

How to motivate your workforce

The COVID-19 pandemic has thrown organizations into new ways of working, which has meant making some tough decisions. At this time more than ever, organizations need to be able to harness a motivated workforce to give them a competitive edge and increase productivity.

Frequently, people think of motivation as something either present or absent. *"Jo is motivated, but Ali isn't."* However, research on motivation has revealed that a more productive question to focus on is, *"What factors are motivating this person's behaviors right now?"* With this lens, we don't focus as much on whether or not a person is motivated, we focus on whether the motivation a person is experiencing is appropriate for goals they are pursuing, and the environment they are in.

As we move from thinking of motivation as *"the fuel"* of behavior to considering it as a tool to effectively *"steer and accelerate"* employees towards their goals, we can begin to consider how HR leaders and managers can support different aspects of motivation. This guide will give you ideas on how to do this at your workplace.



About the author

Dan Belenky is Director of Learning Science Research at Pearson. Prior to joining Pearson in 2014, he was a Post-Doctoral Fellow in the Human-Computer Interaction Institute at Carnegie Mellon University. Dan earned his PhD in Cognitive Psychology at the University of Pittsburgh, where he studied how student motivation interacts with (and is impacted by) innovative instructional methods. His current research projects explore how insights from cognitive psychology and behavioral science can be used to improve learner outcomes, at scale.

Do they believe they can do it?

A growth mindset will help employees if they hit a bump in the road.

We all hit bumps in the road—it's inevitable. But what happens next? Some people may feel demotivated, taking the difficulties as a sign that they don't have what it takes to succeed. Others may see these difficulties as important parts of the journey—they feel driven to overcome these challenges as a way to improve and develop one's abilities and skills.

The idea that you have a set amount of ability which can't be increased is known as a "fixed mindset" and the belief that your abilities can develop is a "growth mindset." In general, holding a growth mindset is associated with more persistence, less anxiety, and better outcomes than a fixed mindset. A growth mindset helps people who get temporarily lost to reorient themselves back in a productive direction, rather than just thinking, *"Oh well! I'm a bit lost so I'll head home!"*

How can we help employees develop a growth mindset?

- 1 Teach employees about growth mindset, and encourage them to reflect on their own thoughts, particularly when they start to experience challenges. If they catch themselves thinking, *"I can't do this,"* encourage them to add that they can't do it **YET**, but they will. It can also help for them to remember times when they've gotten better at something with time, effort, and practice, like learning to play a musical instrument or other hobbies.
- 2 Consider the language used throughout the organization, and make sure it highlights both the effort as well as strategies and approaches that are likely to lead to success. Don't just praise excellent performance; pair encouraging messages like, *"Keep trying, I know you can get it!"* with actionable steps they can take (e.g., *"Before your next attempt, why don't you talk it over with one of your colleagues and see if you can figure out what part is giving you the most trouble."*)
- 3 Encourage managers to structure tasks in a way that rewards incremental progress (e.g., requiring multiple drafts; a low stakes presentation before a high stakes one; or highlighting learning from team "fails" as well as successes).

Setting goals and regularly reflecting on them contributes to increased focus and motivation. Organizations tend to set "performance goals", which are job oriented and results focused, and "development goals", which focus on areas where individuals can learn and grow.

Motivation is more likely to increase if employees gauge their progress against goals by looking at their own improvements, rather than by comparing themselves to others.

Take a look at the differences:

Basing progress on their own improvements

Associated with more productive strategies and higher achievement, particularly in more creative tasks.

Helps develop interest, and causes less anxiety.



Comparing themselves to others

If the task requires a lot of repetition to master, or is a routine task, comparison to others can help people stay focused and improve output.

Can lead to negative emotions, like anxiety.

A culture of development, oriented around progress, is motivating. Here are four ways organizations can achieve this:

- 1 Encourage individuals to focus on where they are now and where they are going, and then demonstrate progress compared to their own benchmarks.
- 2 Structure development opportunities that continuously build off one another and provide a clear path to achieving their goals.
- 3 Avoid publicly comparing individuals' achievements.
- 4 Allow and encourage revised iterations of work products (where possible, such as giving feedback on sales calls and allowing the individual to hone their script).

How rewarding is it?

Help employees see that it's worth the effort.

You do it, your employees do it—we all decide what tasks to engage in by asking ourselves questions like, “*How hard is it going to be?*” and, “*What do I get out of it?*” If employees believe they have the knowledge and skills to succeed, and understand the value of what they're doing, they are more likely to be motivated.

How hard is it going to be?

Known as “*Expectancy*”

- How good am I at these kinds of tasks?
- How hard does this particular task look?



What do I get out of it?

Known as “*Value*”

- How important is the task to me?
- What costs are associated with doing it? (What do I have to give up? What will happen if I can't do it?)

