

Intrinsic Motivation And How It Works

Are you energized by your job or just spinning your wheels? There's a way to tell.

BY KENNETH W. THOMAS

Think of a time when you felt especially energized by your work. If you're like most people, you'll recall doing something you regarded as significant and being completely engaged in the project. You're likely to remember feeling a sense of ownership of the work and using your best thinking and creativity. You may also remember taking pride in your efforts and the excitement of seeing them pay off.

Then again, you probably can remember other times or other jobs when you had a sort of energy crisis—when your work felt meaningless and you had to drag yourself in every day to do it. Did you feel you were in a rut? Did you have to force yourself to go through the motions in order to get paid?

What we're talking about here is high and low intrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation has to do with the psychological rewards you get from your work. When you are intrinsically motivated, you genuinely care about the work, you look for better ways to do it, and you are energized and fulfilled by doing it well. Intrinsic motivation is quite different from extrinsic motivation, which is about the economic rewards you get from others—pay raises, bonuses and benefits.

While extrinsics are important, they are never enough to keep you at your best. With extrinsic motivation, you tend to focus on the rewards rather than the work itself; you work only well enough to get the rewards.

Intrinsic motivation is crucial in today's work

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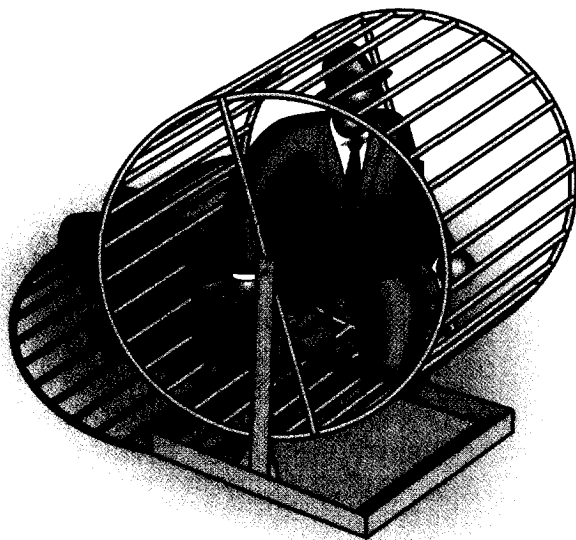


environment. Research shows that it is a key factor in performance and innovation. At a personal level, intrinsic motivation makes your work fulfilling. It's a major reason for deciding to stay on a job. It helps keep your stress level down.

I've been researching and consulting on this topic for 16 years, and I find that people generally understand that intrinsic motivation is important. However, I've also learned that it's hard for many people to think creatively about intrinsic motivation—or to fully understand it. Most of us are holding onto some old half-truths about work and motivation. Specifically, we tend to think that:

- Work is about performing activities.
- Motivation is about wanting something that will happen in the future.
- Work should be logical.
- Building intrinsic motivation is about enriching jobs.

A lot of people accept those four statements as self-evident. But they are seriously misleading, especially in today's workplace. If you want to build intrinsic motivation—for yourself and the people around you—you need to understand why those old half-truths are holding you back. Here are four important lessons about intrinsic motivation.



1 Today's work is about self-management—directing your activities toward a meaningful purpose.

Most people still equate work with performing the *activities* involved in a task—activities like writing computer code, grinding lenses, or meeting with customers. This is a holdover from a time not long ago when organizations were more bureaucratic and most jobs required less thought or improvisation or initiative—a time when managers told workers exactly what to do, and

rulebooks told them how to do it.

The truth is that all of the activities we perform at work are directed toward some purpose. That purpose is the reason for the activities. It is not the task itself but the purpose of the task that provides much of the meaningfulness—the intrinsic motivation—of any job. When people say they are committed to their work, they usually mean they are committed to some worthy purpose served by their work. To a trainer, for example, training is most rewarding when it is about giving people new skills or insights that will make a difference in their lives. When training is simply about following a lesson plan, it loses meaning.

In today's organizations, people are asked to take responsibility for a wider range of tasks and are given more autonomy to choose the activities that will accomplish the purposes of those tasks. Hotel clerks are expected to adjust bills and change accommodations to keep customers happy. Purchasing teams are expected to improve their processes to better meet the needs of their internal customers. In short, people are asked to “self-manage” in the pursuit of their purposes.

Self-management is simply the set of steps you go through to apply your intelligence to accomplishing a purpose: You choose activities you believe will accomplish the purpose, make sure you perform the activities competently, and verify that you are, in fact, making progress toward accomplishing the goal.

But those steps can only be driven by a purpose that is meaningful to you. The first step is always to commit to a *meaningful purpose*. Lacking that, you would feel little commitment, little need to do competent work, and no sense of progress. If you or others in your organization still think that work means performing activities, you have some rethinking to do.

