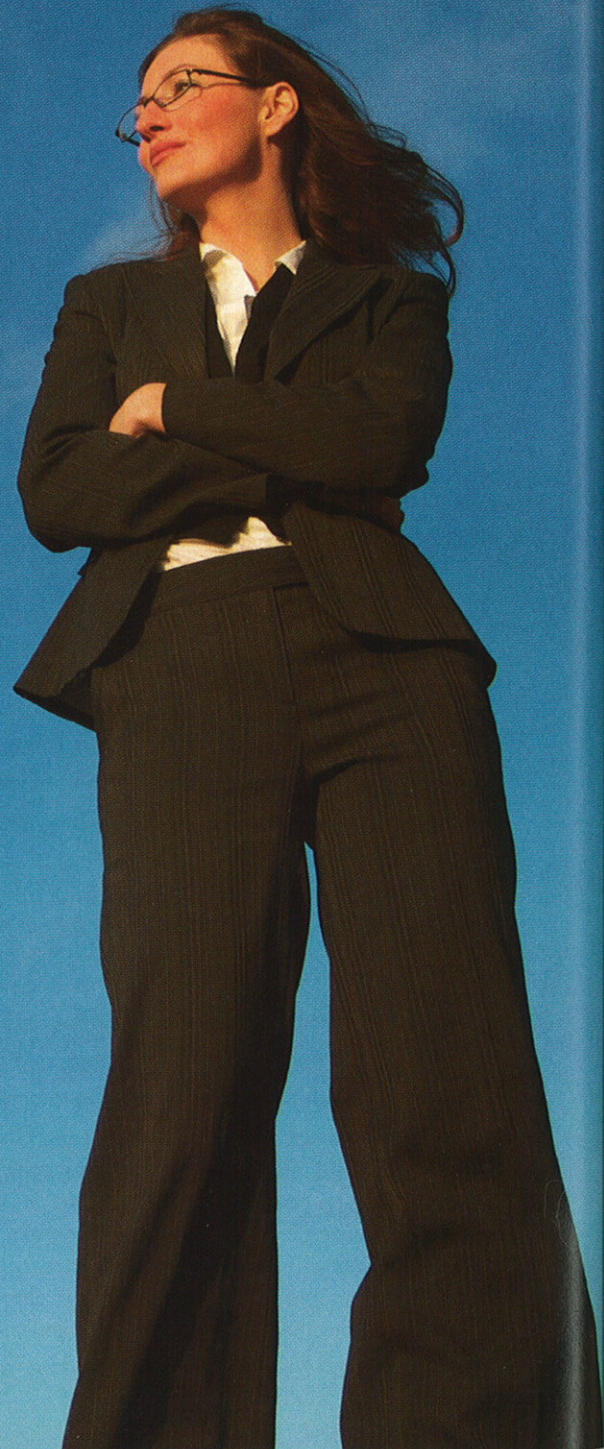


# Real Leadership: The Meaning Behind Motivation

BY GRAHAM JONES

Motivation isn't just a day-to-day drive to achieve goals; it is more complex than that. Leaders must understand its multifaceted nature to achieve success in a healthy way.





Consider two leaders who are equally talented and both highly motivated. The natural assumption is that both will perform to the best of their abilities. But this stance fails to consider that their high levels of motivation may be experienced in different ways.

For example, let's say one of the leaders thrives on challenge and looks forward to going into the office every day. This leader exudes an infectious enthusiasm that underpins an environment where high performance is inevitable and sustainable. The other leader has equally high motivation, but it is in the form of desperation to succeed. This leader lies awake at night worrying about the threats to personal ambitions that will be encountered the following day. This leader is constrained by a fear of failure that is an obstacle to creating a high-performance environment.

The lesson is that high motivation can work against you if it is in the form of desperation, fear or an obsession with being successful.

