

WHY do we work? Motive portends outcome

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Abstract: *Understanding “why” we work helps us understand “how well” we work. People’s motivations for working profoundly impact productivity and outcomes. The motives behind why we work influence levels of engagement, commitment, and passion. Intrinsically motivated pursuits optimize wellness and performance. We must believe our work matters. We must believe in what we are doing, and feel good about it. We must see the impact and purpose of our work, believing that it makes a difference. The “right” answer to why we work, when combined with strong organizational culture, a clear mission, and great leadership; all portend peak performance and a successful business bottom line.*

The answer to the question of *why* we work significantly determines *how well* we work. Our motivations profoundly determine outcomes. The “correct” answer, combined with the right organizational culture, a clear mission, and strong management all contribute to portend peak performance and a successful business bottom line.

According to McGregor (2015), there are six reasons we work: **1)** we enjoy the work (including its challenges); **2)** we value the outcomes and impact of our work (it provides purpose); **3)** we hope the outcomes will enhance our potential; **4)** we are threatened by external factors (guilt, fear, peer pressure, shame); **5)** to gain reward or avoid punishment; **6)** inertia. Intrinsic motives #1-3 improve performance and outcomes, while indirect, external forces (#3-6) impair performance and outcomes. Successful organizational cultures successfully maximize #1-3, while minimizing #4-6.

Our motivation for working is often complex and multifactorial. Intrinsic factors can be diminished by extrinsic ones - external rewards may detract from intrinsic reasons to pursue an activity for its own sake. Or extrinsic forces may fuel intrinsic ones – a reward may be an incentive, and thus improve engagement [Vinney, 2019].

Maslow’s “A theory of human motivation” introduced a hierarchy of needs. This organizational scheme describes people as being motivated to fulfill or satisfy basic needs before moving on to focus on more advanced needs. The five components of the pyramid are: Physiological (air, water, food, shelter), Safety (safe environment, security, employment, resources, health, property). Love and belonging (feeling loved and accepted, feeling of belonging and connectedness), Esteem (desire to feel good about ourselves, self-confidence, feel our achievements and contributions are valued and recognized, respect, status, recognition). Self-Actualization (feel fulfilled, living up to our potential, doing what we are meant to). [Maslow, 1943; Hopper, 2020]. These five basic needs are our most powerful interests. They help explain why we work. If you are negotiating with someone (about work or anything else) you can increase your chances of reaching an agreement with them if you are able to satisfy these basic needs (Fisher, 2011).

Self Determination Theory (SDT) provides a framework to understand intrinsic motivation. This is when we act out of inherent rewards such as interest, enjoyment, or satisfaction rather than extrinsic motivation such as money, acclaim, or avoidance of punishment. Self Determination increases when we feel in control and believe what we do affects outcomes. SDT states that we are motivated by three feelings: (1) Competence: if we confidently feel we have the skills for success and feel effective in what we do, we are more likely to act to achieve our goals. (2) Connection: we need to experience a sense of relatedness, belonging and attachment to others; to feel important to others. (3) Autonomy: we need to feel in control of our behaviors and goals; to have a sense of being able to make choices and changes shaping our future (Ryan, 2000; Cherry, 2019).

McLeod’s (2021) statement that “you cannot spreadsheet your way to passion” cleverly describes that while hitting organizational financial targets requires passionate employees, it does not motivate employees or create pride in their work. The catchphrase captures the essence that while financial performance is crucial (“no money, no mission”), it should not be at the center of leadership narrative. While financial results are a key

outcome, they are not a driver of employee performance. McLeod goes on to describe that overemphasizing financial targets creates transactional relationships with employees, which in turn makes them more likely to create transactional relationships with their teams and with their customers. To ignite creativity and drive effort, leaders help teams stay engaged by building belief in organizational purpose and showing the intrinsic value of employees' work on direct customer outcomes, and on each other. There needs to be a balance between building belief in the meaning and impact of work with the unavoidable attention to financial metrics, deliverables, and performance data. These financial goals must be translated into employee behavior and mindset. Questions to be considered include, what does the team need to think about to accomplish the goals; and how do I want them to behave with their customers and with each other? (McLeod, 2021)

Research (Shore, 2011) has shown that employees will go "above and beyond" and experience greater fulfillment doing so when they have a sense of belonging. Inclusion is every organizations stated goal. Yet, most cultures exist on a continuum somewhere between assimilation and inclusion or true belonging. Shore (2011) described that there is high value in uniqueness and belonging with inclusion, which is when an individual is treated as an insider and encouraged to retain their uniqueness within the group. There is low value in uniqueness and belonging with exclusion which is when an individual is not treated as an insider with unique value in a group but, there are others who *are*. Differentiation is when an individual is not treated as an insider, but their unique characteristics are valuable to the group. This creates high uniqueness but low belongingness. High belongingness and low uniqueness occurs with assimilation, which is when an individual is treated as an insider only when they conform to organizational culture norms, while downplaying their uniqueness. Warning signs to look for include employees altering their attire, grooming, or mannerisms to make their identity less obvious; refraining from behavior commonly associated with a given identity; avoiding sticking up for their identity group; or limiting contact with their group (Yoshino, 2014).

Organizations focused on competitive advantage must have a strong culture, motivate employees, meet customer demands, and deliver consistently great performance. They must have an environment capable of attracting talented and passionate people; people doing what they are good at, and what they enjoy. Happy employees, wellness, and enthusiasm portends optimal outcomes with less burn out. A great organizational culture includes wellness, with people working for the right reasons. This in turn creates happier, more enthusiastic, and more engaged employees. This improves performance, productivity, customer satisfaction, and the business bottom line. As with most everything in business, this begins with leadership. The *KLT factor* states that employees must know, like, and trust (KLT) their leaders. The journey starts with Know, moves on to Like, and concludes with Trust. (Harris, 2020).

Vinney (2019) adds that "who" and "why" are more important than "what," "how," and "when." People can learn new skills but are unlikely to develop new values. The "why" behind our work impacts how we see our connection, engagement, and buy in. The "why" provides connection to a purpose. There must be alignment between an individual's values and the organizational culture.

The motives behind why we work matter (McGregor, 2015). If people feel they have a positive effect, they will be more engaged, motivated, committed, passionate, and inspired. Intrinsically motivated pursuits aligned with our personal values and goals enhance wellness and performance (Cherry, 2019; Vinney, 2019). To increase employee satisfaction, leadership should support autonomy and maximize roles and responsibilities; while providing resources, praise, acknowledgement, encouragement, and positive feedback (Cherry, 2019).

Performance and wellness are enhanced when employees see that their work matters (McLeod, 2021). To increase motivation, people must believe in what they are doing. They need to feel good about what they do. They need to see the impact and purpose of their work, that it makes a difference; that it directly helps people that are counting on them. People need to feel connected to their leaders, teams, and organizations. Leadership must provide opportunities for their workforce to grow, gain new knowledge, develop their skills, and then exercise them in order to master tasks and challenges. Organizational culture should clearly and visibly value and reward employees. These important connections are all supported by creating an environment of true belongingness and true inclusion.

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