

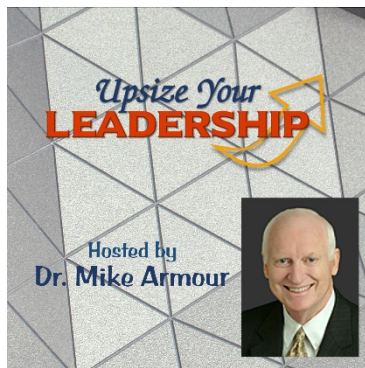
# Motivation May Not Be the Culprit

## *Four Culprits Behind Poor Performance*

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Leadership is about sensing the potential in people and situations and then bringing this potential to fruition. Therefore, few things are more frustrating to leaders than seeing people who seem content to perform far below their capacity.

When you encounter things of this nature on your team, what's your instinctive assumption about what accounts for such underperformance? And based on that assessment, what do you, as the leader, think that you should do to improve the level of performance? Well, the first thing you need to do is to be sure that you analyze the root cause of the problem correctly. So, in this episode I'm giving you a tool to help you do just that. I will show you how to use this tool to Upsize Your Leadership.

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Unfortunately, as leaders and managers we've all encountered situations in which someone seemed perfectly capable of superb performance, but their performance was anything but superb. It might have even fallen short of being mediocre.

Today I want to share a template with you, designed for just such moments. You can use this template to quickly size up the primary factor behind someone's weak performance. The template looks at four factors which, in some combination, are the most common culprits when individual performance is subpar.

And to make these factors easy to remember, I'm going to associate each one with a short, two-word descriptor. Put simply, when people are performing below the promise of their talent and capability, it's because one of four things is missing. Either they lack a "want-to," a "how to," a "chance to," or a "have to." Now, I admit that these names may seem a bit cutesy. And they are somewhat sloppy grammatical constructions. But as I said, my goal is to make this template easy to remember.

The purpose of the template, you see, is to isolate how you should respond to whatever is holding a worker's performance in check. Each of these factors begs for a different kind of solution. And our focus today is not on the cutesy names, but on applying the proper solution to the underlying challenge.

So, let's start with someone who lacks a "want to." The absence of a "want to" points to an issue with motivation. Either the motivation is missing altogether or it's not particularly strong. I start

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with motivation because it's the root cause which leaders and managers routinely default to in analyzing inadequate performance on the part of workers. "They have a motivational problem," managers are quick to say.

And quite often, that's precisely the case. But not always. Having coached and trained in hundreds of organizations, I've come across countless examples of people who were highly motivated, but whose performance was lackluster. We will delve into what stifles their performance when we take up other aspects of our template.

For the moment, however, let's assume that we are dealing with someone for whom motivation is indeed the issue. Their "want to" is either weak or perhaps non-existent. They have no desire to put their heart into what their job calls for. Until we instill a "want to" within them, neither their motivation nor their performance is likely to improve.

The obvious question, then, is how do we develop a "want to" in people? And the answer is rather straightforward, even if not always easy to implement. A "want to" always stems from someone's values. That is, we want to do things which have value for us. Or saying it another way, none of us is motivated to do things well which hold no value for us.

Consequently, for leaders to motivate their people, they must build strong emotional and psychological linkage between what their people value and what the leader wants to accomplish. Whatever the accomplishment, it obviously appeals to the leader's values, either directly or indirectly. Otherwise, the leader would not spend time and effort to promote it. But there's no guarantee that what the leader seeks to accomplish appeals to values which resonate with his or her people.

To offer a simplistic example, a manager may be motivated to meet a demanding level of output because it will enhance chances for promotion. But for the manager's people, getting a promotion for the manager probably offers nothing of value (unless, of course, the workers would love to see the manager gone). Therefore, the specific benefit which motivates the manager has no motivational power for those whom he or she manages.

Again, the key for leaders is to create linkage between what their people value on one hand and what the leader envisions on the other hand. This means that the starting point for motivation is not what the leader wants to accomplish, but the values of individual workers or volunteers. This stubborn reality builds a compelling case for leaders placing a high priority on truly knowing their people.

Values which are strong enough to motivate come in two varieties. Some are things which we want to attain, such as success or praise. Others are things which we want to avoid, such as failure or shame. Some people are more driven by values which they are motivated to attain, others more responsive to values which they want to avoid.

But wait a minute. Did you just hear me describe something we want to avoid as a value? Yes, you did. It's not the way we normally use the word "value," to be sure. Yet, in terms of understanding the dynamics of motivation, it's a helpful way to think of values. That's because there is nothing inherent in a value which automatically makes it desirable or undesirable. Desirability hinges on personal perspectives.

Thus, there are numerous things generally considered desirable, but which many consider undesirable. And vice versa. Take fame, for instance. Many people long to have it. They devote

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their lives to attaining it. By contrast, others want nothing to do with fame. They see the loss of freedom and privacy which accompany fame as an unacceptable price to pay.

