

Rebuttal to extrinsic motivation statement – W. R. Morgan

First, I'd like to thank my esteemed colleague, Dr. Mulenburg for taking a position that he himself does not necessarily agree with, simply to encourage thought and debate. To prevent the destruction of his intrinsic motivation for selfless acts through perceived inequity in rewards, I'm buying HIM a drink tonight, win or lose.

Jerry asks why do we motivate people? I don't believe we can... not over the long term. People do what they want to do. No one really controls anyone else.. at least not for long, and not without building resentment within them. When someone feels manipulated or controlled, the most natural human act of all is to rebel... perhaps not overtly or immediately.. but it will happen, and it will show up in various ways. I believe that most bad behaviors that rules are often made to correct (and managers spend too much time enforcing), are actually only symptoms of the frustrations of good people that are thwarted in their desire to make a real contribution to the greater good.

I strongly believe most people want to do good work, work that is of value to themselves and others. We can provide opportunities to people to accomplish things that they want to achieve, and their intrinsic motivation will naturally come out, and grow with time as their sense of competence and self-fulfillment grows. However, if we rely on an extrinsic reward, it inherently requires increased escalation and creates a diminution in motivation over time. I have seen many instances of complicated reward and bonus systems set up that resulted in the opposite of what the managers wanted to achieve in the morale of the workforce. Such systems are often ignored or perceived as demeaning or inequitable by the majority of those competing for it. Very few will be happy. Very few will agree with how the distribution of discriminatory bonuses is done, no matter what criteria is used, or how the manager strives to make it seem fair.

Maslow's five inherent needs are well known. But, what is not well known is that, before he died, Maslow himself added a sixth, higher need. This was the need for "self-transcendence", meaning having an impact on lives other than your own... to make a difference. He considered this to be the highest calling for human endeavor.. to which people will dedicate their lives, and put their greatest efforts.

As Jerry also noted, Herzberg spoke to something above the satisfiers, the necessary but not sufficient requirements that must be met. I believe this "something else" is in fact the need to do good work of value to others - an intrinsic need of most humans.

The Skinner box may work for hungry animals, whose basic needs haven't been met, but anyone that thinks all animals can be motivated to some action by food, has never owned a cat!

Seriously, we've all seen animals do things in play that are beyond the seeking of food or the drive to mate. These are things they want to do for their own sake, and, certainly, we humans have goals in life and desires to spend our time doing things that we just want to do, without consideration for reward. Most forms of reading, playing, learning, hobbies,

etc., are things we engage in because we just like doing them, without concern for or expectation of any associated reward.

Have you ever gotten interested in a book that you couldn't put down? You have an intrinsic motivation to read that book to experience and learn. Imagine having a job you felt that way about. Most of us did when we started out. Unfortunately, too many of us have that feeling taken away by bad management practices.

Intrinsically motivated people are like good race horses. Most jockeys spend the majority of a race actually reining the horse in, to keep the horse from expending all its reserve too soon. Intrinsically motivated workers are this way too. They have to be told to go home, get some rest, don't work too hard, don't take it too seriously. They don't have to be coerced to show up on time, or not to waste time surfing the net, or other symptoms of burnt-out behavior. Sure there may be crunch times, just as in the final race to the finish, when a leader needs to exalt his team to extreme effort, but this should only be done occasionally, and, again, is best done by appealing to the innate desire to make a difference, or to help out the team and its leader in a crisis.

Extrinsic motivation is, at best, transient. It will breed internal competition, and, eventually, "gaming" of the system, whereby people push against the limits of the rules for reward. This is human nature... it is part of our natural instinct to "work smarter instead of harder". Some will be slower to push the limits, and will regard those who do as cheaters, which will create feelings of unfairness and loss of motivation over time.

In the example given by my worthy opponent for this debate, a system is proposed whereby people are allowed to retain the unused budget from a successful project. The intent is to enhance the motivation, and by extension, productivity, of the team. I can see that this might be a driver in terms of stopping work on a project when objectives are met, and not continuing to do unnecessary work. However, if extrinsic rewards are the biggest driver, I suggest the following problems will result over the long run:

- People will only want to take on low-risk projects.
- Project leaders will be driven to "sandbag" their estimates, to be sure that they can come in well under budget.
- Team decisions on re-allocation of resources from a group that is doing well (under-running budget/schedule) to a group that is having problems meeting its budget and schedule will create a sense of resentment.¹ How would the other group, which was under-running, feel about the group that overran?
- Distribution of the bonus money within the team itself will be a management nightmare, and is almost guaranteed to create ill feelings among the team members.

¹ Are we really to believe the estimates have been made with more diligence than the work itself (my experience is that most overruns are more the fault of the estimation process than the effort itself).

In theory, such a distribution seems equitable. Most think that they would like to be paid according to their value, and others the same. The problem is with perception, no two people will perceive the values of their contributions relative to others as the same, and therein, as they say, lies the rub. Besides, I frankly wonder how many of you are actually motivated in your work by the chance of hanging out with the NASA administrator². Even if it were desirable, when a major project is successful it is usually the result of the efforts of hundreds, if not thousands of people. When one or two are seen on TV with the boss, how do the rest feel?

What I'm suggesting may seem counter-intuitive at first, but I believe it is actually the most intuitive and natural way to manage people. Just as virtue is its own reward, the reward of a job well done is inherent to itself. Certainly we want to be recognized for our contributions and impact, but if we have fair and objective pay scales that reflect our experience, skills, and responsibilities, do we really need to have each act we do evaluated and rewarded? Doesn't it actually trivialize us to be treated as if we needed a "gold star" on our forehead to feel complete each day?

I believe most people would rather have their managers work on helping clear obstacles, provide them with proper tools and training, and allow them to focus on their work in order to turn out products of which they are proud. By focusing on reward systems and rules for them, a manager can actually diminish the joy of doing and make the team compete with those that they should and could be helping. A manager's primary concern should be providing a coherent vision of — and leading his team on — great adventures and helping them succeed. Motivation, like the Chinese "butterfly of happiness", comes naturally; it cannot be forced.

² If you think you would be, have a talk with Ed Hoffman sometime about how he felt about being rewarded by face time with Dan Goldin.