluate human reactions to situations and test the validity of a specific concept. In a few decades, cognition theory overthrew behaviorism as the dominant model for the study of human action. Researchers went on to explore the role of emotions and attitudes with the concept of *affect* attracting interest and experimentation. Gradually, the concept of motivation broadened, encompassing cognition, consciousness, self, emotion, affiliation, achievement, and other lines of inquiry. Still, the behaviorist tradition, with its assumptions of animal-like qualities, remained influential, as the enduring power of the carrot and stick image demonstrates.

***Alphie Kohn makes the case that rewards kill interest. People know instinctively that if they are rewarded for doing something, the action in question is not worth doing on its own merit.***

The application of motivation theory to practice has followed its own, distinctive road. Business people and managers want to motivate employees, while teachers and parents want to motivate students and children. In these arenas of practice, other ideas exert great influence, notably Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs, with its pathway wending toward higher levels of self-actualization. Maslow's influence, supplemented by the workplace research of Douglas McGregor, Frederick Herzberg, and others, led to the rapid growth of a more humanistic perspective as a third force in psychology. This approach resulted in a new focus on two aspects of the issue, rewards and participation (rather than punishment). There is much less talk, consequently, of reliance on the stick. The carrot, however, retains its place at central stage in this drama.

## THE PROBLEM WITH MOTIVATION

Despite its widespread popularity, motivation—in both theory and practice—contains basic flaws that render it dysfunctional, especially in an environment of knowledge workers:

- It seeks to cause or stimulate action, assuming there was none prior to the initiative.
- It is, consequently, incidental, not continuous. Therefore, it must be reinitiated as often as action is desired.
- It is founded on a paternalistic assumption—that a protagonist of greater status, experience, intellect, or responsibility is seeking to motivate a second party, presumably of lesser status. The relationship between the two parties is unequal, that of parent-child, supervisor-worker, or teacher-student.
- It can be critiqued as too narrow, piecemeal, and mechanistic in its assumptions. (It is here that the legacy from behaviorism is most apparent.)
- It relies too heavily on rewards to achieve objectives.

In *Punished by Rewards*, Alphie Kohn makes the case that rewards *kill interest*. People know instinctively that if they are rewarded for doing something, the action in question is not worth doing on its own merit. Those who desire the reward perform as stimulated. But the desired behavior obviously is being accomplished through manipulation, and everyone knows it. The reward is soon taken for granted, and additional manipulation is necessary to revive participation in the desired behavior, which remains "unworthy," since rewards are necessary for its achievement. Thus, rewards *destroy* commitment to the task in question.

All the components of a flawed concept are in place: the triggering of activity where there was none (or insufficient measure); the incidental nature of the enterprise requiring repeated initiation; the manipulation of one party by another; a focus on narrow, isolated behaviors measurable for purposes of experimentation; and reliance on rewards. Together, these limitations reduce the motivation complex to a control-and-manipulate proposition.

To some extent, these limitations have been acknowledged. A decade ago Rosabeth Moss Kanter proffered a "new motivational toolbox" for management structures whose hierarchy and power had been eroded. The new tools included *mission*, stressing the importance of the work; *agenda control* to allow people greater influence over their work lives; *sharing in value creation*; ongoing *learning* by both the individual and the group; and *reputation*, which is crucial for professionals.

Verification of much of Kanter's approach can be found in Mahen Tampoe's research that personal growth, operational autonomy, and task achievement outranked money in importance for a large sample of knowledge workers. Other examples of a new and improved motivation theory include remarkable companies like Southwest Airlines, which uses high pay, participation, internal promotion, and employee ownership to develop outstanding service and profitability. Some argue that the only problem with motivation is that it is generally badly managed, and that proper use of equity, visibility, and non-financial (as well as financial) rewards will fix the problem.

But if the very design of motivation is faulty, an organization built on it will not be sturdy enough to survive in the coming century. The carrot and stick concept must be replaced with something more appropriate that escapes the limitations of motivation theory.