For both groups, the notion of fame triggers a directional impulse. For one group the impulse is toward attaining fame. For the second group the impulse is away from it. One value, but opposing directional impulses. The field of neurolinguistic programming (or NLP) refers to these two impulses as Toward motivations and Away-From motivations.

And fame is not alone in triggering Toward motivation in some, Away-From motivation in others. A similar pattern of response is true of marriage. Or children. Recognition. Solitude. Tradition. Spontaneity. Thrill-seeking. Popularity. Adventure. In the eyes of most, these things are attractive and desirable. Yet it's common to encounter people who see one or more them as undesirable.

The opposite dynamic is also true. The very thing which the average person wants to avoid may be held in high esteem by someone else. Poverty falls in this category. It triggers a strong Away-From in most of us. Poverty is not generally considered something to desire. Yet, a monk or a nun may actually aspire to it. To cite another example, how many people think of drab clothing as something to value? Yet drab clothing is a virtue among the Amish and other groups.

Thus, when we assess individual behavior, we need to take into account both Toward motivations and Away From motivations. Both have the potential to fuel personal impact and effectiveness. Let me illustrate by telling you about two friends of mine who became eminently successful businessmen. One was motivated to build wealth because he dreamed of a project which would transform his community. He could fund the project, however, only if he amassed a sizable fortune. The other man worked just as diligently to acquire wealth simply because he had grown up poor, and he was determined never to be poor again. Both created highly profitable businesses, one motivated by what he wanted to attain, the other by what he wanted to avoid.

Do you know what most deeply motivates your individual workers to do a good job and to rally around you as their leader? Is it something that they want to attain? A better salary perhaps? Recognition from you and their peers? A promotion? Or is it something they want to avoid, something like losing their job or their salary? Or perhaps something more subtle, like loss of respect or loss of face for performing poorly?

You will never know these things without getting to know your people well. Ask questions about what they like most in their job, what they like least. Listen carefully when they answer. Their words will offer valuable clues as to what motivates them most deeply.

When you're heading a small group, targeted conversations like this with individuals who report to you may give you opportunities to ascertain their strongest job-related motivation. With a larger group, where you can't know every person well, you have to employ a different approach. You have to make some assumptions about motivation, act on these assumptions, and then monitor whether worker response seems to confirm what you assumed. In general, it's usually the case that Toward motivated people have a compelling drive to succeed, while Away From motivated people are energized, not so much by the prospect of success, but by their strong desire not to fail.

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To appeal to both groups when you lay out what it is that you want to achieve, spell out the benefits to the group of succeeding and the undesirable consequences of failure. This gives you a reasonable chance to stroke the motivational impulse of both groups.

A worker's performance problem, however, may not be motivation, the lack of a "want to." It may be the lack of a "how to." This circumstance exists when a worker truly wants to perform well, but doesn't know what constitutes excellent performance. Or they may have a clear picture of what excellence means, but lack the know-how and confidence to pursue it.

Sadly, many workers will never tell their manager that they lack a "how to." Either from embarrassment or insecurity, they hesitate to admit that they don't understand certain aspects of their job. So, they continue to fumble along, always wishing that they knew more, but never sharing this feeling with their peers or superiors.

For these workers, the solution for weak performance is not to be found in motivation, but in training. The lack of a "how to" is always a training issue. Yet, it's quite easy to overlook the possibility that poor performance stems from inadequate training. Most managers, after all, do a fairly conscientious job of trying to see that their people are trained.

The more important question is, were they trained in a way which best connected with their style of learning? In recent decades we've seen an abundance of research and writing on the subject of adult learning styles. As a result, it's no secret that different adults learn best in entirely different ways. The best training, presented in a manner or style which does not resonate with a given worker may fail to instill the skills and know-how that the training was designed to provide.

I don't have the time in this episode to do a deep dive into adult learning. But permit me just a few observations about things to keep in mind when imparting new skills and know-how to your team. Some workers learn best when you clearly explain the "why" behind procedures which are being taught. Others care little about the "why." They simply want the procedures spelled out in a straightforward manner and in a sequence which they can perform repeatedly. Still others learn best by a process which I call "tinkering."

I personally am this very kind of learner. When I'm learning a new software package, it's a pretty sure bet that I'm not going to take a lot of time working through tutorials or online guides about how to use it. Years ago, I discovered that I learned software or programming languages best and most rapidly by going immediately into hands-on experience. I typically choose something which I want to create with the software or in the programming language, then I set to work immediately, muddling my way along. When I get stumped, that's when I may turn to a handbook or an online guide to find an answer to my specific issue at the moment. Once I find that answer, however, I go right back to tinkering.