### Motivated for the Right Reasons

At the most fundamental level, behavior — and the motivation behind it — can be divided into two different types:

- Approach, which means quite literally approaching or moving toward a set of circumstances.
- Avoidance, which is avoiding or moving away from a set of circumstances.

This distinction lies at the core of the difference between “safe” and “real” leaders. Safe leaders avoid tackling underperformance, while real leaders address it head on. Safe leaders are fearful of making mistakes and so avoid putting themselves in situations and circumstances in which they might make them. Real leaders, on the other hand, willingly take risks knowing that they are accountable and responsible if things go wrong. Safe leaders sweep failure under the carpet

in the hopes that they can avoid the consequences; real leaders have the courage and desire to understand the causes of failure.

The distinction between approach and avoidance motivation is also evident in other aspects of a leader's behavior. Consider leaders who decide that the time has come to look for another job. Classic approach motives behind this decision include concluding that they have reached a plateau in their current development and need the challenge of a new role in a different type of organization. Or it may be the natural next step in achieving their career ambitions. These leaders have healthy motives for moving on and have planned their futures.

Leaders driven by avoidance motives, on the other hand, often talk about being worn down by frustrations in their current roles; the inadequacies of some of the people they work with; or perhaps the lack of vision in their organizations. They have become disillusioned and want to get away at the earliest opportunity. Often, they believe and assume that things will be different elsewhere, but they may not be sure what they want to move to — their main motive is to move away from their current circumstances. These are unhealthy motives for exiting their current jobs, and these leaders may find themselves in new jobs that they feel are equally, if not more, disappointing. They spent too much time focusing on the things they do not like and not enough time focusing on the future and what they want.

It's important to note that excessive pressure — be it from internal or external factors — also can drive avoidance motivation. So one's motives might change during periods of stress.

### Enjoying Your Motivation

For some leaders, the achievement of goals and ambitions is so important that they are unable to enjoy their quest to fulfill them. This is typically the case for safe leaders, whose fear of failure and making mistakes drives their motivation. For these leaders, motivation



and self-imposed pressure are the same thing. This can lead to intense symptoms of stress when goals are not achieved. At the extreme, this form of unhealthy motivation turns into an obsession with and desperation for success, with anything less being utter failure.

Leaders who are driven by healthy motives have a different experience. These are the real leaders, whose goals are challenging but always realistic, ensuring that they are stretching themselves constantly — but not to the breaking point. Their goals are the result of care-

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ful reflection about what they are capable of and are broken down into shorter-term goals and milestones that instill a sense of achievement and satisfaction as they see themselves moving forward. Their motivation underpins an energy and exhilaration that drives them to continuous development and improvement as they thrive on the pressure of being a real leader.

### Motivating Yourself Inside and Out

Let me tell you a story about an old man who was very happy with the new house into which he had just moved. The quiet street on which it was located, along with the tall brick wall that ran the length of the front garden, provided the privacy and peace he had longed for as he got older.

One day, the old man was awakened from his afternoon snooze by the noise of a group of kids playing soccer outside his house. The thud of the soccer ball striking the wall and the shrieks from the kids in celebration of scoring goals were just too much for him. The old man went out to the kids and asked them to play further down the street. One of the kids responded, "But we've been playing soccer here after school for a long time now. Your wall makes a perfect goal, and we really enjoy playing here." The old man thought for a few moments and then asked, "If I give you each 50 cents, will you please go and play further down the street?" The kids reluctantly agreed, and the old man went inside to resume his afternoon rest.

At the same time the following afternoon, the old man again heard the banging against his wall. He went outside and offered the kids 50 cents each to play further

down the street. They refused, reminding him that they got particular pleasure from playing in that location because the wall provided such a good goal. The old man then offered them 75 cents each to play further down the street, and they reluctantly agreed to move on.

At the same time the following day, the old man was yet again awakened by the noise of the kids playing soccer outside his house. He went outside and this time had to pay them a dollar each to move on.

