Work and the Art of Motivation Maintenance

Adam M. Grant
The Wharton School, University of Pennsylvania

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• *Please tell us about your current position and research interests.*
I am the Wharton Class of 1965 Professor of Management, as well as Affiliated Professor of
Psychology. I study work motivation, the design of meaningful jobs, what encourages people to
proactively create change in their organizations, and what drives people to help others—and
what happens to their careers when they do.

• *What got you interested in studying organizational psychology?*
Growing up, I was surprised that although most people spend the majority of their waking hours
at work, few find their work to be the most meaningful and motivating part of their lives. When I
began studying psychology, I wanted to do research that could make a difference, and I was
excited about the prospect of collaborating with organizations to improve the quality of work
life.

• *What has been the real-world impact of this work?*
My favorite studies have motivated doctors and nurses to wash their hands more often, lifeguards
to focus more attention on protecting the safety of swimmers, and fundraisers to bring in more
money for universities and nonprofits. This work has also led to the design of a program that
significantly increased the happiness and job performance of Google employees and managers,
as well as a series of programs to improve motivation and engagement in a wide range of
organizations, from the military and the government to call centers, schools, and investment
banks.

Employees without a Cause
In college, my first real job was in advertising for the Let's Go travel books. We sent hundreds of
Harvard students to scale mountains and hike through monsoons in search of the best-kept
secrets about what to do, where to stay, and how to eat on the road. In the office back in
Cambridge, teams of editors had three months to deliver a complete book. They started out
highly motivated, often working 100-hour weeks, but the dream of writing a travel book gave
way to the reality of deciphering chicken scratch (often written on a chicken bus) and
transforming it into prose. I decided this would make for a fascinating undergraduate thesis: what
keeps some editors highly motivated to produce successful books, whereas others burn out?

When I surveyed the editorial teams and asked their managers to rate their effectiveness, the
most consistent predictor of success was the perception that the work had a positive impact on
others. Since they were all doing the same work, I was puzzled that some editors had a much
clearer grasp of its importance than others. This became the focus of my doctoral research, and I
stumbled upon an opportunity to explore it at a call center.

The callers were contacting University of Michigan alumni and trying to persuade them to donate money to the university. It was a mundane, repetitive job using a standardized script with many more rejections than successes, and most callers quit within two months. One caller posted a sign next to his desk: "Doing a good job here is like wetting your pants in a dark suit. You get a warm feeling, but no one else notices."

The callers were raising millions of dollars for the university, but had no idea where the money went. Managers tried to solve the problem by delivering inspiring speeches, waxing poetic about athletic teams supported, buildings funded, and faculty and staff salaries provided. A team of students and I realized that it was the right message, but the wrong source. What if the callers heard from the people who were directly affected by the money they raised?

Connecting the Dots
We identified a scholarship recipient, Will, who was willing to share a compelling story about how the scholarship had improved his life. We designed an experiment, randomly dividing the callers between three groups. One group of callers met Will face-to-face, a second group read a letter from him, and the control group had no exposure to him (Grant et al., 2007).

After spending five minutes with Will, a full month later, the average caller spiked 142% in weekly minutes on the phone and 171% in weekly revenue. There were no significant gains in effort or performance among the callers who read Will's letter or had no contact with him. We ended up replicating the effect five times—one of the virtues of high turnover is that each semester brought new employees for new experiments. In one version of the experiment, a graduate student spoke about how the callers had funded archeological digs, and the average caller increased 406% in weekly revenue, from raising an average of $411 before meeting her to $2,083 afterward. In total, the 23 callers who met her raised an extra $38,451 in a single week (Grant, 2008a).

This research solved the Let's Go puzzle. The editors were producing travel books that helped readers have life-changing experiences in foreign lands, but stuck in an office disconnected from readers, many of the editors lost sight of their impact. This is true in many jobs: software developers, scientists, engineers, and accountants all do work that makes a difference but never have direct contact with the ultimate beneficiaries of their products and services.

