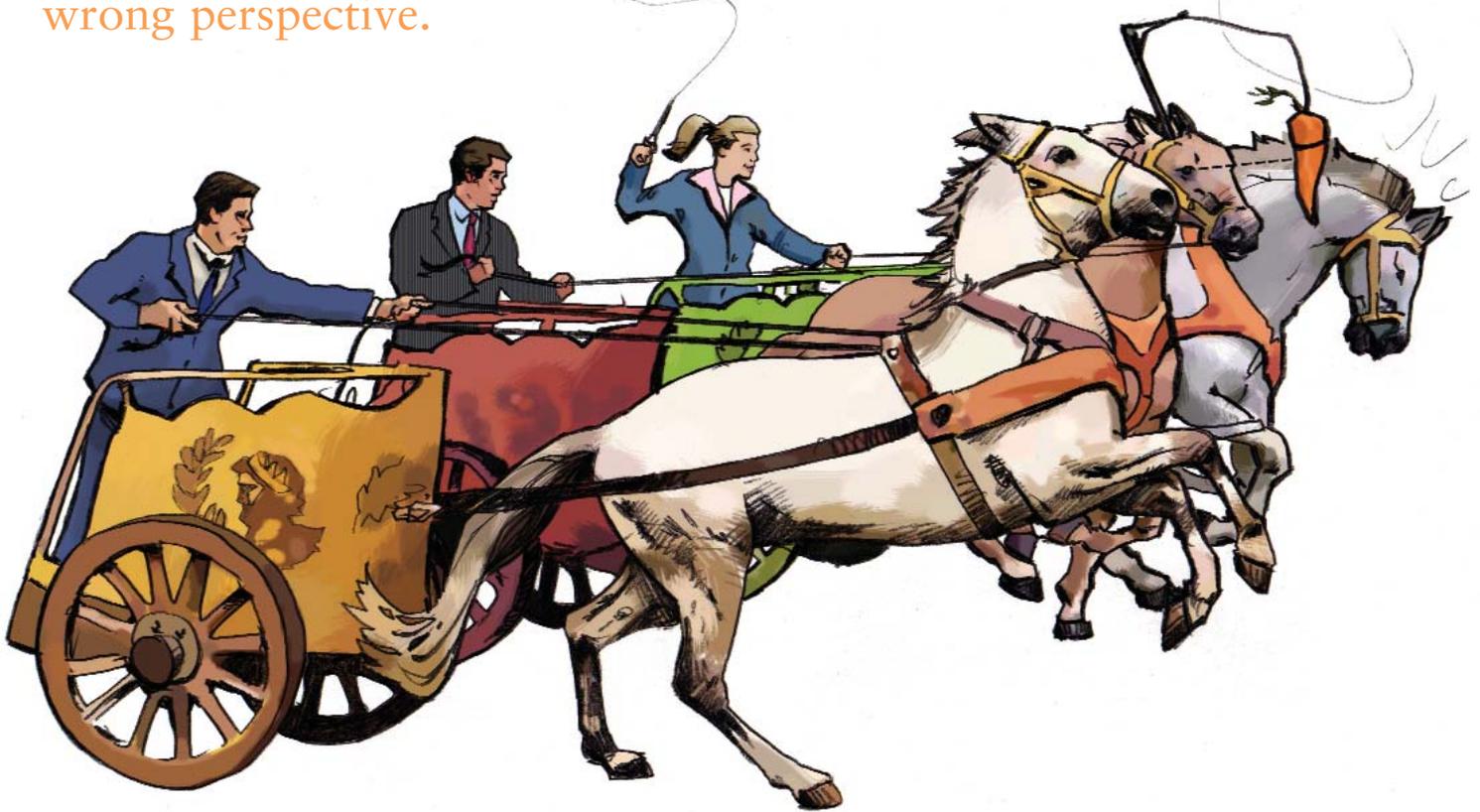


## Motivation

# THE WRONG QUESTION

Motivation is obviously a key factor at work, but Keith Hatter argues that too many companies and managers look at it from the wrong perspective.



