

How Learners Are Motivated

By Matthew S. Richter

My Passion

I am a trainer. I have been a trainer for just about all of my career. I started in the early 90s and was inundated with all sorts of training games that used rubber balls, funny sounds emanating from trainers to participants, and EST-like connections to humanistic approaches in business. Frankly, this stuff drove me crazy and I was somewhat embarrassed to admit I was a trainer.

It was at this time that I met a guy named Thiagi. Thiagi was renowned as the *game guy*. All of my colleagues used his games and half the games I infused into my delivery came from him and I didn't even know it. I should say, however, that my friends and I were all misapplying his activities. And we all had the misinterpretation that training games should be fun first. When I met him, Thiagi explained that fun was not what he and his activities were about. In fact, his goal was to facilitate engagement toward a performance objective. Now today, this all makes sense—but remember 15 years ago, it was all about funny sounds and hopping around like a chicken. Thiagi talked about relevance to performance, and how every activity needed to be congruent with every performance goal. And every performance goal should have a link back to a business objective. Essentially, Thiagi was talking about getting participants to truly connect to the value of what they were learning. And he used activities to facilitate higher levels of competence and used engagement as a way of offering opportunities for participants to freely engage and find their own value. Thiagi was teaching trainers to create motivating environments that had significance. I was hooked.

I had transitioned from a naïve practitioner to someone who could do the moves properly. I had technique but no reason why Thiagi's way of doing things worked. I probably should have just asked him. Then, I was introduced to a model that explained why we do what we do. A mentor of mine handed me a book called just that, *WHY WE DO WHAT WE DO*, by Edward L. Deci. It explained how and why people were motivated, intrinsically and extrinsically, to perform. The more fluent I became in

applying Deci's model to what Thiagi had taught me, the more convinced I became that life had meaning.

Introduction to Motivation

Motivation is the energy that accelerates behavior. Often trainers and instructional designers devote a lot of effort in designing reward strategies, convinced that finding the right reward for the right participant will endow the participant with the motivation to learn. Many of us think of motivation as a "carrot and stick" kind of enterprise, with the mechanism influencing motivation located externally. This chapter will help trainers to choose whether to use reward strategies, and if so, how to use them wisely, with a greater understanding of the consequences of their choices.

The goal of most trainers is to get their participants to engage in the program as productively as possible. Many prescriptive models of motivation have been developed to help educators achieve this objective, but we will only focus on only one. Self-determination theory (from the work of Edward L. Deci and Richard M. Ryan, both of the University of Rochester) is an especially useful model. ¹ When applied appropriately, this model can help trainers and designers achieve effective results. Throughout the ensuing discussion on the application of rewards versus creating a more intrinsically motivated learning environment, I'll focus on the vital role of relevance; where the more effective goal is to move participants along a continuum from being amotivated or apathetic to becoming passionate learners.

These are the major purposes of this chapter:

- ❖ Discuss the role of motivation in the training situation
- ❖ Help leverage the use of rewards and reinforcement systems when they are advantageous
- ❖ Explore alternatives to reward/reinforcement motivation strategies
- ❖ Encourage careful analysis of the intention with which you approach training.

Components of motivation include a sense of relatedness, a sense of competence, and a sense of autonomy. These factors influence how a person's

¹ While at the University of Rochester, I had the opportunity to spend several semesters of study with Deci and Ryan. It was a marvelous and life-changing experience. This paper is my interpretation of their work applied to the workplace. Any value offered here is derived from their research and any incorrect application is due to my own misinterpretation.

motivation is realized, or in other words, what mechanisms drive a person to feel completely apathetic toward learning, capable, but forced to learn, or passionate to learn. Here's the crucial point for trainers to remember: the participant's *perception* of each component is what counts. For example, a participant may come to you with a diagram that is totally incomprehensible. Your first reaction is to tell the participant how great it is. The participants walk away with glee, believing he (or she) is a fantastic graphics person. You and I both know the diagram is objectively hideous. That is real competence. The participant has perceived competence. Motivationally, that perceived competence is what counts.

