

Why You Should Not Motivate People?

Lessons for Leaders from Daniel Pink's "Drive"

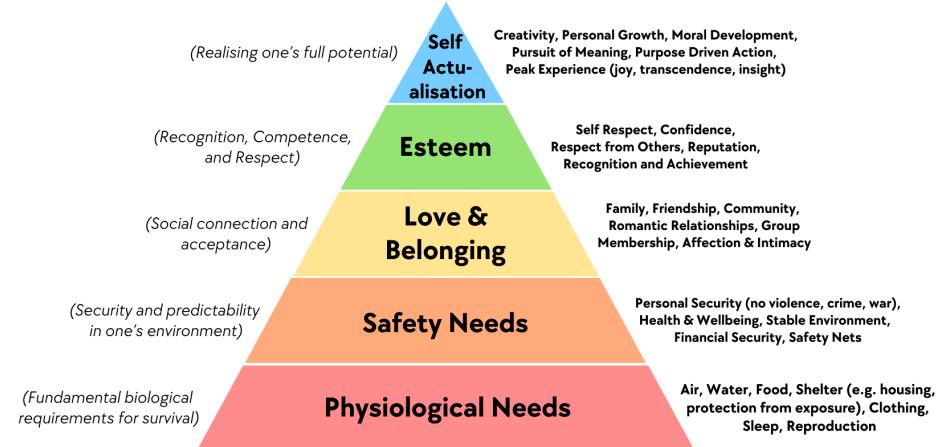
Tomasz Gągor

What comes to mind when you read this title?

- Motivation as "adding something"?
- Carrots & sticks?
- Pep talks?

The old model - The "Carrot & Stick" approach

- Rewards (bonuses, perks)
- Punishments (pressure, micromanagement)
- Works for simple, mechanical tasks...
 *But fails for creative, problem-solving work.*



Think of a time you felt deeply motivated at work

- Was it because of a bonus?
- Or because of space, challenge, and meaning?

The science - What really drives us?

- Autonomy  – Control over how we work
- Mastery  – Getting better at what matters
- Purpose  – Being part of something meaningful

Autonomy

? Ask yourself:

- Do I let my team decide *how* to achieve outcomes?
- Do I trust them, or control every step?
- Do I measure presence, or results?

Mastery

? Ask yourself:

- Do I give space for learning and growth?
- Do I encourage experiments, or punish mistakes?
- Do I celebrate progress, not just output?

Purpose

❓ Ask yourself:

- Do people know why their work matters?
- Do I talk numbers... or impact?
- Do I connect tasks to customers and mission?

Leaders' Role

Not to "motivate," but to create conditions for motivation

- Remove blockers
- Create space
- Connect to purpose

Practical Shifts

Ways to nurture motivation:

- Give teams choice in approach
- Build in learning opportunities
- Share real customer stories
- Recognize progress & impact

Quick Exercise

👉 Pick one pillar (Autonomy, Mastery, Purpose).

- What's one small change you could make next week?
- Share with a partner or us.

When rewards backfire

What motivation science really shows

Deci's Soma Puzzle Experiment (1971)

Goal / Assumption

| Do external rewards enhance or harm people's natural interest in an activity?

Setup

- Participants asked to solve Soma cube puzzles (a creative spatial task)
- One group was paid per puzzle, another solved freely without pay
- Later, both groups were left alone with puzzles — no payment offered

Deci's Soma Puzzle Experiment (1971)

Result

- Paid participants **lost interest** and spent less time playing voluntarily
- Unpaid participants kept solving out of curiosity and enjoyment

Takeaway

Paying for inherently enjoyable work can **undermine intrinsic motivation** once the external incentive is gone

Lepper, Greene & Nisbett (1973) – "Magic Marker" Study

Goal / Assumption

What happens when children expect a reward for something they already like doing?

Setup

- Preschoolers who loved drawing were split into groups:
 - Expected reward (told they'd get a certificate).
 - Unexpected reward.
 - No reward.
- A week later, they were given markers again during free play.

Lepper, Greene & Nisbett (1973) – "Magic Marker" Study

Result

- Those who **expected a reward** drew **less and shorter** during free time
- Their intrinsic joy of drawing dropped — it became "work"

Takeaway

Expected rewards can shift motivation from internal ("I want to draw") to external ("I get something for drawing").

Deci, Koestner & Ryan (1999) Meta-Analysis

Goal / Assumption

Can these effects be seen consistently across many studies and tasks?

Setup

- Reviewed **128 controlled experiments** on rewards and motivation
- Compared effects of **tangible** (money, prizes) and **verbal** (praise) rewards

Deci, Koestner & Ryan (1999) Meta-Analysis

Result

- **Tangible rewards** reduced intrinsic motivation for interesting tasks
- **Verbal rewards** could support motivation *if* they conveyed genuine competence
- Effects strongest in creative and problem-solving work

Takeaway

"Carrots" work for routine tasks — but for knowledge work, they often kill engagement and creativity.

How it applies to Software Development?

It depnds...

Software Development and incentives

- 🧠 Science is non-conclusive — results differ across studies 🤔
- 💰 Incentives do have an impact, but there's no strong statistical proof of a clear direction (positive or negative)
- 📋 Many studies rely on **questionnaires or lab setups**, so they reflect *what people say or feel*, not always *how they behave in real projects*
- 🎮 Gamification gives mixed results: it can drive focus and engagement, but may also create
 - *unhealthy competition*, or
 - *over-focus on extrinsic goals* (badges, scores, metrics)
- 💻 Software development may not behave like pure creative work — some studies hint it's more structured and collaborative

References

1. [A Laboratory Experiment on Financial Incentivization in Software Engineering \(2022\)](#)
2. [A Large-Scale Survey of Motivation in Software Development \(2024\)](#)
3. [Gamification in Software Engineering \(2021\)](#)

When "if-then" motivation works?

When task is boring, repetitive and unrewarding

- Provide rational justification, why it needed to be done
- Agree, that's "it's boring"
- Allow people to execute work the way they want to
 - Focus on expected result
 - Allow to discover "the path" toward it

Why you should NOT motivate people:

- People are already motivated.
- Our job: stop killing it.

?

What will you stop doing?

?

What will you start doing?

Thank You!

*People don't need a fire lit under them.
They need space so their inner fire can breathe.*