

## **INTRINSIC MOTIVATION & 21<sup>st</sup> CENTURY LEADERSHIP: Old School Rewards and Punishments Just Don't Cut It Anymore**

The irrational but very real phenomenon of intrinsic motivation. What is it? Most of us have a vague idea of what it means, but it's tough to put our finger on. It's kind of an intangible. The dictionary definition of *intrinsic* is "belonging to the essential nature or constitution of a thing." Put simply, intrinsic motivation means being actively engaged in a task or activity for the sheer enjoyment of it. It feels natural to you. You don't have to dredge up conscious effort to perform a task when you're intrinsically motivated by it – you just want to. As Daniel Pink puts it in his book *Drive*, "The joy of the task is its own reward."<sup>1</sup>

In *Drive*, Pink introduces us to the three main drives that have motivated humanity since its inception: biological, behavioral – external reward and penalty – and intrinsic.<sup>2</sup> Modern civilization was built around the first two drives. Even today, traditional management still relies heavily on motivating via the second drive; external rewards (the Carrots) and punishments (the Sticks) to get results. Pink calls this "Motivation 2.0".<sup>3</sup>

So, what are the main ways we get intrinsic satisfaction out of work? What motivates someone to do a good job, not for money or status, but...just because?

- *Autonomy*: being self-governed. Handling your time management and workload yourself.
- *Creativity*: putting your own unique flair into your work.
- *Significance*: having a sense of meaningful purpose in what you're doing.
- *Trust and Respect*: knowing your manager believes in you as an intelligent adult, and treats you like one.

People want to know that they're valued, not just given a monetary value. They want their ideas appreciated, not just met with the same old "how fast can you get that done?" This fits with the definition; it's in our nature to be valued, not thought of as just a "grunt". Still, all too often in today's business culture, management sees their human resources as resources only, lowly workers with minimal intellect or drive to perform. This is true at both the blue-collar and white-collar levels. They monitor employees, sometimes to the extreme. We all know, and despise, the "micromanagers". They watch their underlings closely, using external motivators like raises and bonuses for good performance, while punishing sub-par performance with verbal and written reprimands and even firings.

*"...there's 50 years of science that says (carrot and stick motivation) is ineffective for creative, conceptual, complex work. And that's what most people in both the blue-collar and the white-collar workforce are doing today."*

*Daniel Pink, Washington Post, January 2011*

But...it seems to make sense, doesn't it? A greater reward should lead to better performance. Ah, but human beings are an illogical lot. Study after study has shown that a majority of people will work harder, with more heart, for less money...if they know their boss values them as an intelligent, trustworthy person. When they're given a level of creativity and control over the work they're doing, job performance and quality goes through the roof. But when they're treated to the old school "carrot and stick" motivation game, coldly micromanaged by their superiors, then performance goes downhill.

Most of us have also seen both sides of management. To me, the best boss isn't a necessarily a friend, but he or she is a mentor. They're someone who trusts and respects you professionally and personally. They give you feedback, but they don't stifle your autonomy. You want to work hard to make them happy, even though they don't necessarily seem unhappy with anything you've done. Unfortunately, the "good" side – those managers who've let me fly, the jobs I've loved the most – I can easily count on one hand. On the flipside, I've been under a number of real pieces of work. Bosses who were either passively or openly hostile toward me for daring to branch out and work hard, on my own, without their direction. It boggles my mind that in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, there is still this aging mentality of micro-management pervading most companies.

*"People don't engage by being managed. They don't engage by being controlled."*

*Daniel Pink, Washington Post, January 2011*

## **The Joys of Autonomy & Creativity**

Artists love painting and authors love writing, even when the dividends aren't all that great. Why? They perform their respective crafts because they are enthralled with the creative process. They have control over the finished product. Artists, musicians, craftsmen are at their best when they can just lose themselves in their work.

Think about it – at one time or another, you've probably found yourself immersed in some activity, whether it was a hobby you love, or even cleaning out the garage. How can cleaning the garage bring intrinsic satisfaction? Simple – you're in control of what stays and what goes. And, you can organize and arrange what stays. When all is said and done, YOU are the one behind the results. I often find myself going back and briefly looking with a little pride at the most menial of chores...cleaning up the dishes and kitchen, cleaning the garage. I just left a place better than it was before. It may not be a life-changing task, but we have the autonomy to do the job as we see fit, and make it a better place.

## **Open Source versus Traditional Corporate Philosophy, or David versus Goliath**

Consider two similar products each made under very different motivation models. Microsoft has been a large, successful multinational corporation for decades. Founded in 1975, Microsoft continues to lead the computing interface market with its Windows products. In 1993, with a battery of highly trained, well-paid employees and the most modern software tech at the time, Microsoft launched Encarta, the first online encyclopedia. It hit the market as a standalone product, retailing for \$395. That's about \$700 today.