- **Competence:** Competence is the need to perceive oneself as successful at achieving a task or an activity. To feel competent, a person must believe he has the knowledge and skill to perform the task, as well as the environmental support and structure to do it. A sense of competence must be present for a person to be intrinsically *or* extrinsically motivated. Competence is both the *capability* (knowledge and skills) to do something, and the *capacity* (time and resources) to do it. So in a classroom setting, this means participants believe they have the knowledge and skill to learn your topic and the necessary tools and appropriate activities to practice.
- **Autonomy/Control:** Autonomy is the perception that one has a *choice* in performing a task and is not influenced by any other source to do it. A sense of autonomy must be present for intrinsic motivation to occur. Control is the opposite of autonomy. Control occurs when the participant feels he doesn't have a choice in his learning or is influenced by some external source. Clearly, if he feels forced to do an activity or memorize some silly facts, he is less likely to feel either pleasure or passion in engaging the process. So even if he feels competent to learn, if he feels controlled, he will be only extrinsically motivated to perform. A form of reinforcement is then necessary.
- **Relatedness:** Relatedness is the feeling that one is emotionally tied to significant others in one's life. Relatedness is engendered when participants

feel “we’re in this together.” The more we can make the learning relevant to learners, the more engaged and purposeful the training will be.

Rewarding Desired Behavior

Often I’m called into an organization to deliver training programs that I have designed. I often don’t have a long-term relationship with the participants. I’ll be with them for perhaps a day or two. I’ve found it useful in these situations to hand out dollar bills—lots of them. I tell participants that I’m going to pay them for saying anything I deem to be profound or useful or smart-alecky or that might be considered heckling. Clearly, I’m rewarding them for participation. I’m offering an immediate reward, a reinforcing consequence to get them to perform a desired behavior. This is quite effective when given the fact that the majority of participants are assigned the course and have no desire to be there. It helps bridge the initial apathy with potential intrigue.

I find handing out dollar bills to be very effective. Participants compete to answer questions, leap to their feet to volunteer, and keenly listen for any opportunity to show what they’re learning. Knowing I’m out of there after a day or two enables me to punish them, publicly humiliate them, pay them off, or reward them in any way I want to. I get a real short-term bang for my buck. Literally. In a recent Change Management course I taught, I handed out \$250 in one dollar bills and rewarded one team a \$300 cash prize for winning a game. Great for me. Great for the participants. Right?

Or are you appalled, thinking, “I train these people again and again over the course of a year. How can I afford that kind of reward system?” The downside is actually worse than that. Hang on.

The day after our Change Management workshop, a friend and fellow trainer was scheduled to lead the same 25 participants in a workshop on hard-core performance management--a fill-out-the-form type of performance appraisal training (the dead, dull boring stuff). My friend’s real problem, however, was that she had the misfortune of following me the day after I was handing out cash. After a day of money rewards, the

participants were fully expecting a great payout from her, especially when I had teed her up as an exciting, awesome trainer and friend. Imagine the reaction, then, when she informed them she had no money with her to reward them. Given how completely motivated they were to earn the money, the participants joked around a lot at first. Unintentionally, I'd set her up to fail.

In relying solely on rewards, then, I set up two problems: 1) I established unrealistic expectations in our participants for external rewards from every future training situation, and 2) I oriented them to value the reward and not the learning (or its application on the job).

Consequences of Rewards

In deciding to use one motivation strategy with (or over) another, we need to know the consequences of that strategy. It's easy enough to pump participants up in the moment with a reward, whether it's a dollar, an A, a gold star, or an award. What's the *consequence*? We're not arguing that rewards are ineffective. In fact, they are extremely effective (as is punishment). Remember how well our dollar bills worked? The consequences, however, concern the *consistency* of the desired behavior and the *quality* of the behavior when it's demonstrated. When the reward is withdrawn, so, too, and often is the behavior. If consistent behavior is required in a system of rewards, the reward must be consistent, too. This means you have to be ready, willing, and able to cough up the dough every single time. As an outside consultant, that is more likely to be possible than if I am an inside guy.

