



Perfectly Motivated People

They do much more than they are paid to do.

By Aubrey Daniels, Ph.D.

For many managers, *perfectly motivated* employees do what they are paid to do, just what the job description states. But for me, *perfectly motivated employees* do more than they are paid to do—they do what needs to be done to fulfill the mission. They are excited about what they are doing. They don't give up easily; they seek ways to do things better, cheaper, and faster. They work long hours and never complain.

Empowerment, involvement, and ownership are attempts to retrofit positive reinforcement into work.

– Aubrey Daniels

Most people are perfectly motivated to do something. Those who fail to exhibit the characteristics of perfectly motivated employees are transformed once they leave the workplace to pursue their non-work interests.

They spend personal time and money in these activities. They read, practice, and attend courses to improve their skills and knowledge. They talk excitedly about their interests and enthusiastically share their knowledge and expertise with others. They may assume leadership roles in a religious, civic or educational group where they take responsibility for tasks, committees, and anything else that needs to be done. They do all of this without pay and often use their own money for expenses. Many of *these people* are the ones who managers and co-workers regard as not highly motivated.

HIGH PERFORMING HOBBYISTS

Why do they act differently in their spare time? Yes, they are free to pursue their interests; they can do what they want to do. But often they are doing many of the same things they do at work. Every hobby, sport, and civic or religious pursuit is filled with frustrations, setbacks, re-work and mindless repetition. Yet somehow these situations do not cause people to become depressed, cynical, and negative, as they might at work. Rather, in response to the challenges of their avocations, most people become *more* motivated.

In every game, the intent of nearly every rule and regulation is to make the behavior more fun. The rules and regulations of work did not evolve to produce fun for the employee.

Both games and work try to get people to invest much effort in behaviors that they might not engage in otherwise. In games, the purpose of most rules and regulations is to



make the behavior more fun. Unfortunately, those who design the rules and regulations of work often take a different approach—with dramatically different results.

People love games because, by design, they produce high rates of positive reinforcement. And the reinforcement in games is personal, immediate, contingent, and frequent. Hitting a ball and seeing it go where you intended is positively reinforcing. Team members and spectators are liberal with their praise. Records are kept so that the event can be relived later.

How many daily opportunities do your people have to see their accomplishments? Do they have a record of what they've done so that they may show it to others or review it themselves? Are their accomplishments celebrated? In a golf foursome, every good shot is celebrated by the players. How many good shots do you see at work every day? Work is typically not organized to see them, track them, or celebrate them.

Examine the behavior of the perfectly motivated person and you will find reinforcers—or a reinforcement history—that resembles what is found in most games. Rarely is the perfectly motivated person someone who is perfectly motivated in every situation. Rather, they are perfectly motivated in some



situations, less so in others. Once we realize this, the question shifts from, “Why are some people more motivated than others?” to “Why are some situations more motivating than others?” To have perfectly motivated employees, create a perfectly motivating workplace.

A GAME CALLED WORK

If we had perfectly motivated people, we would not need *employee of the month*, because we could not choose one who was better than another. We would not need stretch goals, because everyone would already be doing as much as they could. What would be the point of performance appraisal and rankings. Think of the time and money we could save by eliminating these systems and their accompanying activities.

Can we create perfectly motivated employees? Most employees take a job with the intent of doing the best that they can. Unfortunately,

time on the job tends to diminish motivation. Most systems are designed to reward only a few employees; as a result, many people are not motivated and leave their employers because they don’t feel appreciated for their contributions.

Empowerment, involvement, and ownership are attempts to retrofit positive reinforcement into work. Most workplaces are poorly designed from a behavioral perspective, and hit-and-miss from a reinforcement perspective.

Worse, the initiatives implemented to make work more reinforcing are superimposed upon dysfunctional systems and processes. They often require employees to find or create reinforcers in the face of systems, processes, and management practices that either punish or ignore the very behavior the initiatives are designed to accelerate. In most cases, they are doomed to fail.

Yes, you can create workplaces where all employees are perfectly motivated, if the entire system is designed to assure that valuable behavior is reinforced at the right time, in the right way, for the right things and at the right frequency. You can produce high performance to differentiate your firm from the competition. You can make your workplace perfectly motivating.

As you differentiate yourself behaviorally, the rewards will be positive and certain, and there’ll be no end to what you can accomplish.

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[About the Author]

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Aubrey is a thought leader and expert on management, leadership, safety and workplace issues. For the past 40 years, he has been dedicated to helping people and organizations apply the laws of human behavior to optimize performance. Aubrey is the author of *Bringing Out the Best in People*, *Oops! 13 Management Practices That Waste Time and Money (and what to do instead)*, *Safe by Accident? Leadership Practices that Build a Sustainable Safety Culture* and three other business books. When Aubrey is not working on changing the way the world works, he enjoys golf and spending time with his family.

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