We conducted a number of experiments to figure out why face-to-face contact with beneficiaries is so powerful. It turns out that there's a big difference between knowing that your work helps others and seeing the impact on a living, breathing human being. When we interact directly with the people who benefit from our work, we develop a stronger conviction that our work matters and is valued and appreciated, and we become committed to working harder, smarter, longer, and productively on behalf of the people we're trying to help.

It's Not All About Me
These studies highlighted a new way of thinking about motivation. Traditionally, when we wanted to motivate employees, we focused on providing incentives or making the work itself more interesting. These approaches overlook the importance of interactions and relationships in motivation. We're driven to do our best work not only when our tasks are engaging and we

expect to be paid well, but also when we can see that our work will have a lasting impact on others.

More recent research has extended these ideas into health and safety jobs where lives are on the line. When lifeguards read stories about how other lifeguards had rescued drowning swimmers, they became more aware of the impact and value of their work, and increased 43% in monthly hours worked and 21% in supervisor ratings of efforts to help keep swimmers safe (Grant, 2008b). When nurses assembled surgical kits, those who met a healthcare professional who would use the kits worked 64% longer than a control group, achieving more than double the output and making 15% fewer errors (Belle, 2013).

In high-stakes healthcare settings, even a photograph or a word that signals the impact of our work can be enough to boost motivation. When radiologists scanned an x-ray, including a photo of the patient was enough to increase their reports by 29% and their diagnostic accuracy by 46% (Turner et al., 2008). And consider the important behavior of hand washing in hospitals, which is the single most effective way to prevent the spread of infections and illnesses (Grant & Hofmann, 2011). When doctors and nurses saw a sign that said "Hand hygiene prevents you from catching diseases," their behavior didn't change. But when we changed the word "you" to "patients," they increased their hand washing by over 10% and their soap and gel usage by over 45%. Medical professionals often believe that they're immune to diseases: they don't get sick very often, and when they do, how can they be sure it was due to poor hand hygiene? By contrast, patients are a vulnerable population.

It's not all about me: people often engage in more health and safety behaviors when they focus on others than themselves. We found similar effects with fundraisers and lifeguards: highlighting the personal benefits of the job did no good. They only became more motivated when they saw how their work benefited others.

Givers, Takers, and Matchers
Motivation climbs when we can see how our work helps others, but people differ in their motivation to help others. How do these differences influence our professional success?

To paraphrase Robert Benchley, there are only two kinds of people in the world: those who divide the world into two kinds of people, and those who don't. So often, psychologists make the mistake of oversimplifying people by breaking them down into two categories. In this case, we can gain more insight by examining three styles.

Extensive research shows that across industries and cultures, people typically have one of three dominant motivations when interacting with others (Grant, 2013). On opposite ends of the spectrum, we have people who I call takers and givers. Takers are self-serving: their goal is to get as much as possible from others while contributing little in return. Givers are other-oriented: they enjoy giving more than they get, and helping others without strings attached. In the middle are matchers, people who aim to keep a fair, even balance of giving and taking. Most people are matchers at work: when they do a favor, they expect an equal one back, and when they receive a favor, they feel like they're in debt until they've settled the score.

Being a matcher is a safe way to operate, but is it ultimately the most productive way to live your professional life? To find out, I examined studies of three different jobs with very different ways of measuring success: engineering productivity, medical school grades, and sales revenue. Across each setting, among the takers, givers, and matchers, there was one group that consistently achieved the lowest performance.

No Good Deed Goes Unpunished
The givers sank to the bottom. In engineering, the lowest productivity belonged to the engineers who were rated by their colleagues as doing more favors than they received in return. They were so busy helping others that they ran out of time and energy to get their own work done. In medicine, the lowest grades belonged to the students who agreed most strongly with statements like "I love helping others." In sales, the lowest revenue was attained by the salespeople who reported dedicating the most time and energy to helping their colleagues and customers.