2 Motivation is about pursuing something worthwhile—and enjoying the trip.

Most of us still equate motivation with wanting something that will happen in the future. That notion worked adequately when organizations relied mostly on extrinsic motivation. The basic idea of extrinsic motivation was to find something that people wanted and to use it as a carrot to get them to do things they would not otherwise do—such as boring or unpleasant jobs. It was all about delayed gratification—downplaying the feelings of the moment in order to get some future extrinsic reward. Sure the work felt awful, but it would lead to something that would feel better in the future—a salary increase or a promotion.

Today the motivational dynamics are quite different. Many jobs have the potential to be much more intrinsically rewarding than the rote work of

earlier times. And intrinsic rewards are things that you feel in the present moment—day-to-day experiences of pride and involvement. Do you enjoy being at work? Is it easy to keep your attention on the task? Is your work energizing?

Here's a metaphor I find helpful: Think of any task as a kind of journey. A good purpose provides a desirable destination for that journey and a reason to begin the trip. But once you set off on the journey, you need to get rewards along the way. These rewards are what reinforce and energize you as you go. They keep you alert and involved. They keep that quickness in your step. They allow you to enjoy the trip and make you eager to continue. We'll look at them in more detail in a moment.

3 Self-management involves logical decisions but is powered by emotion.

The self-management required for today's work revolves around decision-making. Most of us have been taught to think of decision-making as a logical process that works best when we don't get emotionally involved. It's true that self-management requires logic, but it's also true that self-management is powered by emotion.

Each step in self-management involves a judgment that carries a strong emotional charge for you. You must believe that your purpose is meaningful, that you're free to choose the best way to do a task, that you're performing competently, and that you're making progress toward your purpose. These emotional charges are the intrinsic rewards of work—the "juices" that energize you and keep you going. You feel good or excited about your work because of these judgments—whether it's a quiet glow of satisfaction or an exuberant need to celebrate.

If you're interested in building intrinsic motivation, then, the last thing you want to do is to keep things dispassionate. You'll want to help yourself and those around you to maintain these energizing emotions. Just as physicians track heart rates and other physical vital signs, you can track the following emotional indicators as the psychological vital signs of intrinsic motivation. They will give you the information you need to judge your overall motivational health.

Sense of Meaningfulness. This is the feeling that you are pursuing a worthy purpose or a valuable mission, one that matters in the larger scheme of things. You feel you're on a path that is worth your time and energy.

When your sense of meaningfulness is high, you will find it easy to focus on the task at hand. You may even resent the time you have to spend on other tasks. You find yourself thinking about the task a great deal—even at home—and you're

Taking Action

As an individual, you can keep your own intrinsic motivation—and energy level—high. As a manager or a training professional, you can also help lead a three-pronged effort to raise the level of intrinsic motivation in your organization:

1. *Education.* Make sure that managers and workers learn the lessons of intrinsic motivation. Teach them to recognize the four kinds of intrinsic rewards.
2. *Measurement.* Take regular readings of people's sense of meaningfulness, choice, competence and progress throughout your organization.
3. *Creative action.* Help people focus their energy on things that will improve intrinsic motivation. Building intrinsic motivation is a task, like any other. You can act as a catalyst to enlist people's creativity and self-management skills in this task. You can also help pass along knowledge and best practices for building intrinsic motivation within the organization. —K.T.

likely to judge how productive your day is by whether you are able to make progress on it. You feel strongly committed to the task. You find ways around obstacles.

In contrast, when a task is not meaningful to you, you feel a bit detached from it, as though you are waiting for something more important to come along. You're easily distracted from it. If you hit an obstacle or get a "no" from a superior, it is a relief to drop the task.

Sense of Choice. This is the feeling of being free to use your own judgment in carrying out the task—to accomplish it in a way that makes sense to you. When your sense of choice is high, you feel that you are driving your own train—that your views and insights matter, and you need to bring your best thinking and judgment to the party. You show more initiative and creativity, and you feel free to experiment to find better ways of doing things. You have a sense of ownership for the task and feel personally responsible for the outcomes of your decisions.

When you have little sense of choice, on the other hand, you feel constrained and pushed by other people and forces that are driving the train.

Your own views seem irrelevant, and you feel more pressure to meet others' expectations about how you should do things. You also feel less responsible for the outcomes of your work.

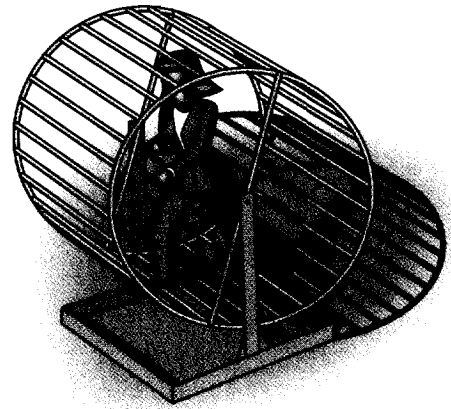
Sense of Competence. This is the proud feeling that you are doing high-quality work and performing it skillfully. You feel a sense of craftsmanship or artistry in how you handle things. You believe you are responding well to the situations you encounter. You have a sense of mastery of your task or its activities, and you are confident you'll be able to handle them in the future.

