

DOES EXTERNAL MOTIVATION LEAD TO FAILURE

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When I was in my mid-twenties I worked for a couple of Fortune 500 corporations in a sales capacity. As I continued in sales, my skills developed and I became more successful; selling more, gaining greater recognition, and winning sales incentives. Each year the company offered an all-expense paid trip to an exotic location as a sales incentive. The first sales incentive I won was a cruise to Mexico, and couldn't wait to attend. I felt proud of my accomplishments, and of the recognition that I received in the office, and looked forward to traveling and reveling in my newfound success. The trip was terrific. I had a wonderful time, and a couple weeks later I was back at work. Within a few months of returning from the cruise, the company started advertising the next year's trip. I remember feeling strange about the upcoming trip. It sounded exciting, and I had very good chance of winning it. Yet, I started feeling resentful.

Why would someone feel resentful about having just returned from a free cruise and about the potential of winning another vacation? I didn't know. But I couldn't get away from the thought that I was somehow being manipulated. As I began to question myself, it struck me that while I was proud of winning the cruise, and was grateful for the opportunity, winning the cruise was not *why* I sold the volume that I did. I did it because I wanted to be a good salesman. I wanted to be a good salesman for me. The recognition and rewards were terrific, and I certainly enjoyed making more money. But that's not why I worked so hard. So, when I saw the advertisement for the next sales trip, I actually felt insulted. Did the company really think that I would not work hard and provide good service to my clients if I didn't have a carrot in front of me?

I don't think for a minute that the company that I worked for intended to insult me or the rest of their sales force (and I didn't ask others how they felt because I thought that I must just be weird), or thought we were so unmotivated that we needed a carrot dangled in front of us to be to work hard and make sales. I just think that they thought it would be an effective strategy to provide a reward, which would serve as an incentive, and would be a win/win for everyone. However, that's not how I interpreted it.

Of course, you might be saying to yourself, one man's internal experience does not make for sound research. If that is so, you are absolutely correct. Lucky for all of us there is now a lot of research happening that is seeking to quantify what motivates people to do what they do. A recent New York Times article outlined a research project, published in Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, by two Swarthmore College professors, on internal vs. external (instrumental motivation). The research actually found that not only was instrumental motivation ineffective, it could actually be counterproductive.

The study analyzed data from over 11,000 entering cadets in nine classes at West Point, the United States Military Academy. Each of the cadets was asked to quantify the motivation that they had for applying to and attending the academy. The motives given on the questionnaire included instrumental motivations, like future career opportunities, as well as internal

motivations like learning to become a leader in the U.S. Army. The research found that those cadets with higher internal motivations for attending the academy were more likely to graduate and obtain a commission in the army. Those with stronger internal motivations were also more successful in their military service, and were more likely to stay in the military after their commitment was complete than their counterparts with high instrumental motivations for attending West Point. The researchers were not surprised by these findings. However what did surprise them was that those cadets who had both strong internal *and* strong instrumental motivations for attending the academy actually performed worse on every measure, across the board than did the cadets who had strong internal motives but weak instrumental motives. (<http://www.nytimes.com/2014/07/06/opinion/sunday/the-secret-of-effective-motivation.html? r=0>)

This is striking information. External motivators are counterproductive. There has been research that has shown that school children perform better academically when the focus has been on internal motivation vs. praise and external validation for work and behavior. However, this study not only suggests that internal motivation is more productive, it suggests that external motivators actually decrease performance. I bet the company I worked for in my twenties would have liked to have that information! It would have saved them a lot of money in incentives.

In the world of education, when teachers were surveyed, it was found that the number one motivator for teacher retention is not financial compensation (although I don't think you'd need a study to figure that one out!). The greatest motivator for teachers to stay in their current position was professional development and a culture of professional growth.

For those of us with children this is vital information, and it also presents some difficulty in how to make use of this information. How do we develop and encourage internal motivation? It is much easier to talk about methods of externally motivating children: sticker charts, trophies, good grades, rewards, video game time, and maybe even cruises (that one might be a little expensive)! These are all ideas that the adult can control and implement. However, if children are motivated to be successful, to cooperate, to become productive citizens because of their own internal drives, then how do we help them develop their internal motivation? I would highly recommend Jane Neslen's Positive Discipline as a great place to start. Below are some foundational methods for helping uncover children's potential.

Nurturing Internal Motivation

1. Observation, observation, observation. Every child is so incredibly different. If you have more than one child, it probably didn't take you too long to figure out that *nurture* is only part of the equation. Each child seems to come hard wired with their own proclivities, preferences, talents and interests. It is our job to nurture these children, but we've got to work with the raw material given to us, no? Putting aside our agendas for our children and looking at them with fresh eyes of a scientist, with keen observation skills, will help us to see them for who are and help guide them to activities, classes, hobbies, sports and

pursuits that follow and support their natural gifts.

2. Don't worry. Be careful of caving into the external and perceived pressures of other parents. There are always children who mature earlier, have skills and talents that develop when they are younger, and there are always children who blossom later. Have faith in your child and the internal drive that exists within them. My son didn't start playing guitar until he was 11, when many of his friends were taking music lessons at a very young age. My wife and I took the approach that we would wait until he expressed interest. It was difficult, and we questioned whether we should be pushing him a little more. When he did start asking about guitar we found a teacher and signed him up for lessons, and bought him a guitar. We never have to ask him to practice; it's not even an issue, and as a result he's getting very good. Sometimes we have to ask him not to practice because he's got other things, like chores, that need to be done. Many of his friends who were taking music lessons at a much younger age have now quit their instruments. Hopefully, they have found something else they like to do.
3. Avoid praise! Praise is external validation for accomplishments. Children need encouragement, but praise and encouragement are very different. Praise focuses on the result and external evaluation by the adult, and invites pleasing behavior and can create pressure on children to perform. Encouragement causes a child to reflect upon their own accomplishments and hard work, and develops introspection self-evaluation.

Here are some examples of praise: "Great job," "Excellent," "Awesome, you're the best," "You won," "You did it just like I asked you to," "Fantastic," etc.

Here are some examples of encouragement: "Thank you, I really needed your help," "How do you feel about your work," "What do you think allowed you to win," "Tell me about the game," "I noticed that you worked really hard on that assignment," etc.

4. Avoid rewards, and encourage helpfulness. Alfred Adler, one of the fathers of modern psychology, observed that humans find the belonging and significance that they deeply desire primarily through helping others (social responsibility). In short, children want to help. They, like adults feel good and important when they make a contribution and understand that they are needed. Consider eliminating rewards or payment for chores, helpfulness or jobs around the house, and instead acknowledging contributions specifically with gratitude. For instance, "Julian, the bathroom really needed cleaning today, and I would have never been able to get to it. Thank you very much for your help. It allowed me to get to my appointment on time." All people really want to help, but often children aren't given the opportunity in our busy lives.