So we may see consistent behaviors if we keep the dollars coming, but what of the *quality* of the behavior? Edward L. Deci, in his book ***Why We Do What We Do***, tells the story of Lisa, a six-year-old girl, whose violin teacher awarded her a gold star for every practice session Lisa completed. When Lisa had collected enough gold stars, the teacher gave her a "treasure." Lisa's parents discovered, much to their dismay, that while Lisa completed every minute of her practice sessions, she did no more than was required to receive the star, watching the clock the whole time. Worse yet, her effort and diligence in learning new songs and correct fingering were all but non-existent.

Remember, she wasn't rewarded for *quality* practicing, just for *consistent* practicing. Clearly, the consequences of the reward system inadvertently sabotaged the goal of learning. Instead of being motivated by the pleasure of playing music (and playing well), she was fixated on the gold stars. In fact, she became quite stressed out at the possibility of not meeting the expectation. Stress became the overriding emotion rather than pleasure.

Context plays its part on motivation, too. Many years ago, I taught a course at Nazareth College, near Rochester, New York, called Intrinsic Motivation in the Workplace. Since I considered it hypocritical to award grades in a course designed to teach people to see the inherent value in what they're doing, I arranged with the dean to *not* give traditional grades at the end of the course, but to indicate "pass" or "fail" on the students' transcripts. I had a rebellion. The students were furious. They wanted their A. They complained that the class just couldn't be worthwhile if they didn't earn a grade. In what might be the ironic *coup de grace*, they wondered how they would know if they'd worked hard enough if they didn't get a grade. The system of motivation in place on campus was so overwhelmingly skewed toward rewards (i.e. grades) that the students tolerated no single exception to the system. On a grander scale, we have to ask how motivation is affected by the system in which it's embedded.

From the Outside In: Moving Participants toward Seeing a Value Proposition

Most motivational strategies are applied from the outside to the individual, as in the reward strategies discussed above. When the strategy is applied from the outside, it is perceived as (and, in fact, is) controlling. Whenever a participant is controlled, influenced, manipulated, or coerced, long-term, negative consequences arise. Money, grades, and other rewards can be manipulative. So, too, are value systems, cultural concepts, and organizational structures. When a motivation strategy is controlling, its benefits are only of a short duration. Yes, their effect can be measured quickly, but reward strategies distract the participant's attention from what's really in it for them, replacing the intrinsic value of the learner with the "value" of the reward. The result is

lowered intrinsic motivation. Our goal as trainers should be to come as close as possible to creating an *intrinsically motivating environment*. Along the way, learners are led to see the value of the training proposition, to them and to the organization.

What's Your Intention?

If we begin by asking ourselves *why* we're offering training, we're bound to uncover our intention. Each decision we make is informed by our intention, so we might as well come clean with ourselves right up front. Say, we're scheduled to deliver training in a compliance topic, such as sexual harassment or an ethics policy (which is often just an excuse to cudgel people not to disclose company secrets). Is it fair to say our participants sometimes feel a little punished and resentful, just to be dragged into the training? *So, why are we doing it?* If our answer is, "It's mandated," what does this mean for our participants? From the get-go, our intention is not about them. It's about us, the mandate, and our butts. The training is a waste of time, then, from a *learning standpoint*, especially if participants consider themselves compliant already, or if they consider the training useless on the job, or if the material is dead, dull, boring, and painful. Simply put, the training isn't relevant to them. Then we're stuck trying to get them to learn in spite of themselves.

Self-Determination Theory

If we decide the training is about helping our participants to *see the value* in the training, to *feel competent* and *autonomous* to use compliant behavior, and to know *we're in this together*, then the training is more about the participants and their learning. Our intention, then, will drive design and training decisions. We better ask ourselves, "What's the goal of this training?" If we link the learning objectives to business results, we're half-way home. If we link the business results to a value proposition to participants, even better.

Now we're going to look at a theory of motivation that looks at the factors of *competence*, *autonomy*, and *relatedness*: Self-determination Theory, when applied appropriately, can help trainers achieve greater results than reward strategies alone.

Where does motivation come from?

The idea of *internal* and *external* motivation is easy to grasp. If I raise my hand and answer questions correctly in a training session because I'm \$1 richer for doing so, I have been *externally* motivated. If I answer the question because it makes me proud of myself or because I take great pleasure in responding, I have been *internally* motivated. However, the difference between ***intrinsic*** and ***extrinsic*** motivation is trickier—and more useful.