Now, to some this may seem a very inefficient way to learn. But the object is not efficiency, but mastery. It's no different than learning a new foreign language. Some people do so very well by studying books or sitting in classes where they learn the structure and syntax of the language. Others do equally well – or even better – by simply throwing themselves into situations where they have to use the language to get even the most ordinary things done. It's called immersion learning.

So, do you know how your people learn best? That's as important as the question of what motivates your people most thoroughly. When workers fail to perform, always consider the possibility that they merely lack a "how to." Not uncommonly you may discover that while some

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of your people have been thoroughly trained, others have not. In that scenario, training is your starting place for overcoming lack of performance. And fortunately, of the four causes of poor performance, a missing “how to” is the easiest to remedy.

Always keep in mind, however, that training does not equal learning. Just because someone has been trained, it does not follow that the person learned. And most frequently, that’s because the training did not match their learning style. People develop confidence in their “how to” when appropriate training is delivered in a way which most naturally aligns with their learning style.

A third possibility is that an underperforming worker has a “want to” and a “how to,” but lacks a ‘chance to.’ In this case the problem is not motivation or training, but system design. Take, for instance, someone who is caught in what I call the crosshairs of a matrix management system. In this type of management structure, a person answers to two entirely different people in terms of job expectations.

A nurse on the ward of a hospital might fall in this category. On one hand the nurse is answerable to the chief of nursing, on the other hand to the doctor in charge of a particular patient. If the chief of nursing and the doctor are not on the same page with regard to protocols and standards, the nurse can please one only at the expense of displeasing the other.

I’m working with a situation right now where three senior managers are held responsible for certain established standards. But they have no authority to enforce these standards in any area outside of their own immediate purview. Yet, the partners in the practice hold them individually accountable when standards for which they are personally responsible are carried out inconsistently anywhere in the organization. Ironically, these managers are all three highly motivated to do a good job and have all the requisite skills to do so. But a flawed system design causes their performance to be seen as inadequate. When it comes to offering their best performance, they don’t have a “chance to.”

Our fourth source of performance issues is what I describe as the lack of a “have to.” Some people may be moderately motivated, reasonably trained, and in a position to perform, but they’ve not been presented with an urgency that gives them no choice but to take action. When I consider this possible cause of weak performance, I think of my Dad and something which happened when I was a teen.

One cold, wintry day, after nearly a week of heavy downpours, he drove deep into the woods skirting the Sabine River in East Texas. His goal was a stretch of water, about a mile into the woods, where he always had great luck hunting ducks. The torrential rain had left the rutted roadway slippery and choked with mud. To make any progress at all, he had to keep his pickup running at break-neck speed, because it was so easy to get stuck.

About halfway to his destination, the slippery roadway cost him all traction just as he approached a flooded slough which backed off of the river. The pickup slid off of the roadway, plunged into the slough. and immediately sank. Only the top of the cab was left above the water.

That in itself was bad enough. But Dad was a carpenter and many of his most expensive tools were in the back of that truck. Without them he had no way of earning a living. Not only that, his best shotguns were in the truck, as well.

So, he walked back to the highway, hitched a ride into town, got a junker of a truck that we used to haul hay around the farm, and headed back to the river to rescue his tools and guns.

Just as he got to the woods, he met the game warden coming out in a four-wheel drive jeep. When the warden realized what Dad had in mind, he said, “You can’t possibly get that far into the woods. It’s too muddy. I tried to go in, and even with my four-wheel drive I had to give up and come back out. You’ll never be able to get where you’re going in your pickup.”

Dad looked at him, smiled, and said, “Warden, the difference between you and me is that you don’t *have* to get there.” And with that he got back behind the wheel, gunned the engine, and plunged at breakneck speed into the woods.

He did, I might add, retrieve his tools and his guns. And once the water receded, we were able to pull the pickup out of the slough. It’s amazing what people can accomplish when they sense that they have no other choice. The COVID-19 pandemic has forced thousands of businesses and organizations to adopt practices, processes, and procedures which are far-removed from anything which they would have ever considered in the past. And given a choice, they would have never adopted these approaches. But to survive, they were presented with a “have to” which neither they nor their workers could ignore.

Now, I’m not suggesting that as a leader you should purposefully create situations which are so stressful that people feel that they have no choice but to perform. But neither should you ignore a valuable insight which comes from considering a “have to” as part of the template which you use to assess the cause of poor performance.

Here’s what I mean. When someone is failing to perform, ask yourself, “If the situation were so desperate that they would have no choice but to perform, could they do it?” If the answer is “yes,” then they possess the “how to” and probably the “chance to.” Apparently their “want to” is not strong enough, which brings us back to motivation.

The ability to motivate will always be one of the most vital tools in the manager or leader’s toolkit. Lack of motivation is not always the root of underperformance. But in the final analysis, the absence of a “want to” is more commonly the root of poor performance than is the absence of a “how to,” a “chance to,” or a “have to.” Just be sure that you take the other factors into consideration before you conclude that you are indeed facing a motivation problem.

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