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Employee Motivation: A Powerful New Model
by Nitin Nohria, Boris Groysberg, and Linda-Eling Lee

Getting people to do their best work, even in trying circumstances, is one of managers' most enduring and slippery challenges. Indeed, deciphering what motivates us as human beings is a centuries-old puzzle. Some of history's most influential thinkers about human behavior—among them Aristotle, Adam Smith, Sigmund Freud, and Abraham Maslow—have struggled to understand its nuances and have taught us a tremendous amount about why people do the things they do.

Such luminaries, however, didn't have the advantage of knowledge gleaned from modern brain science. Their theories were based on careful and educated investigation, to be sure, but also exclusively on direct observation. Imagine trying to infer how a car works by examining its movements (starting, stopping, accelerating, turning) without being able to take apart the engine.

Fortunately, new cross-disciplinary research in fields like neuroscience, biology, and evolutionary psychology has allowed us to peek under the hood, so to speak—to learn more about the human brain. Our synthesis of the research suggests that people are guided by four basic emotional needs, or drives, that are the product of our common evolutionary heritage. As set out by Paul R. Lawrence and Nitin Nohria in their 2002 book Driven: How Human Nature Shapes Our Choices, they are the drives to acquire (obtain scarce goods, including intangibles such as social status); bond (form connections with individuals and groups); comprehend (satisfy our curiosity and master the world around us); and defend (protect against external threats and promote justice). These drives underlie everything we do.

Managers attempting to boost motivation should take note. It's hard to argue with the accepted wisdom—backed by empirical evidence—that a motivated workforce means better corporate performance. But what actions, precisely, can managers take to satisfy the four drives and, thereby, increase their employees' overall motivation?

We recently completed two major studies aimed at answering that question. In one, we surveyed 355 employees of two global businesses—a financial services giant and a leading IT services firm. In the other, we surveyed employees from 300 Fortune 500 companies. To define overall motivation, we...
focused on four commonly measured workplace indicators of it: engagement, satisfaction, commitment, and intention to quit. Engagement represents the energy, effort, and initiative employees bring to their jobs. Satisfaction reflects the extent to which they feel that the company meets their expectations at work and satisfies its implicit and explicit contracts with them. Commitment captures the extent to which employees engage in corporate citizenship. Intention to quit is the best proxy for employee turnover.

Both studies showed, strikingly, that an organization’s ability to meet the four fundamental drives explains, on average, about 60% of employees’ variance on motivational indicators (previous models have explained about 30%). We also found that certain drives influence some motivational indicators more than others. Fulfilling the drive to bond has the greatest effect on employee commitment, for example, whereas meeting the drive to comprehend is most closely linked with employee engagement. But a company can best improve overall motivational scores by satisfying all four drives in concert. The whole is more than the sum of its parts; a poor showing on one drive substantially diminishes the impact of high scores on the other three.

When it comes to practical implications for managers, the consequences of neglecting any particular drive are clear. Bob Nardelli’s lackluster performance at Home Depot, for instance, can be explained in part by his relentless focus on the drive to acquire at the expense of other drives. By emphasizing individual and store performance, he squelched the spirit of camaraderie among employees (their drive to bond) and their dedication to technical expertise (a manifestation of the need to comprehend and do meaningful work). He also created, as widely reported, a hostile environment that interfered with the drive to defend: Employees no longer felt they were being treated justly. When Nardelli left the company, Home Depot’s stock price was essentially no better than when he had arrived six years earlier. Meanwhile Lowe’s, a direct competitor, gained ground by taking a holistic approach to satisfying employees’ emotional needs through its reward system, culture, management systems, and design of jobs.

An organization as a whole clearly has to attend to the four fundamental emotional drives, but so must individual managers. They may be restricted by organizational norms, but employees are clever enough to know that their immediate superiors have some wiggle room. In fact, our research shows that individual managers influence overall motivation as much as any organizational policy does. In this article we’ll look more closely at the drivers of employee motivation, the leverage managers can pull to address them, and the “local” strategies that can boost motivation despite organizational constraints.

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