When you are motivated, you are motivated in one of two ways:

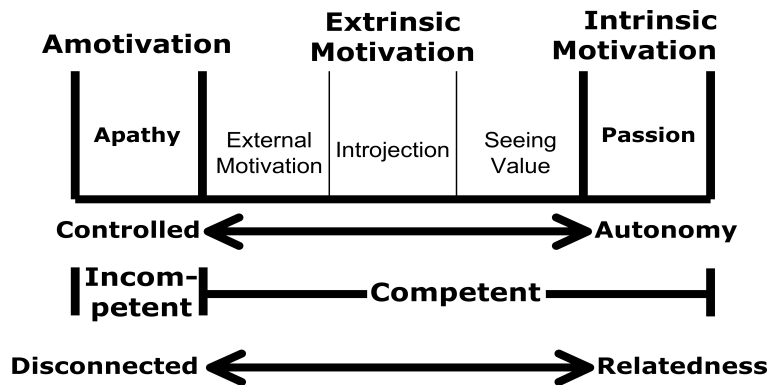
- **Intrinsically:** Intrinsic motivation occurs when you are passionate about a task and perform it for the sheer pleasure of doing it. The motivator resides within you. *Not all internal motivators are intrinsic.*
- **Extrinsically:** Extrinsic motivation occurs when you perform a task because some force, either external to you (money, rewards, grades, punishment) or internal to you (a value or belief that impacts your self-worth) drives to you perform.

	Intrinsic	Extrinsic
External		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Money • Bonus • Punishment • Praise
Internal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When you have a passion for performing a task. • When you perform a task for the sheer pleasure of it. • When you freely choose to perform a task. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Guilt • Ego Gratification • Seeing the Value of a Task

The Mechanisms of Motivation

We've been discussing extrinsic motivation quite a bit in this chapter, thus far. Whenever we discuss rewards and recognition strategies in a system (or training

session), we're referring to external motivation. Extrinsic motivation, however, can also arise *within* the individual. Below is a variation of what Deci and Ryan call the Mechanism of Motivation.



From Richard Ryan & Edward Deci, University of Rochester

Apathy

Have you ever gotten in front of a classroom and seen long faces, disheartened souls, and completely miserable participants? Usually this occurs in highly technical programs for highly non-technical people, or highly flaky (interpersonal) topics for people who have a great aversion to members of humanity. Essentially, apathy, or *amotivation* as Deci and Ryan refer to it, occurs when participants are forced to learn material they believe they have no competence to learn. Let me give you an example. I can't ski. If you put me up on the top of a mountain, slap on some skis on me, and put a gun to my head, forcing me down the slope, I will do it, knowing full well that the likelihood of my dying is only slightly lower than dying from a bullet to the head. I feel utterly and completely incompetent—no skill, no ability, and certainly no knowledge to ski down a mountain, and yet I would be compelled to do so. That visceral feeling of hopelessness and helplessness in the face of doing something that feels completely

impossible is amotivation. Learners don't face their own mortality in the classroom, but being forced to learn something they feel incompetent to learn is no less frustrating or scary. When participants fall into this frustration zone, it's our job as trainers to get them out of it as quickly as possible. This is an appropriate time to offer rewards as a way of introducing the possibility of competence. Remember, competence is all about the learner's perception of it.

Rewards, Punishment, and Other Controlling Factors

We've said a lot about the effects of rewards and can't emphasize enough the often detrimental effects rewards have on a learner's intrinsic motivation. So let's just summarize. Rewards:

- ❖ Devalue the focus on learning for learning's sake.
- ❖ Demotivate all those who don't achieve them.
- ❖ Crowd out other possible focal points.
- ❖ Reinforce a Machiavellian approach to learning and reroute the goal to achieving the reward, and not the learning objective.
- ❖ Require the continuation of subsequent rewards.

External motivation means just that. The reinforcement comes from outside of the person and controls, forces, or strongly influences participant behavior. I can't emphasize enough how powerful this is when the goal is short-term behavioral change. That's the obvious reason why parents, teachers, bosses, government officials, and animals rely on external motivation as the most efficient catalyst for behavior. Long-term, however, the short-comings are often perilous to authenticity.

