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The Myths of Motivation

An awful lot of nonsense gets talked about motivation, much of it to people in business and other kinds of organisations by motivational speakers. I am sure that you know the kind of speaker that I am referring to here. He gets up on the stage, rolls up his sleeves and creates great fervour by telling everyone that they can have whatever they want if they only want it enough. "The secret of success in life" he tells us "is to be strongly motivated."

Such speakers create a false sense of omnipotence, which inevitably leads to depression not long after they have left the stage and we have finished hugging each other and doing the other things he has directed us to do. Motivational speakers also imply that high motivation is always and necessarily good. Unfortunately, plenty of problems involve high motivation. The person who is addicted to drugs is highly motivated. So is the Type A manager who is headed for a heart attack. So is the compulsive gambler. So is the person suffering from chronic anxiety. So is the person who is totally obsessed with details. So is the rapist. In all these cases being highly motivated only makes things worse.

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Here is something else that motivational speakers also often tell you. They say that you must "think positively" if you are to succeed. But American investors thought positively before the Wall Street crash in the late twenties. Many Jews in Germany thought positively about the coming of Hitler in the thirties and refused to emigrate. The inhabitants of every country that ever lost a war "thought positively" when they entered into it.

The point is that it is the quality of your motivation, the way that it is directed and the skills involved that determine success, not simple absolute quantity. And it is the accuracy and realism of your thinking that is related to success, not just its optimism. In other words, what people need are what we might call "motivational skills." The fact is that success – individual and organizational – is about harnessing, channelling and directing motivation. We are all motivated sufficiently already (unless we are suffering from depression). The issue is not "how we get it," but "what we do with it."

Finally, we have the need to do things for ourselves. No one would disagree with that. But we do also, at times, have the need to be altruistic, to do things for others, to care more about what happens to others than to ourselves. Without this need in adults, few children would reach maturity. Without this need in fans, no football team would survive. Without this need in at least some people, no charity would flourish. So there are two directions of concern in our lives. Sometimes we put ourselves first - let us say that we are being self-oriented when we do this. At other times we are more concerned with what happens to others. Let us say that we are being other-oriented when this is the case.

The Problem of Conflicting Motives

And now we come to something really interesting about motivation that you will never hear from motivational speakers because it seems, as it were, to be something of an embarrassment to the whole human species and we always want to avoid embarrassments.

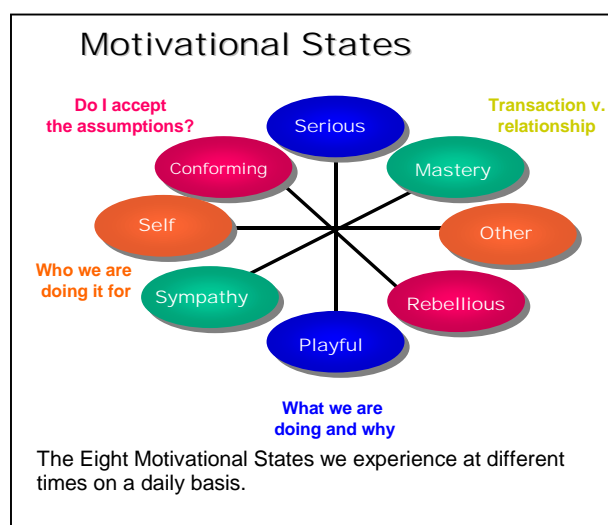
Think about it. One basic need we have is to be engaged in matters of weight and significance that give meaning to our lives. We like to feel that we are moving towards the achievement of important goals, doing something solid and worthwhile. On the other hand, we also like to be disengaged, to do things which have no importance beyond themselves but which are simply fun to do. In other words, we like to play. Play and work, work and play....we need them both. And we cannot say that one is more essential than the other, any more than we can say that plants need rain more than sunshine or sunshine rather than rain. Both are needed at different times.

