

Leadership And Managing People

3 Ways to Motivate Your Team Through an Extended Crisis

by Anne M. Brafford and Richard M. Ryan

September 25, 2020



Illustration by Joe Magee

Summary. Research shows that we are most energized and committed when we are internally motivated by our own values, sense of enjoyment, and growth — in short, internal motivation, not external structure, inspires us to be our best selves. The authors discuss how business... [**more**](#)

As we flip our calendars to yet another month of our large-scale Covid-19 remote-work experiment, it's no wonder that motivation, performance, and well-being are flagging for many.

Months in, managers need new tools to reenergize their teams, to accurately identify and diagnose recurring struggles, and to empathetically help employees address their problems.

A large part of a leader's responsibility is to provide structure, guidance, and regulation; yet many workplace studies point to the fact that the most important gauge for a healthy work environment isn't a strong external framework, but whether individuals can foster internal motivation.

Using a well-established theory of motivation called self-determination theory, or SDT, we have identified three main psychological needs that leaders can meet to help their employees stay engaged, confident, and motivated.

1. Relatedness

This means that your employees feel cared for and that you've fostered a sense of belonging. Make time to listen to your employees' perspectives and make them know that they are heard and valued. A few simple practices may help:

- Acknowledge and validate your employees' emotions as well as their reactions. ("I know it can be tough to stay focused right now, but we'll figure it out together!")
- Don't let people get lost in the crowd: Reduce team size and acknowledge each member's work and achievements to the extent possible.
- When problems arise, make sure to get full feedback from those involved. This helps you identify the biggest issues and obstacles, while strengthening connection and encouraging communication.
- Emphasize that people's contributions are unique and necessary; do not let good work go unacknowledged.
- Communicate that you care about employees' well-being, not just their productivity.

2. Competence

This refers to when a person feels effective and experiences growth. Research shows that holding employees accountable for achievable goals can improve performance, and motivational science also suggests that trust begets trust. Try these approaches to help ignite your team's internal motivation:

- Involve your employees in decisions where their input could be valuable. Asking for suggestions to optimize an ongoing process, for example, can help maximize a sense of empowerment, progress, and ownership.
- To demonstrate their mastery of a particular task or skill, ask an employee to explain to their colleagues what they're working on or why they chose a particular strategy.
- Set up check-ins to regularly discuss progress on individual goals and create strategies to meet them.

3. Autonomy

Effective leaders foster internal motivation by empowering employees' sense that they are the authors of their actions and have the power to make choices that are aligned with their own values, goals, and interests, as well as their team's. Leaders should encourage autonomy and be genuinely caring while also recognizing that each employee carries responsibilities for achieving team objectives. To help foster a sense of autonomy we recommend that leaders:

- Encourage self-initiation and participation. Perhaps ask, "What part of this project can you see yourself leading?"
- Avoid controlling language ("Get this to me by tomorrow!") and minimize coercive controls like unrealistic deadlines and constant monitoring of your employees. Instead, find ways to motivate them through encouragement and positive feedback, such as, "I know it's a tight deadline, but having your skills on this team will be so helpful to our client."

- Be transparent by providing the rationale behind demands. People are more willing to put in their full effort when they understand why a given task is important.

A person's work environment plays a big role in whether these three channels surge or jam, so it's no surprise that motivation is especially at risk in these pandemic times. No matter what the circumstances are, we are most energized and committed when we are internally motivated by our own values, sense of enjoyment, and growth — in short, internal motivation inspires us to be our best selves. By meeting the three psychological needs, leaders help employees be engaged and feel valued at work, (relatedness), feel motivated by growth (competence), and feel empowered and confident in their skills (autonomy). Employees who feel unappreciated or coerced will, at best, often half-heartedly comply with a boss's orders without whole-heartedly committing to excellence. At worst, they will lose all sense of motivation and fail to meet goals and deadlines.

AB

Anne M. Brafford is a former law firm partner, a consultant to the legal profession on individual and organizational thriving, and a PhD candidate in positive organizational psychology from Claremont Graduate University. She is the author of *Positive Professionals: Creating High-Performing Profitable Firms Through the Science of Engagement*.

RR

Richard M. Ryan is a psychologist and co-developer of Self-Determination Theory. He is a professor at Australian Catholic University,

North Sydney, Australia and co-founder and
chief scientist at Immersyve Inc.