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MANAGEMENT PERSPECTIVES

Motivation

From the Editor

A number of years ago on CBC radio, *This Country in the Morning* ran a contest that asked listeners to define the Canadian identity in a single short sentence. This was no commercial radio contest where “the fifth caller who can successfully tell us the middle name of Attila the Hun will have their name put in a drum and will qualify for a trip to sunny Steinbeck, Manitoba.” No this was a contest that required insight, wit, and a capacity to say it succinctly. Here’s the winning entry: As Canadian as possible under the circumstances.

The definition makes me smile every time I think about it. “As Canadian as possible” suggests that there’s no aspiration to be perfect or even pretend to be; there’s no desire to be the leader of the free world (whatever that means) or insist on glory unearned. And “under the circumstances” recognizes that there are circumstances which can affect us and that there might be some virtue in being pragmatic. Who are we as Canadians? Imperfect pragmatists.

Those two words also define half of what leaders need to be. Paradoxically, I suppose, leaders need to balance that with being values-driven idealists.

At LIVE Consultants we help leaders figure out how to be both.

Marilyn Baetz, editor

About the Author and the Article

If you’ve been a manager for more than 5 years you’ve probably heard more than a few explanations of what motivates people. The works of Taylor, McClelland, Maslow, and Herzberg have been brought to many seminars and workshops and been offered to managers as reasonable explanations of why people do what they do.

Fairly recent research points to the reality that there are 4 drivers that are hard-wired into our brains. In this article, Stephen reviews those and points to the implications for leaders. He goes on to assert that there are other shapers (which he broadly describes as environmental) which can either complement or override our hard-wiring.

Stephen is a principal of LIVE Consultants Inc., the organization which sponsors this publication.



Stephen Baetz

What Drives Us

In the July 2008 edition of *Harvard Business Review*, two profs from Harvard University in Boston and a colleague at the Center for Research on Corporate Performance in nearby Cambridge wrote, “Our synthesis of the research suggests that people are guided by four basic emotional needs, or drives, that are a product of our common evolutionary heritage.” That got my attention. The assertion that Nohria, Groysberg, and Lee make is that the drivers of human motivation are hard-wired. They base their conclusions on work done in the areas of neuroscience, biology, and evolutionary psychology: something which previous motivational theorists like Freud, Jung, Maslow, Herzberg, and the gang didn’t have available to them.

Here are the motivational drivers they defined:

The drive to acquire — the urge to acquire scarce goods like clothing, housing, food, money as well as entertainment experiences or events that will improve our social status

The drive to bond — the desire to be part of families, groups, kinship groups, organizations, collectives, associations, and nations

The drive to comprehend — the push to make sense of the world, to produce theories and explanations that make events, at a minimum, understandable and

The drive to defend — the inclination to protect (so that we can feel secure and confident) what we have acquired, bonded with, or understood

What the trio from Massachusetts has uncovered is attractive because it seems to explain some phenomena which, on the surface, may seem odd. For example, they explain that the drive to acquire is always relative and insatiable — relative in the sense that we want to stack what we have up against what others have and insatiable in that we always want more. Now I get why people are interested in what others have in their pay package and why salary caps hardly ever work. And with the drive to bond we can understand why employees want to feel proud of their organization and are severely disappointed when the organization behaves poorly or lets

them down. It also explains why divisional or functional silos form and many times take precedence over the needs of the larger organization. The hard-wire drive to defend explains why many people are reluctant to make change, especially when the change threatens what we have worked so hard to acquire.

Implications for Leaders

So, if for a moment, we can assume that Nohria, Groysberg, and Lee are right, what are the implications for leaders?

Relative to the drive to acquire, ensure that the compensation system is fair, clearly defined, and communicated. Most organizations have developed regimes to make sure that the comp system is fair and clearly defined; in some way, that’s the easy part. What gets left undone is the communication part. People want to see where they are compared to others in the organization, particularly to those who have similar responsibilities and accountabilities and that can make many leaders feel ill-at-ease, particularly if they don’t have a solid knowledge of what the specialists in HR have done.

As well, the performance management process ought to differentiate the okay, from the good from the exceptional. Where performance is not acceptable, leaders have to be dedicated to getting the individual up-to-speed or finding out what is blocking that person from doing what is expected. And of course, rewards (and just as importantly recognition) have to be tied to the real contribution that people have made.

Relative to the drive to bond, the most important arena for a leader to play in relates to organizational climate or culture. Teamwork (maybe it’s better to say team *play*) and collaboration not only have to be talked about as central to the organization, they have to be part of a leader’s repertoire. Times and places have to be found where people can get to know one another and friendships can be created. Substantial research in the area of employee engagement points to the reality that an

employee's desire to stay is connected to whether they have friends in the workplace. Leaders ought to make clear that mutual reliance is an organizational fact of life and that everyone is expected to collaborate in getting it done. As well, leaders should find ways to demonstrate what mutual reliance looks like by building trusting and highly-functional relationships with each and every member of their peer group.

To contribute to the culture of collaboration, leaders ought to tell and then retell stories of teams who came together to accomplish a goal that nobody thought was possible. To signal the value of collaboration to the organization, recognition should be given to what teams accomplish just as much as it is given to what individuals get done.

Relative to the drive to comprehend, leaders must dedicate huge chunks of their time to making meaning by talking about the opportunities, challenges, and problems that exist in the marketplace, the competitive realities, the strategic positioning of the organization, the values envelope, the core processes, and the role each person and each team has in the overall functioning of the organization. It is all too easy for leaders to make the assumption that their familiarity with the issues of the business is shared by everyone. It isn't. People in customer-facing roles who deal with the day-to-day pressures of "making it happen" for the customer can lose sight of the bigger end game for the organization and how they fit in. Making meaning helps others define priorities so everything isn't equally important and they can invest their time in what matters most.

In addition, leaders should make sure that everyone has a well-designed job: a job which is significant and meaningful, a job in which the individual can see how what they do makes a difference to the organization.

Relative to the drive to defend, leaders must ensure transparency so everyone comes to the conclusion that the organization and the people in it are behaving fairly. Fairness is important in all situations but it's particularly important in performance management and resource

allocation (commonly referred to as planning and budgets). Backroom deals, blinds-drawn processes, and "just trust us" communication increases the chance that employees will defend what they have and, in turn, decrease their willingness to collaborate or trust others. In essence, leaders should be creating an environment where employees come to the conclusion that being excessively defensive and protective isn't worth their investment or energy.

The Additional Complexity

I have no reason to suspect that the work done by Nohria, Groysberg, and Lee isn't accurate. My feeling is that their work isn't complete or as complete as it needs to be for a full picture of what drives us to do what we do. What I offer, therefore, is an *and* rather than a *but* to what they have given us.

And the environment — the social systems, networks, culture, and structures — we live and work in also shape what we think, what we believe, what we value, and hence, what we do. The inputs from the environment shape our motivations. I suspect there are times when the environmental inputs complement our hard-wiring and there are times when the environmental inputs override our hard-wiring.

An example of how the environmental inputs might complement is reflected in a comment made to me recently by a senior executive. "I learned early on in my career from many of my bosses," she said, "that it's better to be the puppeteer than the puppet." She has understood (for better or worse) from cues in her environment that the focus of her *acquire drive* should be control. And an example of how environmental inputs can override any hard-wiring are silent philanthropists: individuals who are driven to help others without the possibility of any recognition or added significance for themselves.

All of which says that to understand the four drivers — acquire, bond, comprehend and defend — is extremely important. Equally valuable is an appreciation of the environmental shapers of motivation.

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