



# A Case for Intrinsic Motivation

Indeed, motivation has a critical function in regulating our lives and careers. It gives reason to our ambitions, energy to our pursuits, perseverance to our commitment and courage to face hardships. In short, with motivation we move and without it we let go of our lives. The good thing is that everyone is motivated, however with a different manifestation. Some are intrinsically motivated, while others look for external stimuli to get their motivation. The former drive motivation from the inner self i.e. clarity of purpose, conscience, values, sense of responsibility, self-esteem and self-actualization, etc. The latter derive their motivation from their needs and seek satisfaction of the same in the external environment. Maslow makes subtle distinction between extrinsic and intrinsic motivation. In his famous Needs'-Hierarchy, he ranked lower order motivations like food, security and social needs as extrinsic, while he ranked higher order motivation like self-esteem and self-actualization as intrinsic. Having said, necessity of advancing intrinsic motivation cannot be over emphasized.

## Citations from the Noble Quran

*"Have you ever considered the case of him who has taken his desires for his god? Can you take responsibility for guiding him to the Right Way?" Noble Quran, Surah Al Furqan Ayat 43.*

*"Competition for more gains diverts you from Allah, until you end up in your graves". Noble Quran, Surah At Takathur, Ayat 1-2.*

*Allah says, "Do not even cast your eyes towards (crave for) the worldly adornments We have granted to different kinds of people, nor grieve over the state they are in, but turn your loving attention to the believers instead". Quran. Sura Al Hijir, Ayat 88.*

Earning livelihood is recognized as a primary responsibility, however, once it becomes purpose in life, it tends to alter moral compass and behavior. In the above citations Allah clearly downplays needs-driven motivation. The obvious reason is that our needs (lust for gains) turn into our obsession, which effectively shift our motivation from accomplishing what we have to accomplish to satisfying our needs (lusts). For example, an entrepreneur feeling obsessed with

maximizing his earnings is likely to do so by hook or crook. It is so because once rationality is hijacked by lust, greed begins to control cognition. Afterall, greed is at the core of every unjust and unfair action, for it alters cognition from reasoning to rationalizing.

On the contrary, an intrinsically motivated person always remains focused on accomplishing the task in the best possible manner, remains disciplined and acts responsibly. The outcome is obvious: sustained motivation from inside.

## Excitement vs. Motivation

Another important distinction we need to make in our pursuit of understanding motivation is excitement vs. motivation. Often it is difficult to differentiate between the glittering gold and shining brass, for both are similar in appearance yet different in kind and properties. Likewise, the manifestation of excitement could appear similar to motivation, yet the dynamics of the two remain poles apart. Let us explore the differences.

Any decision taken or action made impulsively lacks reasoning. It is so because when excitement becomes overwhelming, our cognitive reasoning is effectively eclipsed. For example, impulsive buying decisions, halo effect in recruitment decisions, compromise on principles for an exciting reward, etc. are common behaviors we observe day-in day-out.

Does money really motivate? Frederick Herzberg presented Two-factor Motivation Theory. He suggested that satisfaction and dissatisfaction are independent of each other. Furthermore, he asserted that economic well-being of employees affects the ("Hygiene factors"). Hygiene factors are responsible for reducing dissatisfaction and employee retention but do not cause motivation.



Global research published in Harvard Business Review (HBR) concluded that money is a poor long-term motivator, often failing to boost performance or engagement. While competitive (fair) pay prevents dissatisfaction. True motivation comes from inner self. Financial incentives in fact limit performance, encourage unethical behavior, and undermine intrinsic motivation.

Intrinsic motivation, on the other hand, is built upon clarity of purpose, conscience, values, sense of responsibility, self-esteem and self-actualization, etc. For instance, a student aiming to advance his career would at his own choice sacrifice his leisure opportunities knowing that spending time on his education is more important. Having said, intrinsic motivation keeps the person focused on his purpose, lets him adhere to his values and entails reasoning before acting and last but not the least does not require external supervision per se.

### Practice in Contemporary Organizations

Prevailing culture in organizations are largely driven by extrinsic motivation, while intrinsic motivation has gone in shadows. So much so that fun and excitement have practically replaced motivation in modern day social and work settings. Consequently, leaders in social setting and managers in work setting naively rely on incentives that excite people rather than harnessing their intrinsic motivation. For instance, financial incentives which are generically means of fair compensation and reducing dissatisfaction, are widely used to induce excitement under the guise of motivation. The result is obvious: Externally driven instrumental behaviors. It is so because it is lot easier and quicker to manipulate extrinsic motivation while we remain ignorant of its cost.

That said, employees' motivation is directly influenced by organizational practices. Honestly speaking, with extrinsic motivation being prevalent in the overall environment employees' perspectives are effectively tuned to instrumental (reward-based) behaviors. This results in subtle dilemma: Greed and lust eclipse the intrinsic motivation, while organizations become victims of employees' persistent dissatisfaction and excessive attrition. Much of it goes unnoticed because it has become neo-normal. So much so that highlighting it raises eyebrows on both sides.