How often have you listened to someone explain or offer advice on different ways you can motivate others? Then there are the countless magazine articles offering similar advice, and small armies of motivational speakers who will do the job for you. Not forgetting the in-house versions, doing their passable impressions of David Brent up and down the country.

It has become accepted wisdom that it is the responsibility of some people to motivate others – and that raises a number of questions. As teams grow, how is one manager or leader supposed to motivate

everyone? Who motivates the people at the top? What about all those people who work for themselves or are home based – who is to motivate them?

But this assumes that individuals have insufficient internal motivation, and it encourages a lack of responsibility – after all, if it's someone else's role to motivate you, if you're not motivated then surely it's their fault, not yours. Like Wallace and Gromit's wrong trousers, "How do I motivate my people" is The Wrong Question. It should surely be "How do I get my people to motivate themselves?"

### The why question

Before you can think about effective self-motivation, it is essential to understand the nature of motivation itself. As motivation is the key to success in any activity, it is vital that we understand it well enough to influence performance.

On the face of it, motivation is a simple concept. It dictates our choices, the intensity of effort we subsequently apply, and the time we spend doing that particular thing – fundamentally, motivation is the “why” question. Why we go to work, why we visit the gym, why we go on a diet or why we mow the lawn.

In our experience, many people think motivation is something you either have or you don’t – as if it’s a characteristic determined by our genetic make-up. We hear them say “Oh, she’s a really motivated person”, “He’s just not a very motivated person” or “She’s so motivated I guess she was just born that way”.

However, if we give it a bit more thought, we realize that motivation varies according to the activity we are doing. We may not feel particularly motivated during mundane tasks such as filing or checking expenses, but highly motivated when involved in a more interesting project, such as arranging a complex deal for a client or preparing a key presentation or business pitch. Our motivation also changes over time. Some days you may feel really good about work, whatever the task, but at other times you just can’t seem to get your enthusiasm up at all.

So motivation is much more complex than we like to think. For any one individual it will vary by activity and by time – even those elite athletes with whom we work and who seem to have a consistently high level and quality of motivation will experience dips in this emotion from time to time.

There are many types of motivation – understanding these and the type of motivation being experienced is vital, since the type of motivation dictates the level of performance in any activity at any given time. In simple terms, motivation can be divided into three main categories: **amotivation**, characterized by the “I don’t know why I bother” feeling; **external motivation**, where you do things for some separate reason – such as when you hear yourself say “I do it because I ought to” or “I’ll get a reward for doing it”; and **internal motivation**, where you do it just for the fun and enjoyment that you feel – “I do it because I love it”.

These motivational types exist on a continuum, with amotivation at one end and internal motivation at the other. Three decades of research, and our experience in working with the elite in business and sport, clearly show that, as our motivation becomes more internal, our performance develops world-class characteristics – it’s consistent, sustainable and intense.

Evidence from arenas as diverse as sport, commerce, music and medicine shows that three very basic human

needs play a big part in self-motivation. The more these particular basic needs are met, the higher the quality of motivation; and the higher the quality of motivation, the better the performance.

### Choice

The first of these basic needs is to maintain and exercise your sense of choice – sometimes that can seem hard, if say you’re given a task and told what to

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do, when to do it and how you should go about it. Even then, top performers know that they can still choose how to respond to any situation. Choosing whether to react in a particular way is always a choice, and one that can be exercised even in the harshest conditions. Remembering that you love to do a great job, and that excellence is really important for you, can help you keep your quality of motivation high. Victor Frankel, the eminent psychologist who spent time in Auschwitz during the Second World War, spoke of those prisoners who gave away their last bits of bread and offered comfort to others.<sup>1</sup> He spoke of how, by choosing to respond to their situation in this way, they exercised “the last of the human freedoms”.