## ERGING DEFINITIONS OF ENGAGEMENT THEORY

The concept of engagement is emerging as a possible replacement to motivation. A number of researchers have made the following observations regarding this concept:

- The link between self-determination and engagement is clearly documented; people choose to be engaged, they are not assigned engagement.
- Engaging activities are interesting and enjoyable.
- The engaging work must reside within the subject's area of competence and expertise.
- Engagement requires direct participation; one does not become engaged through observation, but through direct, tactile experience.
- Engagement is characterized by persistence.
- Engagement involves the selection of challenging tasks; routine work is not engaging.

The two essential elements of engagement theory are learning and involvement. The acquisition and use of more and better knowledge are the drivers in this process. Engagement cannot be static; it is a dynamic process. In engagement, activity is a given. This contrasts with motivation theory, where action is a primary goal. Although much of the research and discussion of engagement can be related to motivation theory, engagement provides a construct that is different enough from motivation to be considered a separate theory.

A working assumption of engagement is continuous activity. Behavior is rightfully considered a process more than a single action or episode. According to action theorists, an activity is a broad concept, containing cognition, motivation, emotion, and process, with various components waxing and waning in intensity over time. Actions are complex and often involve more than one person. From this perspective, it is inappropriate to focus on a specific act as carrying much significance.

In the field of learning theory, some researchers studying reading have matched elements of individual engagement within the context in which the activity occurs, that is the classroom. This theory allows room for peer and social influences on behavior without losing sight of the importance of individual interests and the need for self-direction. The definition of engagement produced by learning theory defines engaged readers as:

- reading for a variety of purposes,
- able to comprehend the material and the context,
- self-determining, choosing to read for their own reasons,
- gaining knowledge,
- interacting with others,
- developing higher-order strategies for learning.

A related line of inquiry within learning theory focuses on the role of the teacher in fostering emotional engagement, as opposed to disaffection. This is accomplished through coaching, modeling, enthusiasm, confidence building, sincere praise, and reinforcement. The positive role that teacher behavior can play in fostering engagement in learning has been confirmed by more than one study. Therefore, coaching, as opposed to instruction, can be considered an appropriate exercise in fostering engagement.

***The positive role that teacher behavior can play in fostering engagement in learning has been confirmed by more than one study.***

An entirely different perspective is introduced by the English business philosopher Michael McMaster. He defines engagement as consisting of the relationships and process of communication that engage the intentions of others in the absence of coercion. Such engagement involves dialogue and a measure of introspection. It cannot occur when a situation is closed or complete, but involves the ability to "presence something before it is well formulated or complete." McMaster insists that the degree of engagement is inversely proportional to the amount of authority being exercised. It is noteworthy that psychologists have overlooked this communication-authority relationship dimension of engagement.

Another applied field, information management, provides a distinctive use of engagement. In his book *Information Ecology*, Thomas Davenport uses a sliding scale of engagement with information, from the passive (seeing and hearing) to discussing, presenting, or teaching, to using in practice. These mechanisms serve as instruments for handling information overload. This insight complements the principles of activity-engagement theory, which stresses that initial purposes for an activity can change over time. According to this approach, persistence in a behavior builds "intrinsic motivation," which is similar to engagement.

The foregoing discussion suggests the following formula for engagement: $E = L\ (I + Cp + Ch) \times Inv\ (A + Co + Cm) \Rightarrow IK/Ef \Rightarrow E$, which means: Engagement = Learning (Interest + Competence + Challenge) × Involvement (Activity + Communication + Commitment) producing Increased Knowledge and Effectiveness which results, typically, in increased Engagement. The process amounts to a dynamic evolving system.