When you feel little sense of competence, in contrast, you feel little pride in your performance. Your activities may seem too easy or too unimportant to take pride in. Or you may feel dissatisfied with the quality of your work.

Sense of Progress. This is the encouraging feeling that things are working out—you're in the midst of a successful endeavor, and you're getting closer to achieving the purpose behind all your activities. Since you feel that your time and effort are paying off, you are enthusiastic and eager to keep investing your energy into the task. If the purpose is very meaningful for you, you are also likely to feel excited about achieving something important: "Yes, it's working!"

But with a low sense of progress, you tend to feel discouraged. In a rut. Stuck. You feel unenthusiastic, less effective, and maybe even helpless about the task. You may give up on it altogether.

When intrinsic motivation is low, these motivational vital signs can give you the diagnostic clues you need to find a remedy. Often, people have only a vague sense that something is missing, or they're simply aware that they "aren't very motivated." That may set off an alarm, but it won't point you toward a cure. Knowing *which* intrinsic reward is missing is a big step toward solving the problem.



4 You build intrinsic motivation by shaping interpretations as well as redesigning jobs.

If intrinsic motivation is about feelings of meaningfulness, choice, competence and progress, what can you do to cultivate those feelings? In the 1950s and 1960s, consultants like Fred Herzberg began talking about job enrichment, focusing on objective changes that could be engineered into jobs—more authority, whole tasks, better performance feedback and so on. These changes in job design are still important, but they ignore the rest of the truth: Intrinsic motivation also depends on people's subjective interpretations.

Our emotional reactions to events are only loosely shaped by the "objective" nature of those events. They are shaped most strongly by how we interpret events—how we frame them to give them different meanings.

With my colleague Walt Tymon of Villanova University, I have identified a number of building blocks for the four types of intrinsic rewards (see box, below). Many are the familiar targets of job redesign, like delegated authority and whole tasks. But others are things that shape people's interpretations of their tasks.

Those latter kinds of building blocks are espe-

Building Blocks for the Four Types of Intrinsic Rewards

CHOICE	COMPETENCE	MEANINGFULNESS	PROGRESS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Delegated authority • Trust in workers • Security (no punishment for honest mistakes) • A clear purpose • Information 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Knowledge • Positive feedback • Skill recognition • Challenge • High, noncompetitive standards 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A noncynical climate • Clearly identified passions • An exciting vision • Relevant task purposes • Whole tasks 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A collaborative climate • Milestones • Celebrations • Access to customers • Measurement of improvement

Source: *Intrinsic Motivation at Work: Building Energy & Commitment*, by Kenneth W. Thomas (Berrett-Koehler Publishers, San Francisco, 2000).

cially important to a sense of meaningfulness. For example, it's important to avoid cynical interpretations of the purposes of our work and to build a vision of a desirable future that appeals to people's passions.

But interpretative factors contribute to the other intrinsic rewards as well. Judgments of progress depend on identifying and pointing out milestones, for instance, and celebrations draw attention to that progress. If your organization is relying only on job redesign to build intrinsic motivation, you're operating under a severe handicap.

Inspirational leaders have always recognized the importance of interpretation. They describe our tasks in ways that energize us. They construct meaningful visions of our purposes and tell us why they are important. They recognize our skills and help us celebrate our progress. They express their trust in us.

But it isn't enough to pay attention only to how leaders interpret events. Employees form their own interpretations of events and share them with each other. Part of building intrinsic motivation in an organization is helping individuals at all levels learn how to interpret events in ways that keep energy levels up.

Tymon and I found a number of interpretive "habits" that skew people's intrinsic motivation. The most important of these is "deficiency focusing." Simply put, many people have learned to approach situations by first asking themselves what's wrong. Others also see what's wrong, but have learned to focus more strongly on the positives of a situation. Deficiency focusing undermines a number of building blocks of intrinsic motivation. It can contribute to a cynicism that undermines a sense of meaningfulness. It can make it difficult to recognize or celebrate progress. It's also likely to undermine feelings of competence.

This habit can be changed, but only if people become aware of it and practice a more balanced way of interpret-

ing events—one that emphasizes the positives while recognizing the negatives.

The trick is for people to regularly ask themselves what's going well.

Are any intrinsic rewards missing in your workplace? It's worth taking the time to find out. The stakes are high for individuals and organizations. You can help make work the rewarding, energizing adventure it should be. ■



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