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How to motivate yourself and others? Intended and unintended consequences

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ABSTRACT

To achieve goals, individuals and organizations must understand how to effectively motivate themselves and others. We review three broad strategies that people employ to increase motivation: giving feedback, setting goal targets, and applying incentives. Although each of these strategies can effectively motivate action under certain circumstances and among certain people, they can also result in unintended consequences: not helping or even hurting motivation. For example, employers may give positive feedback that leads employees to relax their effort or negative feedback that undermines employees' commitment, organizations may set goals that are overly ambitious and consequently reduce motivation, and certain incentives might appear attractive before pursuing an action but uncertain incentives better motivate action during goal pursuit. By identifying when and how these common motivational strategies work versus fail, we are able to prescribe a specific set of guidelines that will help people understand how to motivate themselves and others.

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Success in the workplace – and in life – hinges on effectively directing the behavior of oneself and others. As such, understanding which motivational tools to select and how to employ these tools is critical. Indeed, the study of motivation has historically been a cornerstone in psychological, organizational, and economic research. Several prominent theories on motivation emerged pre-1990, ranging from goal setting theory (Locke & Latham, 1984) to expectancy theory (Vroom, 1964), to social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1977). Each theory implicated a set of motivational tools for the workplace and beyond (e.g., pay for performance, Haire, Ghiselli, & Gordon, 1967).

These classic motivational theories have been extremely influential in organizational research; the tools they provide can be quite effective when appropriately used. However, modern research suggests these tools do not always work as originally predicted. Rather, they can have unintended consequences whereby the intervention backfires and instead decreases motivation. To direct the behavior of oneself and others successfully in field settings (e.g., the workplace), a more nuanced understanding of motivational theory is required. Here we highlight the contributions of a novel, growing body of research that documents when and why some tools are effective and the unintended consequences that can occur for each of these motivational tools.

In particular, we consider three leading categories of strategies that organizations employ to increase motivation: (A) giving feedback, (B) setting goal targets, and (C) providing incentives. Decades of experiments support the

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assertion that, to motivate people, it is useful to provide performance feedback (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996), to set specific goal targets or performance standards (Locke & Latham, 1984), and to incentivize goal-directed behavior (Eisenberger & Cameron, 1996; Eisenberger, Rhoades, & Cameron, 1999). However, we propose that each of these operations can result in undesirable consequences. For example, positive feedback can make people relax their effort whereas negative feedback can undermine people's commitment, setting goals can reduce motivation if the specific target is too ambitious (or alternatively, after it has been achieved), and certain incentives can undermine motivation compared with uncertain incentives. Accordingly, we identify when and how these common motivational strategies work, and when do they fail. We review theory and discuss practical implications. Our propositions and conclusions are summarized in Table 1.

Part A: Feedback

Feedback is critical for goal pursuit. When individuals receive information on successful and failed actions, they can adjust their efforts accordingly to improve their ability to fulfill their goals (Bandura, 1991; Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Festinger, 1954; Locke & Latham, 1990). By this perspective, any type of feedback should be beneficial, helping individuals to pursue their goals more effectively. But consider the following three scenarios. A manager writes a glowing performance evaluation for an employee who has just met the standard expectations. A piano instructor tells a student who just started playing the piano last week that her technique is terrible. Finally, an editor whom a writer has never met tells him that his writing style needs work. In each of these cases, feedback might actually dampen the motivation of the person pursuing his or her goals.

We distinguish between the two primary forms of feedback: positive and negative. In pursuing any long-term goal, a person is likely to encounter both failures and successes. She can consider the progress made, or the progress still missing to meet the goal. In this way, performance can be evaluated positively or negatively. Hence, a person can choose to motivate oneself or others by focusing on the positive or negative aspects of the goal pursuit. In the earlier examples, the manager chose to give positive feedback whereas the piano teacher and editor gave negative feedback. Positive feedback refers to accomplishments, strengths, and correct responses, whereas negative feedback refers to lack of accomplishments, weaknesses, and incorrect responses.

On the one hand, several motivation theories suggest that positive feedback is more effective for motivating goal pursuit because it increases outcome expectancy of the goal and perceived self-efficacy of the pursuer (Atkinson, 1964; Bandura & Cervone, 1983; Lewin, 1935; Weiner, 1974; Zajonc & Brickman, 1969). These findings demonstrate that positive feedback can increase people's confidence that they are able to pursue their goals. Negative feedback, in contrast, can undermine people's confidence and hence their expectations of success. Consequently, positive feedback is often used to encourage individuals to internalize or integrate new goals to their self-concept, with the expectation that these individuals will then be more committed to pursue the goal on subsequent occasions (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

On the other hand, other motivation theories suggest that negative feedback is more effective for motivating goal pursuit. For example, cybernetic models of self-regulation propose that positive feedback on successes provides a sense of partial goal attainment, signaling that less effort is needed to accomplish the goal. In contrast, negative feedback on lack of successes signals that more effort is needed and encourages goal pursuit (Carver & Scheier, 1998; Higgins, 1987; Kluger & DeNisi, 1996; Locke & Latham, 1990; Miller, Galanter, & Pribram, 1960; Powers, 1973). According to cybernetic models, then, social agents would be more effective if they emphasize negative feedback.

We suggest that *neither* form of feedback is generally better. When is positive feedback effective for motivation, and when is negative feedback effective? In the following section, we propose that each type of feedback can be effective (or ineffective), but their effectiveness depends on at least two factors: (1) action representation (commitment vs. progress), and (2) experience (goal expertise: experts vs. novices; relationship between feedback giver and receiver: close vs. distant). We consider each factor in turn.

Proposition 1a. Positive (vs. negative) feedback is effective when it signals a boost in commitment, whereas negative (vs. positive) feedback is effective when it signals a lack of goal progress.

Research underlying the dynamics of self-regulation (e.g., Fishbach & Dhar, 2005; Fishbach, Dhar, & Zhang, 2006; Fishbach & Zhang, 2008; Koo & Fishbach, 2008; Zhang, Fishbach, & Kruglanski, 2007), suggests that there may exist two distinguishable representations of actions. Actions can represent commitment toward a desirable state (Klein, Wesson, Hollenbeck, & Alge, 1999; Locke, Latham, & Erez, 1988), or they can represent making progress toward the state.

In a commitment representation, people ponder whether a goal is worth pursuing and they infer from observing themselves pursuing that goal that, indeed, the goal is important or enjoyable (hence valuable) and expectancy of attainment is high (Emmons, 1989; Fishbein & Ajzen, 1974; Lewin, Dembo, Festinger, & Sears, 1944; Liberman & Förster, 2008). Thus people infer commitment based on engagement (Arkes & Ayton, 1999; Bem, 1972; Cialdini, Trost, & Newsom, 1995; Higgins, 2006). Not only does prior engagement increase motivation by suggesting high commitment, but also plans for future engagement often signal commitment and therefore serve to increase motivation (Hart & Albarracin, 2009; Oettingen & Mayer, 2002; Zhang et al., 2007).

In a progress representation, individuals monitor their rate of progress toward a goal. They infer from completed actions and actions scheduled to take place in the future that their rate of progress is sufficient. On the other hand, they infer from the lack of past and planned actions the need for progress. Discrepancy theories of self-regulation

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