

Payoff: The Hidden Logic That Shapes Our Motivations – Dan Ariely

How to Destroy Motivation or: Work as a Prison Movie

Life is never made unbearable by circumstances, but only by lack of meaning and purpose – Viktor E Frankl

But here's what was so interesting: In the Sisyphean condition, we discovered that there was no relationship between the internal joy of making Bionicles and productivity. Those who weren't terribly excited about Bionicles created about seven of them-the same number as those who loved building them. In general, we should expect that those who love Bionicles would build more of them, but by dismantling their creations right before their eyes, we crushed any joy that Bionicle-loving participants could get out of this otherwise fun activity.

In contrast, participants in the "shredded" condition stopped working far earlier, at about 29 cents. These results show that when we are acknowledged for our work, we are willing to work harder for less pay, and when we are not acknowledged, we lose much of our motivation.

In fact, participants who experienced the "ignored" condition stopped working when the payment per page was around 27.5 cents-only 1.5 cents less than the participants whose work was shredded. This suggests that if you really want to demotivate people, "shredding" their work is the way to go, but that you can get almost all the way there by simply ignoring their efforts. Acknowledgement is a kind of human magic-a small human connection, a gift from one person to another that translates into a much larger, more meaningful outcome. ON the positive side, these results also show that we can increase motivation simply by acknowledging the efforts those working with us.

"This is important" I told engineers, "because if your CEO is working according to his intuition and not data, and if his intuition is the same as that of the participants in our consultant experiment, this means that *he may be systematically underestimating the importance of meaning at work.*

"The consultant experiments," I continued, "showed that people dramatically underappreciate the extent and depth to which a feeling of accomplishment influences people. Your CEO most likely reasoned that people who work for him are like rats in a maze, only instead of working for food, work for a salary. If he wants you to start working toward a different goal, he probably thinks that all he needs to do is direct you down a new path, and you will quickly start working towards the new goal. He seems not to appreciate the effect that stopping your big project would have on your internal motivation."

And then the CEO makes his stupefying announcement. When that happens, you feel as if all that investment-what you've put into your work, your home, your education, and those collegial relationships-goes *pfffft*, like a deflated balloon. It's not just the feeling of wasted work that disturbs you. Nor is it even what one may see as the CEO's blindness. It's the sense that your own *life* matters less-that who you are has been belittled somehow. You haven't been working just for a paycheck or even a vision for the company: you've been working for yourself by building something that you cared about, and now all of this is gone. The CEO's announcement snatches away not only your sense of trust, meaning, accomplishment, connection, and pride, but also some of your longer-term dreams and hopes.

Given all of this, it's hardly surprising that some of the most innovative and senior engineers, now feelings "negatively motivated" quit the company a few weeks after my visit.

Another company came up with an even more brilliant idea that nobody could "own" their cubicle, designing the system so that the ones who showed up to work earliest in the morning could claim the ones closest to the windows. None of the cubicles has anything but a desk, a place to connect a computer, and a chair. No one could establish a sense of connection to their workspace. Ultimately, but setting the atmosphere this way, the company communicated to the employees that they are valued only for their direct productivity and that they are easily replaceable.

My colleagues Mike Norton (professor at Harvard), Daniel Mochon (professor at Tulane), and I described the general over-fondness we have for stuff we've made ourselves as the "IKEA effect." And while IKEA inspired our original research, IKEA was hardly the first to understand the value of self-assembly.

Thinking of our kids in this way can help us better understand the value that people place on their simple Bionicle

creations of the value that Sumi and I projected onto our Cambridge house. We become more invested as we pour effort into different activities, and with it experience greater love for what we have created—our creations become part of ourselves and our identities. As an added bonus, we are all also largely blinded by our egocentric bias; we just don't seem to recognize that the love for the outcome of our own efforts is limited to us alone.

Instead, we saw that monetary bonuses results in the sharpest decrease in productivity, while rewarding people's performance with a compliment increased engagement ever on the days when there was no bonus.

If you think broadly about these findings, it seems that we don't experience our work in day-to-day transactional terms/ WE don't measure our lives out in coffee spoons, as T. S. Eliot wrote, even in the most quotidian work. Instead, we think and behave on a longer time scale, which means that managers need to take into account (and measure) not only the direct effect of different incentives but also their delayed and enduring outcomes. The more a company can offer employees opportunities for meaning and connection, the harder those employees are likely to work and the more enduring their loyalty is likely to be.

I'm not a Marxist by political and definitional standards, but I will say this: When people are not able to focus on the larger meaning of their labor, they are more or less stuck in the modern equivalent of a pin factory. Granted, developing a workplace that is centered on meaning is no easy. It is certainly more complex than the current efficiency-based model of breaking tasks into component, departments, job specialties, and sub organization. But in an era in which knowledge work is prized and creativity arguably matters far more than efficiency, Marx's views on alienation, connection, and control should be baked more directly into the DNA of modern organizations. To me, the lesson from our research on motivation seems very clear. As we become meaningfully engaged with our work, we become both happier and more productive—a win-win situation if there ever was one.

As the compliment condition at Intel and other experiments on social norms show, my thanks, hug and our family dinner would make all the difference in your feelings of current and future engagement. The bonus, however, would put a numerical value on something that wasn't countable to begin with: your commitment. And while you might appreciate the cash, the next I ask you to help me with a deadline, you will most likely ask, "How much?"

In *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, Douglas Adams describes the search for the "Answer to the Ultimate Question of Life, the Universe, and Everything." TO get this answer, a specially built supercomputer called Deep Thought spent 7.5 million years toiling away. Here's the passage from the book:

"Good Morning," said Deep Thought at last.

"Er..good morning, O Deep Thought" said Loonquawl nervously, "do you have...er, that is..."

"An Answer for you?" interrupted Deep Thought majestically. "Yes, I have."

The two men shivered with expectancy. Their waiting had not been in vain.

"There really is one?" breathed Phouchg.

"There really is one," confirmed Deep Thought.

"To Everything? To the great Question of Life, the Universe and everything?"

"Yes."

Both of the men had been trained for this moment, their lives had been a preparation for it, they had been selected at birth as those who would witness the answer, but even so they found themselves gasping and squirming like excited children.

"And you're ready to give it to us?" urged Loonsuawl.

"I am."

"Now?"

"Now," said Deep Thought.

They both licked their dry lips.

"Though I don't think," added Deep Thought. "that you're going to like it."

"Doesn't matter!" said Phouchg. "We must know it! Now!"

"Now?" inquired Deep Thought.

"Yes! Now..."

"All right," said the computer, and settled into silence again. The two men fidgeted. The tension was unbearable.

"You're really not going to like it," observed Deep Thought.

"Tell us!"

"All right," said Deep Thought. "The Answer to the Great Question..."

"Yes..!"

"Of Life, the Universe and Everything..." said Deep Thought.

"Yes...!"

"Is..." said Deep Thought, and paused.

"Yes...!"

"Is..."

"Yes...!!!...?"

"Forty-two," said Deep Thought, with infinite majesty and calm."

As Deep Thought provided 42 as the Answer to the Ultimate Question of Life, the Universe, and Everything, it also pointed out that the answer is meaningless because it was never clear what the question was. When asked to produce "the Ultimate Question", Deep Thought said that it could not; however, it could help to design an even more powerful computer that, after running or ten million years, would be able to provide the Question. In the story, Planet Earth turns out to be this more powerful computer.