## ENGAGEMENT VS. MOTIVATION

On one level, engagement appears to be a synonym for high motivation. Yet there are crucial differences, primarily in the assumption of participants as independent agents act-

| *Motivation* | *Engagement* |
|---|---|
| *Goal: initiate action* | *Goal: learning and greater knowledge* |
| *Protagonist assumes responsibility* | *Assumes participant equality* |
| *Activity is incidental, triggered* | *Activity is assumed, ongoing, temporal* |
| *Assumes biological human "core"* | *Participants seek meaning, actualization* |
| *Seeks control, influence* | *Accepts participant self-determination* |
| *Atomistic, linear, deterministic* | *Holistic, systemic, complex* |

ing with self (agency)-determination in activity selection, and the ongoing (rather than episodic) quality of endeavor. There can be no thought of control here. The engagement is open, freely entered into, and quickly abandoned by the various agents. (The chart above highlights the differences between engagement and motivation.

This means that, regardless of the level of sophistication of the motivational endeavor, it remains manipulative in its essence and is, accordingly, unsuitable for the educated knowledge worker of today's workplace. An engagement mindset offers a more useful model for cultivating mutually beneficial working relationships with staff and colleagues. In short, motivation amounts to manipulation and control; engagement is based on learning and involvement.

Organizational leaders interested in experimenting with engagement theory should:

- Think in terms of partnerships, not employees.
- Scan for *interests* and *competencies*, not past records.
- Focus on *achievements*, not processes or credentials.
- Provide and support *continuous learning*.
- Test people with *challenges* and opportunities for personal growth.
- *Negotiate projects*; avoid assignments.
- Keep in mind that *true engagement provides its own rewards*.

A different model of leadership is required. Whereas the "motivating" boss of the traditional organization thinks in terms of being in control, running a tight ship, and giving directions, the engaging leader is a coach and facilitator scrambling to keep up with the pack. ■

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES


Connel, J.P. & Wellborn, J.G. (1991). Competence, Autonomy, and Relatedness: A motivational analysis of self-system processes. Minnesota Symposia on Child Psychology, 23, 45–77.

Conti, R. & others. (1995, October). The positive impact of creative activity: Effects of creative task engagement and motivational focus on college students' learning.Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 21(10), 1107–1116.

Cordova, D.I., & Lepper, M. R. (1996, December). Intrinsic motivation and the process of learning: Beneficial effects of contextualization, personalization, and choice. Journal of Educational Psychology, 88(4), 715–730.

Csikszentmihaly, M. (1996). Creativity: Flow and the psychology of discovery and invention. New York: Harper Collins.

Davenport, T.H., with Prusak, L. (1997) Information ecology. New York: Oxford University Press.

Deci, E.L. & Ryan, R.M. (1985). Intrinsic motivation and self-determination in human behavior. New York: Plenum.

Guthrie, J.T. & Wigfield, A. (Eds.) (1997). Reading engagement: Motivating readers through integrated instruction. Newark, DE: International Reading Assoc.

Higgins, E.T., & Trope, Y. (1990). Activity engagement theory: Implications of multiple identifiable input for intrinsic motivation. Handbook of motivation and cognition (Vol. II), 229–264.

Kohn, A. (1993). Punished by rewards: The trouble with gold stars, incentive plans, A's, praise, and other bribes. Boston: Houghton-Mifflin.

Levinson, H. (1973, January). Asinine ideas about motivation. Harvard Business Review (51)(1) 70–76.

McMaster, M.D. (1996). The intelligence advantage: Organizing for complexity. Boston: Butterworth-Heinemann.

Pfeffer, J. (1993). Competitive advantage through people: Unleashing the power of the work force. Boston: Harvard Business.

Skinner, E.A. & Belmont, M.J. (1993, December). Motivation in the classroom: Reciprocal effects of teacher behavior and student engagement across the school year. Journal of Educational Psychology, 85(4), 571–581.

Tampoe, M. (1993). Motivating knowledge workers: The challenge of the 1990s. Long Range Planning, 26. Reprinted in Paul S. Myers, (Ed.), Knowledge Management and Organizational Design (pp. 179–189). Boston: Butterworth-Heinemann.

Wegner, D.M. & Vallalcher, R.R. (1986). Action identification. Handbook of Motivation and Cognition (Vol. I) 550–582.

Weiner, B. (1990 December). History of motivational research in education. Journal of Educational Psychology, 82(4), 616-622.