

Motivation: Direction and Intensity

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WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, you will learn about the major factors that determine a person's performance. You will also learn to distinguish between direction and intensity of motivation. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

1. Major Factors That Determine Performance

The major determinants of a person's performance include ability, role perception, performance environment, and motivation. Each of these factors is described in detail below.

1a. Ability

Ability refers to the knowledge, skills, and receptiveness to learning that a person brings to a task or job. Knowledge is what a person knows. Skill is their capacity to perform some particular activity (like welding or accounting), including knowing what is expected of them (called accurate role perceptions). Receptiveness to learning is a function of how quickly a person acquires new knowledge. Some people have more ability than others, and high-ability people generally perform better than low-ability people (although we will see that this is not always the case) (Hunter & Hunter, 1984).



TERM TO KNOW

Ability

The knowledge, skills, and receptiveness to learning that an individual brings to a task or job.

1b. Role Perception

Accurate **role perceptions** refer to how well an individual understands their organizational role. This includes the goals (outcomes) the person is expected to achieve and the process by which the goals will be achieved. An employee who has accurate role perceptions knows both their expected outcomes and how to go about making those outcomes a reality. Incomplete or inaccurate role perceptions limit employees' capacity to meet expectations, regardless of their abilities and motivation.



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Role Perception

The set of behaviors employees think they are expected to perform as members of an organization.

1c. Performance Environment

The **performance environment** refers to those factors that impact employees' performance but are essentially out of their control. Many environmental factors influence performance. Some factors facilitate performance, while others constrain it. An office professional who has to work with a defective personal computer is certainly not going to perform at peak levels, regardless of ability or desire. Students who are working full time and carrying a full load of classes may not do as well on an exam as they would if they could cut back on their work hours, despite the fact that they have high ability and high motivation.



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Performance Environment

Refers to those factors that impact employees' performance but are essentially out of their control.

1d. Motivation

Motivation is the fourth major factor that determines whether a person will perform a task well. **Motivation** is a force within or outside of the body that energizes, directs, and sustains human behavior.

➞ **EXAMPLE** Within the body, examples might be needs, personal values, and goals, while an incentive might be seen as a force outside of the body.

The word stems from its Latin root *move*, which means “to move.” Generally speaking, motivation arises as a consequence of a person's desire to (1) fulfill unmet needs or (2) resolve conflicting thoughts that produce anxiety (an unpleasant experience). There are many ways in which we describe and categorize human needs, as we will see later in this Challenge. Certain needs are fundamental to our existence, like the need for food and water. When we are hungry, we are energized to satisfy that need by securing and ingesting food. Our other needs operate in a similar manner. When a need is unfulfilled, we are motivated to engage in behaviors that will satisfy it. The same is true for situations in which we experience conflicting thoughts. When we find ourselves in situations inconsistent with our beliefs, values, or expectations, we endeavor to eliminate the inconsistency. We either change the situation, or we change our perception of it. In both cases, motivation arises out of our interaction with and perception of a particular situation. We perceive the situation as satisfying our needs, or not. Motivation is thus a result of our interacting with situations to satisfy unmet needs or to resolve cognitive dissonance.

Simply stated, **work motivation** is the amount of effort a person exerts to achieve a certain level of job performance. Some people try very hard to perform their jobs well. They work long hours, even if it interferes with their family life. Highly motivated people go the “extra mile.” High scorers on an exam make sure they know the examination material to the best of their ability, no matter how much midnight oil they have to burn. Other students who don't do as well may just want to get by—football games and parties are a lot more fun, after all.

Motivation is of great interest to employers: *All* employers want their people to perform to the best of their abilities. They take great pains to screen applicants to make sure they have the necessary abilities and motivation to perform well. They endeavor to supply all the necessary resources and a good work environment. Yet motivation remains a difficult factor to manage. As a result, it receives the most attention from organizations and researchers alike, who ask the perennial question, “What motivates people to perform well?”

In this Challenge, we look at current answers to this question. What work conditions foster motivation? How can theories of motivation help us understand the general principles that guide organizational behavior? Rather than analyze why a particular student studies hard for a test, we'll look at the underlying principles of our general behavior in a variety of situations (including test taking). We also discuss the major theories of motivation, along with their implications for management and organizational behavior. By the end of this Challenge you should have a better understanding of why some people are more motivated than others.

Successful employees know what they want to achieve (direction), and they persist until they achieve their goals (intensity).



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Motivation

A force within or outside of the body that energizes, directs, and sustains human behavior. Within the body, examples might be needs, personal values, and goals, while an incentive might be seen as a force outside of the body. The word stems from its Latin root *movere*, which means “to move.”