That was an extreme situation that most of us will never face, but you can learn from those experiences, and others, and apply the core ideas to everyday tasks. Here are some simple options:

- Think about how you would like to respond to adverse circumstances and rehearse responding in that way – use all your senses to “live” the experience over and over again. Your mind finds it difficult to distinguish between reality and created images, so use your power to get into the habit of responding the way you want to.<sup>2</sup> You can also do this as a group exercise when, for example, you have an important presentation coming up – each person can rehearse his part and prepare for any obstacles, so that the team is not caught out by unexpected questions.
- Encourage your team to recognize the part they play in creating any situation, and support them in taking responsibility for change. At the same time, distinguish between the things that they have direct control over (eg their response) and those aspects over which they have little or no control (such as the response of others) – elite performers focus on “controlling the controllables”.

Exercising your sense of choice in this way is empowering, and gives you a sense of control even when others seek to remove it – and bear in mind that this also means that you take responsibility for *your* actions – if you choose how to respond, then you can't blame anyone else for the consequences of your response!

### Confidence

The second of these vital needs is confidence. We often refer to this quality as the guardian angel of performance. When it's high, you're much more likely to succeed, even if the task is challenging. Your choice of task also becomes more effective as your confidence encourages you to opt for things that are new,

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challenging and achievable.

On the other hand, your technical skills may be as strong as ever but if your confidence is low, this will matter little – you won't be able to apply the skills. Research with Olympic athletes shows that the biggest single difference between medal winners and those who return home empty-handed is that medal winners expect much more success than their counterparts. Put another way, their confidence was higher – nothing to do with their technical skills or their tactical ability.

So how can you increase your confidence levels? Firstly, think about where your confidence comes from, particularly if faced with an unfamiliar task or if you have a boss who is an Olympic champion at seeking to undermine you. Remembering your past achievements, the skills that you have, or perhaps times when you have overcome similar challenges, will be really effective. Keep a list of the things you do really well, and talk to yourself in a positive way on at least as many occasions as you give yourself a hard time!

Secondly, begin to notice how many times you praise yourself and your team compared with the frequency with which you criticize others or give yourself a hard time. You can do this by drawing a line down the middle of a sheet of paper, putting the negative comments on one side and the positive comments and thoughts on the other. See how the two columns compare, and concentrate on achieving a balance between the two.

### Connectedness

The third and final of these vital needs for motivation is the quality of personal relationships at work. Putting it simply, good quality personal relationships have been shown time and time again to be the single biggest factor in determining happiness – and when we're happy, our motivation is stronger. Think about your relationships at work with the people with whom you work most closely – are they secure, caring and supportive?

That *doesn't* mean that you have to have a hug each morning; it *does* mean that you know they are in your corner, backing you up, supporting you, there if you need them. It means the sort of relationships that are characterized by trust and honesty. How can you make this happen?

Well, simplicity is genius. One of the best ways of ensuring you get support at work is to offer it – the more you do this, the more it will come back. Not everyone will respond, but those that do will make it worth the effort.

Then you should begin to coach your team – by asking open and non-judgmental questions, help them to figure out their goals and their options. Rather than *tell* them, ask them to offer up timescales for delivery and what the first steps should be. By coaching and not telling, responsibility will be taken, confidence increased, commitment improved and enjoyment enhanced – all pretty vital for performance.

The third option when it comes to getting support is even simpler: just ask for it – and encourage your team to do the same!

In summary, the gold standard of motivation, leading to world class performances, comes from the inside. For you, that means looking for ways in which you can exert influence and choice over the job in hand, and in which you can choose how to respond to any situation. It means working on your confidence, so that as it grows it leads you to seek even greater challenges. It also means ensuring you have supportive relationships in and out of work. For your team, your job is to create the environment in which they can have the same things.

By doing so, your job becomes a lot easier – for it no longer is a question of “how do I motivate my team?” – they will motivate themselves and deliver superb performances as a result. □

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<sup>1</sup> Victor Frankel, *Man's search for meaning*, New York NY, Washington Square Press 1946

<sup>2</sup> It is no coincidence that airline pilots and military officers spend so much time in simulators and wargames preparing and rehearsing their responses – and those of their teams – to crisis situations. Ed