On the fourth consecutive day, the kids reappeared and played soccer outside the old man's house, but this time the old man failed to appear. The kids stopped playing, went up to the house and knocked on the front door. The old man appeared and the kids said, "We're playing soccer outside your house. Why haven't you come and paid us to move on?" The old man replied, "Yes, I heard you, but I can't pay you. I have no money." The kids responded in disgust, "If that's the case, there's no point in playing outside your house. We'll play further down the street."

This story reflects a basic distinction between internal and external motivation and also demonstrates how motivation can change in response to rewards available. The original motivation of the kids was internal — in the form of the enjoyment they got from playing soccer. However, this internal motivation was eroded and eventually destroyed by the gradual increases in external motivation the old man provided in the form of money. Eventually, a point was reached so that when the old man ran out of money, there was no internal motivation remaining. No longer were they playing because they enjoyed it; instead, they were playing for money.

This type of situation — assuming that it is external rewards that will drive people's performance — is more common in business than you might think. This is often the case, but issues arise when internal motivation is eroded as a consequence. Organizations that incentivize their leaders through substantial bonuses for hitting performance targets are effectively controlling these leaders' motivation. In fact, external motivation is increased to the extent that internal motivation is negligible. High levels of external motivation also can drive extreme behaviors in the quest to gain those rewards, resulting in stress and potential burnout, as well as unhealthy competition with colleagues.

Critically, the internal-external dimension of motivation relates very closely to being able to thrive on the pressure of real leadership. There are differences in both well-being and performance in real leaders, whose motivation is internal, compared to safe leaders, who are externally motivated. Research on self-determination by Richard Ryan and Edward Deci in a 2000 issue of the journal *American Psychologist* indicates that:



- A strong focus on internal motives, such as personal growth and development as a leader, is associated with higher self-esteem, higher self-actualization and lower stress.
- A strong focus on external motives, such as the wealth and profile that can be achieved as a leader, is associated with lower self-esteem, lower self-actualization and higher stress.
- It is not merely the focus on internal and external motives that is important; the attainment of these different aspirations has essentially the same effect on well-being.
- Internally motivated real leaders, when compared with externally motivated safe leaders, demonstrate greater persistence, creativity, energy, well-being and, crucially, performance.

#### Motivating Yourself to Thrive on Pressure

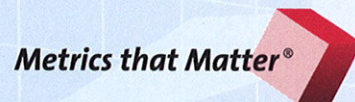
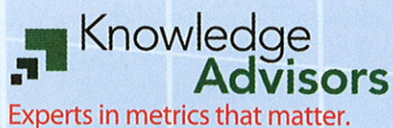
It is not level of motivation that is important in driving behavior as a leader, but rather the nature of motivation. If you strive to be a real leader and thrive on the inevitable pressure, you must ensure that:

1. Your motivation is underpinned by the healthy "approach" and "enjoyment" motives.
2. Your motivation is driven more by internal than by external motives.

Before you get too carried away with your determination to maximize your internal motivation, let me bring you back to reality. It is unrealistic and inappropriate in most leadership contexts to be purely internally motivated. The stakes are simply too high for leaders to be permitted to pursue and satisfy their personal needs solely for interest and enjoyment. But you can focus on achieving an optimal degree of internal motivation appropriate to your specific situation and circumstances.

The key to thriving on pressure is to recognize the healthy and unhealthy dimensions of your motivation and to channel it so that it works for you rather than against you. **CLO**

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## Data tells a powerful story...

**17** Percent, amount by which organizations that measure learning investment outperform the S&P 500

**15,000** Number of hours of increased productivity from technical training program

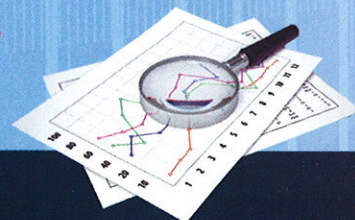
**74,256** Sales dollar increase per sales person after \$5,000 per person training investment

**55** Percent of training not optimally applied 60 days after training....scrap learning

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