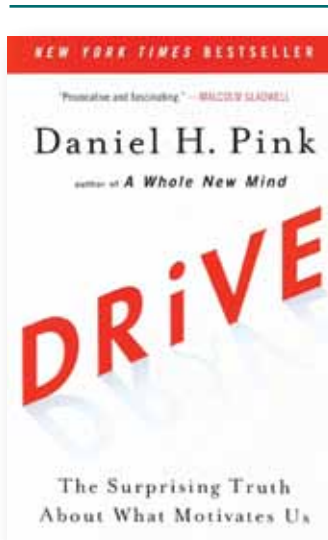


The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us

By Shayne Kavanagh



Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us

Daniel H. Pink

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The graying of the workforce and how to recruit a new generation of public servants has been a persistent and rising concern of public managers in recent years. At the same time, state and local government agencies have always needed to make the most of their limited resources, including human resources. In *Drive*, Daniel Pink challenges the common assumption that the best ways to improve performance and increase productivity in organizations are rewards and punishments for good and bad behaviors. This assumption underlies much of the traditional thinking about how to attract workers and how to motivate them once they are on the job. This assumption is so entrenched because it has served society well for a long time. It was effective for maintaining production in large factories and the other kinds of organizations that were common in the industrial era. However, as we move further away from the industrial era, its management systems begin to lose their relevancy — including the system of motivation. Pink posits that the traditional view of motivation is often incompatible with modern realities in three ways.

First, we are coming to rely more on volunteer efforts to get work done. A striking example is Wikipedia — a pure volunteer effort that has essentially made the traditional encyclopedia

obsolete. Government is becoming well acquainted with this trend too. More governments are pursuing public service objectives through third-party for-benefit organizations, like charities and social entrepreneurs. Some governments are even crowdsourcing work to individual volunteers, such as by sponsoring “hackathons” to build mobile applications for solve social problems. The traditional reward-and-punishment perspective does not help us understand why these new volunteer-driven methods of work even are possible, much less how to use them to their maximum potential.

Second, the traditional view of motivation is strongly linked to the traditional view of economics: people will rationally calculate how to maximize their own self-interest and then act accordingly. If this were true, a system of rewards and punishments to appeal to self-interest would be an effective form of motivation. However, a raft of experimental evidence has now shown the people are far from purely self-interested, rational utility maximizers. If classic economics is an insufficient explanation of human behavior, it stands that a system predicated on rewards and punishments is an insufficient explanation of human motivation.

Finally, the nature of work has changed. In the heyday of traditional

motivation, most work processes were relatively simple and repetitive. This made it possible for supervisors to directly monitor productivity and devise incentive systems around straightforward indicators, like number of units of work produced. Today, in the information age, many work processes are more complex and requires the worker to exercise considerable discretion in order to achieve the best results. Extrinsic motivation (rewards and punishments) are largely sufficient for simple and repetitive work, but don't work nearly as well for more complex tasks.

As an alternative to the traditional view of motivation, Pink uses a large body of research from the behavioral sciences to put forward a new recipe for motivation with three ingredients: autonomy, purpose, and mastery.

Autonomy is the ability to act with choice and direct our own lives. In a work environment, a highly motivated employee requires autonomy over what they do (their task), when they do it (their time), who they do it with (their team), and how they get it done (their technique). An example of the power of autonomy, researchers from Cornell University studied 320 small businesses, where half granted workers autonomy and half relied on traditional command and control. Those firms that embraced autonomy grew four times faster and had a third of the turnover of those that didn't.

In order to realize gains comparable to the small businesses in the Cornell study, organizations need to increase autonomy over what Pink calls the

“Four T's”: task, time, technique, and team. For example, some well-known companies, like 3M and Google, put aside up to 20 percent of the workweek for employees to work on issues of their own choosing. This “20 percent time” has led to the development of Gmail and a host of other popular Google applications. Another example is a results-oriented work environment (“ROWE” in human resources parlance), where the focus on how many hours people spend in the office is totally eliminated in favor of what they accomplish. The corporate offices of Best Buy report a 35 percent increase in productivity and a small reduction in voluntary turnover from implementing a ROWE.

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Autonomy in the workplace dispenses with traditional management conceptions of control over workers. However, it doesn't dispense with accountability — it assumes that people want to do a good job and that it is management's job to remove impediments. That said, Pink does not suppose that all workers will instantly take to increased accountability like fish to water. People will need to learn how to handle autonomy and work within a system where they are expected to use their own discretion and judgment.

The second ingredient, mastery, speaks to engagement in work and building skills that make a difference. When employees are not engaged in work the costs are substantial. In fact, Gallup has shown that, in the United States, over half of workers are not engaged and 20 percent are actively disengaged. Gallup estimates that this costs the US over \$300 billion each year in lost productivity. The good news is that the workplace provides a lot of potential for people to become engaged. Jobs can be structured so that employees are required to grow into new skills.

The third ingredient is purpose. Deep motivation requires that work take place in the service of a cause greater than ourselves. The increasing prevalence of volunteer work, when taken with the low levels of engagement described earlier, suggest that people really do want purposeful work and are willing to work for free, outside of their place of employment, to get it. This hunger for purpose represents a massive opportunity for many government agencies to better motivate their workforce. Many agencies have valuable, if not inspiring, social purposes. Pink suggests that managers of organizations emphasize “why” the organization does what it does to help employees connect with a broader purpose. Often, managers focus exclusively on “what” employees are supposed to do and “how” they are supposed to do it.

Pink follows up on these ingredients of motivation with a list of specific suggestions for baking them into your organization. For instance, Pink sug-

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gests “non-commissioned work time” similar to how Google and 3M provide latitude to employees to work on tasks that are of personal interest to them, and suggests wide-ranging reform to the traditional performance appraisal approach in order to give employees more frequent and effective feedback. It is likely that any organization, or even any individual, can find at least some ideas that Pink provides, which are practical for implementation.

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Though Pink's ideas turn many traditional conceptions of what it means to “manage” a workforce on its collective ear, it is important that public managers give these ideas a serious hearing. Pink, and the considerable body of scientific evidence behind him, suggests that attracting people to public service and getting the best work from them once they are there will require a radical rethinking of how we structure and operate the work environment. ■

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