Introjection, The Guilt Factor, The Ego Thing, The "Should" Factor, and KFKD

Extrinsic Motivation from Within: According to Deci and Ryan, sometimes we are motivated by an internal factor that is not truly *intrinsic*, which they call introjection. Call it guilt. Call it ego. Call it, as Anne Lamott does, a radio station inside her head, tuned to the most judgmental critic and nag imaginable. (She calls it, "KFKD.") We don't *want* to do something, but because we believe we *should*, we do.

Our self-esteem and self-worth are threatened or stroked, depending on what we think of our behavior. You recognize this motivator in your training session when a participant has forced herself to volunteer for something when she's clearly uncomfortable. She may be telling herself that she's bound to fail, but because her boss has sent her to this training, she feels she *should* volunteer. She's been motivated by a factor extrinsic to her self (the boss' expectations) expressed from within. As a motivator, *introjection* can be powerful, but it doesn't often result in excellence. For example, my three-year-old Lia came up to me with tears in her eyes. She said, "Daddy. You're going to die. I don't want to be a porphan." I looked at her, quite confused, and asked what she meant by all this. She told me very seriously that I was fat, and that I ate too much, and needed to pexercise. Then she sobbed and asked me not to leave her alone. My three-year-old looks nothing like me, and thankfully takes after my wife, which makes her impossible to resist. That afternoon, we went to an exercise equipment store and purchased a treadmill. The first week, she would sit right next to me as a walked, urging me to go faster and insuring that I completed my 45 minutes. By the second week, she would only get me started before she explained that she had other things to do. By the third week, the treadmill was in the basement. This is a good example of the long-term effects (or lack thereof) of introjection on behavior. While ego gratification, seeking approval, or guilt may have a longer effect than rewards, the long-term effect is still negligible.

Seeing the Value

Extrinsic Motivation Further Along the Continuum: Another extrinsic motivator is the ability to *see value*. Though you are not doing the task because you freely choose to and you passionately want to, you have internalized its overall importance. This type of motivation is actually quite close to intrinsic motivation. However, *seeing value* is still extrinsic, because the sense of importance originates from an outside source. For example, a man might quit smoking, because he knows it is good for his health. He knows he will have more energy. And he knows he will save money on dry cleaning. You've noticed the participants in your training sessions who

see value in what you're doing. They're not dying to be there, but they appreciate that it's good for them. Helping your participants see what's in it for them is a good strategy for trainers to employ. Making training relevant moves them along the continuum toward intrinsic motivation, where passion motivates behavior.

Intrinsic Motivation

Intrinsic motivation is synonymous with passion. As a trainer and an instructional designer, I have seen passionate learners in corporate settings. Frankly, this is rare. Intrinsic motivation means that your participants have freely chosen to engage in the learning opportunity and completely believe they can do what it is they're learning. I use simulations and games frequently as a way to engage learners to a degree where they no longer think about or reflect upon their competence. Essentially, when they're having fun or are engaged, they don't perceive their own incompetence. The more relevant and applicable the activity (game or simulation), the more likely the participants see value or, if I'm lucky, freely choose to do it.

Conclusion

Motivation is trickier than it looks. If a trainer wants to increase participation and decides that in order to do so, she will hand out dollar bills, she must know that she is doing so at the expense of increased learning retention and relevance, substituting extrinsic motivation for intrinsic. Money, rewards structures, and gold stars do influence behavior, but they focus behavior on getting the external reward, not on really improving at the task at hand. In a technologically rapid world, sometimes it is necessary to push behavioral modification through quickly. However, acknowledge to the employee what you're doing, and strive to create, in parallel, a more intrinsically motivating training environment.

Making the training *relevant* is of paramount importance. When a trainer focuses on improving the opportunities for people to meet their psychological needs (competence, autonomy, and relatedness), it is more likely that the trainer will get

higher levels of satisfaction and morale, and foster a mastery-orientation among the participants, demonstrated by increased resourcefulness, concentration, creativity, and intuition. Creating a motivating environment takes more than just throwing money at the problem.

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