This is sad news for givers. It's also sad news for organizations, since we now have several decades of evidence that when groups of employees act like givers, organizations are better off. In one comprehensive analysis of more than 3,600 business units, for example, the more frequently employees helped each other, the better those units did in terms of profits, customer satisfaction, employee retention, and operating expenses (Podsakoff et al., 2009). Givers contribute to organizations by sharing knowledge, making introductions, providing mentoring, and solving problems, but they appear to make their organizations better at their own expense. So if givers are the worst performers, who are the best performers?

When I analyzed the data, it wasn't the takers. They were too self-serving, and their colleagues penalized them for it—especially the matchers. If you're a matcher, you believe in a just world, and you can't stand to see people get away with acting selfishly. When you encounter a taker, you might feel that it's your mission in life to punish that person (Feinberg et al., 2012). Most people expect that the managers are the best performers, but the data showed that it wasn't the matchers either.

Good Returns
When I looked at who attained the highest performance, it was the givers again. They were more likely to finish last, but they were also more likely to finish first. The most productive engineers were the ones who did more favors than they received in return. Somehow, they managed to balance helping others with doing their own work efficiently and effectively. The matchers who traded favors evenly—and the takers who got more favors than they gave—didn't have terrible results, but they rarely had extraordinary results. It's a fascinating paradox: helping others can sink your career or accelerate it.

In medicine and sales, time was a key factor. In the first year of medical school, the givers fell behind. They admitted that when it was time to study for a big exam, they would teach what they already knew to their friends, instead of filling the gaps in their own knowledge. But by the second year, the givers caught up and gained a slight advantage. The program shifted: now, instead of being evaluated on exam performance, students were graded on their abilities to work with colleagues and care for patients. Once the work became interdependent rather than independent, the givers thrived. Each year, as their grades depended more heavily on

collaboration and service, the givers pulled further and further ahead. Ultimately, the positive correlation between the motivation to help others at the beginning of medical school and grades at the end of medical school was stronger than the effect of smoking on the odds of getting lung cancer.

A similar pattern unfolded in sales. The givers were reluctant to deliver aggressive pitches, and often struggled in the first quarter or two. However, by taking a sincere interest in their customers, they learned more about customers' interests and built more trust. Over time, this meant that they could deliver pitches that were tailored to customers' needs, and they generated more repeated business and more referrals. By the end of the year, on average, the givers averaged 68% higher sales revenue than the takers and matchers.

This body of research raised two exciting questions. First, what do successful givers do that takers and matchers can learn? Second, what differentiates the givers at the top from those at the bottom—how do they avoid burning out and becoming doormats?

On the first question, research has shown that givers tend to build deeper and broader networks than takers and matchers. By being willing to help others without strings attached, they create strong relationships and engage with a wide range of people. By contrast, takers and matchers tend to create a transactional impression and limit their exchanges to people who seem able to help them. As a result, givers tend to receive greater support from others and benefit from stronger reputations. Whereas people are threatened by successful takers, they root for successful givers. In addition, givers tend to think more creatively: they're motivated to take others' perspectives, which enables them to make connections between different ideas and figure out how to make novel ideas useful to others.

On the second question, the available evidence points to two kinds of givers (Helgeson & Fritz, 1998). Selfless givers tend to be self-sacrificing: they make the mistake of helping all of the people all of the time with all of the requests. This makes them vulnerable to burnout and to being exploited by takers. There's another group of givers, "otherish" givers, who strive to integrate their own ambitions with their desires to help others. They put others first often, and help without the expectation of reciprocity, but they keep their own interests in the rearview mirror. This means being more cautious when dealing with takers and blocking out time in their calendars to get their own work done. It also involves becoming specialists rather than generalists when it comes to giving: helping in one or two key ways that align with one's interests and unique expertise, so that giving is more likely to be energizing and efficient than exhausting and distracting.

What inspires me most about successful givers is that they manage to lift others up, rather than cutting them down. As Simon Sinek put it, "Givers advance the world. Takers advance themselves and hold the world back."

Suggested Further Reading

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