Work Motivation

The amount of effort a person exerts to achieve a level of job performance.

2. The Role of Direction and Intensity on Motivation

Our discussion thus far implies that motivation is a matter of effort. This is only partially true. Motivation has two major components: direction and intensity. **Direction** is *what* a person wants to achieve, or what they intend to do. It implies a target that motivated people try to “hit.” That target may be to do well on a test. Or it may be to perform better than anyone else in a work group. **Intensity** is *how hard* people try to achieve their targets. Intensity is what we think of as effort. It represents the energy we expend to accomplish something. If our efforts are getting nowhere, will we try different strategies to succeed? (High-intensity-motivated people are persistent!)

It is important to distinguish the direction and intensity aspects of motivation. If either is lacking, performance will suffer. A person who knows what they want to accomplish (direction) but doesn’t exert much effort (intensity) will not succeed. (Scoring 100 percent on an exam—your target—won’t happen unless you study!) Conversely, people who don’t have a direction (what they want to accomplish) probably won’t succeed either.

Employees’ targets don’t always match with what their employers want. Absenteeism (some employees call this “calling in well”) is a major example (Actitime.com, 2016). Pursuing your favorite hobby (your target) on a workday (your employer’s target) is a conflict in direction; below, we’ll examine some theories about why this conflict occurs.

There is another reason why employees’ targets are sometimes contrary to their employers’—sometimes employers do not ensure that employees understand what the employer wants. Employees can have great intensity but poor direction. It is management’s job to provide direction: Should we stress quality as well as quantity? Work independently or as a team? Meet deadlines at the expense of costs? Employees flounder without direction. Clarifying direction results in accurate *role perceptions*, the behaviors employees think they are expected to perform as members of an organization. Employees with accurate role perceptions understand their purpose in the organization and how the performance of their job duties contributes to organizational objectives. Some motivation theorists assume that employees know the correct direction for their jobs. Others do not. These differences are highlighted in the discussion of motivation theories below.



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Direction

What a person is motivated to achieve.

Intensity

intensity

- (1) The degree to which people try to achieve their targets; (2) the forcefulness that enhances the likelihood that a stimulus will be selected for perceptual processing.

3. Introduction to Motivation Theories

At this point, as we begin our discussion of the various motivation theories, it is reasonable to ask, “Why isn’t there just one motivation theory?” The answer is that the different theories are driven by different philosophies of motivation. Some theorists assume that humans are propelled more by needs and instincts than by reasoned actions. Their **content motivation theories** focus on *the content of what* motivates people. Other theorists focus on the process by which people are motivated. **Process motivation theories** address *how* people become motivated—that is, how people perceive and think about a situation. Content and process theories endeavor to predict motivation in a variety of situations. However, none of these theories can predict what will motivate an individual in a given situation 100 percent of the time. Given the complexity of human behavior, a “grand theory” of motivation will probably never be developed.

A second reasonable question at this point is, “Which theory is best?” If that question could be easily answered, this Challenge would be quite short. The simple answer is that there is no “one best theory.” All have been supported by organizational behavior research. All have strengths and weaknesses. However, understanding something about each theory is a major step toward effective management practices.



REFLECT

1. Explain the two drivers of motivation: direction and intensity.
2. What are the differences between content and process theories of motivation?
3. Will there ever be a grand theory of motivation?



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Content Motivation Theories

Theories that focus on what motivates people.

Process Motivation Theories

Theories that focus on the how and why of motivation.



SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned about the **major factors that determine performance**: **ability**, which refers to the knowledge, skills, and receptiveness to learning that a person brings to a task or job; **role perception**, which refers to how well an individual understands their organizational role; **performance environment**, which refers to those factors that impact employees’ performance but are essentially out of their control; and **motivation**, a force within or outside of the body that energizes, directs, and sustains human behavior. You also learned to distinguish between **the role of direction and intensity of motivation**, understanding that direction is *what* a person wants to achieve (implying a target that motivated people try to “hit”), while intensity is *how hard* people try to achieve those targets. You also covered a brief **introduction to motivation theories**, noting that content motivation theories focus on *the content of what* motivates people, while process motivation theories address *how* people become

motivated. It is important to note, however, that regardless of the varying theories, given the complexity of human behavior, a “grand theory” of motivation will likely never be developed.

Best of luck in your learning!

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TERMS TO KNOW

Content Motivation Theories

Theories that focus on what motivates people.

Process Motivation Theories

Theories that focus on the how and why of motivation.