

Motivation in the Workplace

Ever wonder what motivates others at work? Ever wonder about your own motivation? Understanding motivation is a lot like understanding anything that has multiple layers: You must uncover one layer at a time.

At a base or foundation layer, needs for things like money to pay one's bills, safety from harm, a satisfactory commuting distance and a schedule that works with one's lifestyle are motivating. If your job doesn't pay your bills, puts you in harm's way, has a time-consuming commute, or greatly inconveniences your family, you are likely to look for a new job. If you find this new job and it takes care of all of these factors, you are likely to look at the job to meet other needs: These needs become the new motivators once the foundation needs are met.

Thanks to the work of David McClelland, we know that for most people these other needs are: 1) a need to influence and direct others; 2) a need to take on challenges and accomplish tasks; or 3) a need to affiliate and cooperate with others. These needs are quite distinct from each other and predict with near certainty who will succeed or fail in any given role in an organization.

What does this mean about your own and others' motivation? It means that once your base motivating needs are met, you will seek circumstances or situations that meet your other needs. The same is true of others.

If you are motivated to influence and direct others, your satisfaction at work will depend on your position in the organization, the power you have over others, the status you have in the eyes of your co-workers, etc. You are likely to seek increasing responsibility in an organization until you are the CEO, president or owner. Your values and choices are likely to be a reflection of your motivation to express both informal and formal authority over others. In its purest form, this motivating need is fulfilled in the "alpha" male or female.

In contrast, if you are motivated to take on challenges and accomplish tasks, you will seek opportunities to demonstrate your competence and will take satisfaction from doing something better than others. You will seek to master problems and tasks and appreciate recognition for your accomplishments. It is likely you will not like conflict and will respond to competition by increasing your "expertise" and credentials. You probably will prefer reason and logic and may be seen as unemotional or distant to others. Satisfaction comes from successful task completion and overcoming challenges. You may choose a professional role (such as physician, lawyer, accountant, or engineer) and be as happy on your own as in a large organization. In its purest role, this motivating need is fulfilled in the innovator or entrepreneurial scientist.

Finally, if you are motivated by affiliation, you will seek cooperative interaction with others above all else. Satisfaction at work will come from being around others, being in harmony with them, and sharing in a reciprocal manner. You are likely to be more skilled than others at reading social cues

and navigating the social network at work. You will respond well to interpersonal warmth and be distressed by conflict. Belonging to a group or team, fitting in and being popular will bring great satisfaction. You may be sensitive to “peer pressure” in the workplace and will probably conform to group norms without complaint. You are probably most comfortable in roles that allow you to be a team player (sales team member, human resource professional, service technician) and spend the majority of your day interacting with others. In its purest form, this motivating need is fulfilled in the customer support team member.

Frequently there is a mixture of these three needs. Sometimes, one is clearly dominant. Most often, one need is dominant while a second is important but clearly secondary and the third is unimportant.

In general, motivating needs are stable—they tend to stay the same for an individual over time. This is not to say they cannot change. Circumstances and effort can produce a change but change is the exception.

Understanding your own motivating needs can help you select what kind of role suits you and will bring you satisfaction after your base needs are met. Motivating needs dictate what type of work you look forward to and, often, what type of work you are good at.

Understanding the motivation of others can help you understand what brings them satisfaction in the workplace and can provide insight into why they behave the way they do. If you are in a position to hire or otherwise influence who is in what role, understanding motivation can increase the fit between the person and the role they are expected to play.

If you or someone you know is unhappy at work while meeting their base needs, the chance of a mismatch between role expectations and motivating needs is high. Now you can say you know why, as well as how to seek another role that provides a remedy.