

Why Popular Motivation Techniques are Ineffective

The times when employers needed to force workers to do their jobs have long gone. Compared to how things used to be around a century or two ago, it can be seen how working conditions have improved. The eight-hour working day, the prohibition of child labor, equal career opportunities for all genders, regular and adequate payment—these are just some of the boons workers nowadays can enjoy.

On the other hand, with the disappearance (at least formally) of coercion, employers face the need to somehow keep workers interested in continuing to perform their duties. Salaries and social packages alone cannot serve as sufficient reasons to not just keep working, but to do it well and to strive for professional development. Even the threat of dismissal, due to the versatility of career options for people with a decent education and skills, is no longer as inciting as it used to be.

The solution for this problem arguably appeared with the development of positive psychology. Motivation—this is what many best-selling coaches and trainers see as the key to success for average workers, corporate sharks, and anyone willing to achieve something substantial in his or her life. Such books as, “7 Habits of Highly Effective People,” “Think and Grow Rich,” “Rich Dad, Poor Dad” and hundreds of other similarly titled volumes are arguably aimed at helping people believe in themselves, pursue their goals, and succeed in life.

With time, people become extremely enthusiastic about the role of motivation in their lives. This enthusiasm has been supported and adopted by many companies all over the world. Motivation training and team-building events have become a kind of sacred cow of the corporate environment. Indeed, can there be something more perfect for a company than a worker eagerly seeking out ways to keep himself or herself motivated and voluntarily striving to perform better?

The truth, however, is not so rosy. While it is important to see purpose and find inspiration in what one does, the role of training which can, as declared, boost motivation is overestimated. Why?

The first and foremost reason is often the fact that companies (as well as individuals themselves) choose wrong methods. Remember all the New Year promises you made to yourself, and then gave up on them up completely? At first, you feel enthusiastic about a desired goal, be it quitting bad habits, having a fit body, or whatever. Your enthusiasm and interest usually lasts for a period of time, and then fades away quickly. Even when you keep reminding yourself how great it would be to achieve your goal, or visualize your success, or try to push yourself over the limit, in the majority of cases, it still ends up with you losing motivation. This is natural, and caused by choosing the wrong methods of self-motivation (as well as the wrong goals).

How do people try to keep themselves motivated? Usually, it involves some kind of cheerleading. A person keeps repeating to themselves, “I can do it!” pushing hard no matter what. Corporate motivation coaches and trainers often do the same, completely ignorant about the fact that such cheerleading is ineffective. Another strategy—both personal and corporate—is getting oneself engaged into some sort of competition. For some reason, people believe that if they compete with others, they will feel the urge to stay on top, to be the best. Or, employers may appeal to everything good in their workers, to impose visions of a bright future onto them (SmartBrief). **None of these strategies work for long because of a single nuance: all of them deprive an individual of a sense of autonomy.**

When a corporate coach keeps repeating “You can do it,” at some point you will start to feel annoyed. Perhaps, you are tired; or, you had poor sleep; or, your dog got hit by a car; or, you are just not feeling well, and would rather stay at home than go to the office with a fever and runny nose. There may be dozens of reasons why a person cannot do something at a certain moment; sometimes, circumstances are stronger than us, our energy is drained, and we feel down. Yet, coaches keep “cheering” us up with clockwork obstinacy, completely ignoring individual conditions, and making us feel obliged to be able to “do it.” The same works for competition and “bright ideals” and worthy goals: at some point, an individual’s personal life circumstances may interfere, rendering him or her temporarily unable to perform tasks.

What is important to remember when trying to motivate oneself (or your employees) is that true motivation only comes from within. Imposed ideals and goals can inspire for a brief period of time, but relying on them to keep people motivated in a long-term perspective is inefficient. The same works for values coming from outside: a slim figure, a bigger salary, a new car, career growth—all this, if not sincerely shared and desired by an individual, can keep them motivated only for brief periods of time. On the other hand, when a person starts seeing individual sense in performing any kind of activity or pursuing certain goals, his or her enthusiasm will be sustained much longer, giving this person enough energy and motivation to accomplish anything.

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