On the basis of research which I and others have carried out over a quarter of a century, and also clinical evidence of various kinds, it is in fact possible to distinguish four pairs of opposite basic motives. One pair we have just looked at: the need for accomplishment and the need for fun.

Here is another pair. Sometimes we need to be cool and detached and on top of things. When we are negotiating with someone, or controlling some expensive piece of electronic equipment, or trying to beat someone at sport, we have to try to dominate and control. But at other times, we need to be open and intimate and affectionate - to be sympathetic and personable rather than masterful and manipulative. It is probably not a good idea to try too much to dominate and control when you are with your spouse. It is also probably not a good idea, if you are going to win at some sport, to be too sympathetic with your opponent, at least while you are playing. We need at times to be masterful and at times to be sympathetic. Both are needed, but each one in its place.

Here is yet another pair of these opposite motivations. Much of the time we need to go along with the way that things are done - we need to conform. Life is too short to have to rediscover every day what we are supposed to do at work. Just imagine the time that would be wasted! But there are crucial moments when we do need to be critical, to oppose pressures, to query ways of doing things, even just to say "no!" This is the way of creativity, innovation and change. So, conformity and rebelliousness - both are needed.

Let me list the four pairs here:



All eight of these motives are needed if we are going to live truly satisfying lives. But since we cannot pursue them all at once, we must take them in turns. Just as we need all the keys on a piano to play a tune, so we need all the motives in our everyday lives.

And just as we do not hit all the keys on the piano at the same time, so we play “life-tunes,” spreading things out over time. To do it successfully, we need to pursue the right motive at the right time, in the right way.

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both.”

We need, funnily enough, to be inconsistent in our lives. Perhaps a better-sounding way of putting this would be to say that we need to be motivationally versatile, not always banging away at the same note. (And note that how hard we bang at the note is irrelevant to the tune.) So we come back to the earlier point: motivation is about harnessing our motives, not creating them. To enjoy a party you need to harness your motive for play.

To enjoy feeding a child you need to harness your motive for love and care. To take part fully in a church service you need to harness your motive for duty and virtue. To learn to operate a machine you need to harness your motive for power and control. If you do not do these things you will be working against the grain of the situation you are in, rather than taking advantage of it and going with the flow.

Taking Your Personality to Work

All of this applies at work as well as at home and more generally in your life. To get full satisfaction out of a job you need to experience life through all the different “spectacles” provided by different motives. And to put this the other way round, an organisation needs to be able to harness all these different motives because they each have something special and unique to offer. This is nothing to do with quantity of motivation, in the motivational speaker’s sense. It is to do with quality and direction.

If you work for an organisation, then that organisation will want you to be motivated to achieve things, and think in a foresighted way about what you are doing. But it will also want you to be able to enjoy your work in itself; otherwise you will become bored and distracted, tire easily and lose concentration, and perhaps be less creative than you might otherwise be. It will want you both to be in control of the processes and tasks that you engage in, but also able to deal in a civil and friendly manner with your co-workers and customers. It will want you to take personal responsibility and pride in your work, but also to be willing to act as a mentor for others and also to display good team spirit.

To Think About

So here are two issues for you to think about. Firstly, am I experiencing all these different motives? Check and see if you can identify one or more that you experience rarely if at all. If you can do this, then you need to ask yourself whether you are missing out on something of importance. For example, if you are not experiencing play very often, think of all the joy and fun and exuberance and excitement and sensual pleasure you might be missing in your life. If you are not experiencing sympathy, think of all the closeness and affection and intimacy and tenderness that you might be missing. The second issue is this — do I have the ability to get the satisfaction that I am looking for in relation to each of these motives? Am I pursuing these motives in suitable ways? Do I want the right thing at the right time? Do I have the various motivational skills necessary for success?

If you require further information regarding Apter International, Reversal Theory or to read other articles by Michael Apter then visit: www.apterinternational.com or call Rowan MacMillan on 01509 228896.