Subsequently, compensation packages have literally skyrocketed over the last decade, however, performance and commitment of the employees are a continuing challenge for their work organizations. To understand the facts underlying performance

challenge, we need to use customer satisfaction analogy. We know that customers feel delighted first time they are given an incentive. Quickly, their response moves to must-be. In a short while customers demand even more. Similar is the case with employees, an incentive excites them stat then in a short while they begin to consider it nothing unusual. Meaning it no longer excite them and if withdrawn they become dissatisfied. Consequently, to keep motivating them, they demand even more. The sad part is there is no limit to employees' yawning expectations.

Secondly, it is important to take note that once an incentive is availed employees no longer feel compelled to walk an extra mile. Peter F. Drucker, management writer, once argued that there should remain a level of dissatisfaction in order to keep employees motivated. Therefore, in extrinsic motivation scenario the need for direct supervision becomes inevitably huge.

Hopping jobs is yet another cost of excessive focus on extrinsic motivation. Hopping from one employer to another was never so prevalent then today. So much so that HR managers who are supposed to reduce attrition in the organization, themselves are the victims of hopping culture. People may articulate a host of reasons but raise in compensation, however insignificant, is the most recurring factor underlying the decisions to change jobs. This led to price war in the job market, which is dysfunctional for every employer in the long run. This has affected the work culture basically in two ways: increased incidence of induced dissatisfaction and encouragement of fence-sitting attitude amongst employees. Subsequently, employees' commitment to performance is practically replaced with their personal gratification – they become more motivated for rewards than performance. Hence, uncertainty at the workplace increases many folds. The problem is generally attributed to low motivation but in fact it is displacement of motivation from intrinsic to extrinsic orientation. Paradoxically, organizations naively keep raising the level of compensation but for no sustainable advantage because it does not address the real problem.

So, we have basis to conclude that while providing fair and equitable satisfaction of lower order needs, especially economic well-being, effectively keep employees' dissatisfaction in control, however, it does not contribute towards augmenting motivation per se. Thus, we can say lower order needs have inherent limitations in motivating employees. However, organizations remain blindfolded to this fact and continue to focus on lower order needs but to no avail.



If economic rewards fail to motivate employees, then what is the alternative? To unravel this ambiguity, first we need to unpack the true concept of motivation.

A lot of misnomers surround the concept. For example, it is now common persons' belief that excitement and fun drive motivation. So much so that, many pseudo trainers bank on their mesmerizing talk and fun activities in their so called ("Motivation Training"). The big question is, do the participants leave the session truly motivated or simply entertained? The answer is obvious.

Objectively speaking, motivation is a cognitive readiness to act in a most befitting manner. This demands that an employee should have clarity of purpose, feel his responsibility, demonstrate commitment to do the job well, serve the customer right, and leave the impact. Obviously, all this requires harnessing overall perspective more than simple excitement. Motivation becomes most important factor in shaping the employees' ("Psychological Contract"). Having said, motivating entails clarifying the purpose, nurturing positive values – faith, service, perseverance, discipline, passion and last but not the least hope and fear – moral compass, mindfulness, emotional well-being, etc.

## Recommendations

It is pertinent to note that motivating employees has limitations which one needs to understand before embarking on the role of a motivator. Some pertinent limitations include employees' given motivational orientation reflect their unique perspective. Influence of emergent relationships on employees' behavior usually has precedence. Lack of trust in the relationship between the manager and employees affects manager's ability to motivate. Reward centric cultures are incompatible to nurture intrinsic motivation. Last but not the least, motivation level and orientation of the managers may convey a different message.

Stimulating fun and excitement could be much simpler but motivating is rigorous and complex process of

harnessing employees' overall perspective. It, therefore, entails a holistic strategy taking into consideration employee's overall perspective (Belief, values, cognition, needs and expectations, etc.).

To begin with, while recruiting and selecting employees into the organization, it is imperative to check the perspective of candidates. Candidates should be evaluated for their intrinsic motivation orientation. It is often not practical to alter their perspectives at 360 degree. That said, motivating employees who have higher intrinsic motivation quotient is more plausible.

Standards of job performance at each position should manifest organizational vision and core values. Better is to annex the standards in employees' job descriptions and performance review criteria. For example, the manager should evaluate employees' performance on basis of demonstrating commitment to the vision and living the values. On the contrary, if a manager evaluates his juniors based on how submissive they are to him then this would make them focus on building good relations with the manager rather than performing.

Lastly, we know that employees respond to the permeable culture: How peers generally behave resonates across the employees. It is therefore imperative that a dominant organizational culture must be established that prevails over individuals' personalities. The culture should proactively encourage and reinforce intrinsic motivation amongst the employees. Alongside, the organization should demonstrate unwavering commitment to the same. Organizations that follow profit maximization as the sole motivation and give no value to responsible business practices should not expect employees to demonstrate intrinsic motivation.

**About the Author:** The writer holds a professional qualification in Banking and Finance. He is a practicing Human Resources and Organizational Development Professional, having more than three decades of hands-on experience in his field. He has authored books and publishes extensively.