Something happened, though. All that highly-paid aptitude didn't pan out like Microsoft expected. Soon, Encarta was dropped to \$99 and even bundled with other software as part of new computer purchases. Interest in the program didn't really take off. With the World Wide Web full of information, there were just too many free sources for people to research their interests rather than pay for an encyclopedia. By October 2009, 16 years after its launch, Microsoft pulled the plug on Encarta.

By contrast, in 2001, a group of eager volunteers got together, out of their own sheer sense of adventure, and began writing peer-reviewed articles using a new type of internet knowledge base that allowed users to collaboratively modify and manage web content. This new web technology, known as Wiki, gave birth to the largest free encyclopedia on the internet: Wikipedia.

Stemming from a type of open source development model, these volunteers spent up to thirty hours a week of their own time – with no pay – writing and editing articles that became Wikipedia. Now in its nineteenth year, it certainly shows no signs of slowing down.<sup>4</sup>

Open source – the idea of a group of people thinking and acting freely, of their own accord, working on a project or product. When people are motivated by their own curiosity, their own passion, money is not a motivator. If anything, money just gets in the way. The myriad of people who worked (and continue to work) on Wikipedia are motivated by the joy of the task itself. To put a price tag on it cheapens the concept, and takes away the purity of the challenge.

Open source collaboration such as the one that launched Wikipedia is the embodiment of intrinsic motivation. These people, a vast, varied body from different locations and backgrounds and skill levels, all came together with a common goal. They were inspired to launch a bold new product. They had a purpose, and they found deep meaning in that. It was a pleasure for them to work long hours with no pay to help create this new information source.

So, how do we reconcile statistics such as over 80% of the global workforce not engaged in their work, and close to 20% are actively disengaged? A 2013 Gallup poll found twice as many “actively disengaged” workers as those who were “engaged”, or who liked their jobs.<sup>5</sup> It may

not seem like much of a distinction, but that's pretty strong language - "actively disengaged". If we find no purpose, no meaning, and thus no joy in our work, then of course we'll be disengaged. I've been there. Many of us have. We dread getting up in the morning, we drag ourselves into the shop or office, and we make a stressful, all-out effort to just be there and look alive. We try to busy ourselves with our tasks, but it's drudgery. We're told what to do and how to do it, overshadowed by uninspired managers who have nothing better to do than keep tabs on us and make sure we're still part of their plan to look good to the upper ranks.

How do we find real meaning and satisfaction in our work, especially if we can't stand our job? That can be a tough one to answer. Your education and skills may have put you in a position that you simply no longer care about.

You can consider another line of work. Take stock of your skills, figure out something you enjoy doing within that set, and find a way to pay the bills with it. Both of those components together are key – you can have the most passionate dream of what you want to do, but if you're just not good at it, it probably isn't going to happen. Mike Rowe of "*Dirty Jobs*" fame hosted a video on YouTube titled "*Don't Follow Your Passion*". In it, this is the main reason he cites – if you're not good at what you love, you can love it all you want but it won't earn you a living. He goes on to advise: follow opportunity, and learn to love what you find.<sup>6</sup>

I disagree a little with the priority of his message. One of his examples is a guy who cleans out septic tanks, who loves his line of work. He took a job no one else wanted to do, and he makes a very good living at it. That's all well and good, but no one is saying you have to go shovel crap and be happy about it.

John Marty, a YouTuber, responded to Rowe's video. His main sentiment is where I got my point above. He takes Rowe's somewhat cynical view and puts a positive spin on it: you can do something you enjoy, but make sure you're skilled at it so you'll be successful. He also gives this example of how people can view their work very differently: There were three bricklayers all working on a job site. A passerby came up to the site and asked one, what are you doing? The man replied, "I'm just laying some bricks." He asked the next one, who replied, "I'm building a church." He asked the third, who looked at him and said, "I'm building the house of God." The first just had a job to do. The second had a career. And the third viewed his labor as a calling.<sup>7</sup>

For the time being, as you remain in your current line of work, learn to at least like it a little. With some practice, we can find significance in what we're doing. Let's stop looking inward, at how much we dislike our job, or aspects of it. Let's look outward to others – our coworkers, our customers – and see how we can positively impact them. You have the autonomy & creativity to build others up. Let's look upward and find a greater purpose in our work. You can give yourself a sense of respect at your job with the right purpose. I guarantee you'll feel better.

## REFERENCES

*Drive* – Pink, Daniel

<sup>1</sup> Intrinsic motivation: the joy of the task is its own reward. page 3

<sup>2</sup> The three drives – biological, behavioral and intrinsic. pp 2-3

<sup>3</sup> Motivation 2.0 pp 18-21

<sup>4</sup> Encarta vs. Wikipedia pp 15-17

*Why We Work* – Schwartz, Barry

<sup>5</sup> 2013 Gallup Poll page 3

Mike Rowe

<sup>6</sup> <https://youtu.be/CVEuPmVAb8o>

John Marty

<sup>7</sup> <https://youtu.be/zvDb0OXmd20>