How to increase expectancies (the employees believe they will succeed)

- Experiencing success (or even observing success of similar peers) can help individuals feel more likely to succeed in the future, so consider ways of helping employees achieve “quick wins” on the way to harder tasks, and break down big goals into smaller achievements.
- Similar to the research on growth mindset described earlier, people's beliefs about whether their effort will lead to meaningful changes in their abilities can impact expectancies, too.
- Make sure goals are achievable and challenging.
- Give feedback and support, and listen to feedback from the employee too, to make sure the goals are still achievable.

How to increase perceived value (how important the task is to the employee)

- A task can be seen as valuable because it is inherently pleasant (it is fun), because we can see how it will help us do something we want to do (it is relevant), because it would increase our social standing (it looks good), it gives us some external reward (we get something else of value when we do it), or many other reasons.
- Some non-monetary ways to increase the value of a task are: linking it to the company strategy and goals; including it as a personal goal that will be appraised at the end-of-year review; showing how it will increase an individual's visibility.

How much should external incentives play a part?

Carefully balance external recognition with activities that increase internal motivation.

Another approach for increasing motivation relies on extrinsic (external) factors—recognition of various kinds, or the avoidance of punishment—rather than internal factors.

While it isn't effective for managers to rely solely on extrinsic motivation, it does have a place in the suite of tools available. **This table gives an overview of when it is appropriate to use it:**

Examples	When this might be effective	When this isn't effective
Positive feedback from manager or peers	Routine tasks (e.g., data entry)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Deep thinking (e.g. putting together a persuasive presentation)● Creative tasks (e.g. solving novel problems)
Bonuses	When they are awarded based on clear milestones and evidence of desired behaviors and outcomes, not just output.	When employees are placed into competition and have no clear guidelines. When there isn't a clear link between the award and what it takes to achieve them.

Really, the key to consider is how to balance these different kinds of approaches. While motivation can certainly increase when recognition is introduced, a person who relies solely on extrinsic recognition to motivate their behaviors is more likely to give up when things get hard, to lose interest, and to burn out. In addition, when people start receiving extrinsic recognition for something they already enjoy doing, it could potentially lead to an “*overjustification effect*”, where the intrinsic motivation decreases over time.

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These different aspects of motivation all provide potentially useful ways of increasing engagement and perseverance in employees. Here, two managers share their own stories about improving staff motivation.

About 3 and a half years ago we needed to move out from our old office because the owner wanted to renovate the building, and at the same time we went through a period of cost cutting and restructuring. As a result, we ended up with a smaller team and without an office for about 6 months. The remaining employees had to work from home until we could find a suitable office space. We were really busy, and without regular face-to-face contact it was really hard. We then implemented more regular online catch ups, improved our communication and got people more involved as a team, and things got better. Finding a new office space really helped too.

Generally, I've found that being flexible with working hours and allowing people to work from home if they need to motivates them. Giving them a sense of purpose and responsibility, a good degree of autonomy (like the ownership of a project) is important.

They want to be accountable for the success of their project. I think people need to feel supported and understood, and be heard when they have concerns or ideas for the company. Communication is highly important, they need to feel they are across the business, to get updates, to know our common goals or vision. Weekly catch ups, and feeling of being part of something are highly important as well.

Bastien Vetault, Co-founder & CEO at Sherpa, Australia



Since joining Pearson in 2003, I have been motivated and inspired by some incredible leaders. Those leaders have taught me all I know, and as I have progressed through the organisation, I have aimed to apply the theories and principles that I have learnt to my own team.

The success of any team within an organisation depends on its team members. Keeping team members motivated and engaged is key and you would not be able to fulfil your role as a manager or a leader without a motivated and engaged team.

I lead a Delivery team within Product Development and Service Delivery, and they are a fantastic group of highly skilled, experienced professionals who have a wealth of talent between them. A key source of motivation for the team is that they are providing a service that will allow students to make progress in their lives. I hope one of my team members won't mind when I quote "The reason I get up in the morning and go to work is because I know that I am making a difference". This in itself is a source of motivation.

Shared departmental goals, linked to the wider business objectives and professional development are, in my view, also key to engaging and motivating a team. In my team, working groups have been set up for each goal, where the members nominate or put themselves forward as the lead. The working group then works collaboratively on the goal and the lead project manages the goal to stay on track. Taking this approach offers opportunities for self-development and fosters collaboration, allowing team members to take ownership, come up with innovative solutions, address challenges and above all communicate with each other to achieve a shared objective and drive business performance.

These approaches have resulted in a high performing team who create great relationships with customers and bring innovation, creativity, dedication and passion to their everyday work.

Julie Jefferies, Head of Digital Delivery, Pearson, UK

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Are you using some of these strategies at your organization? Tell us how. efficacy@pearson.com