



Challenging Beliefs that Erode Workplace Motivation

SUSAN FOWLER

As a leader, you cannot motivate anyone. What you *can* do is cultivate a workplace where it is more likely for someone to experience optimal motivation.

Optimal motivation means having the positive energy, vitality, and sense of well-being required to sustain the pursuit and achievement of meaningful goals while flourishing. Optimal motivation is the result of satisfying three basic psychological needs that lie at the heart of every human being's ability to thrive: autonomy, relatedness, and competence.

Why care if people are optimally motivated? Optimal motivation fuels employee work passion. Actively engaged employees have positive intentions to stay and endorse your organization, use discretionary effort and organizational citizenship behaviors on behalf of the organization, and perform above expected standards.

Unfortunately, despite your positive intentions, there is a high probability that you are trapped in counter-productive practices eroding people's optimal motivation.

The scary thing is that you believe you are doing the right thing. Motivation is one of the most vital and essential, yet confused and misunderstood aspects of leadership. Lacking an understanding of the true nature of human motivation, contemporary science, and alternatives to carrots and sticks, many leaders are blind to what does and doesn't work. Immersed in motivation-eroding beliefs, they find it difficult to hear, see, or do something different.

Research over the past sixty years continues to prove the point. When individuals' rankings of workplace motivators are compared to rankings of what their managers think motivates them, the results reflect how most individuals feel: managers simply do not know what motivates their people.

Why the big disconnect? One reason is that leaders depend on their observations of external behaviors and conditions to evaluate their employees' motivation. Unfortunately, many leaders are not perceptive observers, nor are they wise interpreters of what they see.

It is nearly impossible to understand other people's internal state of motivation by observing their external behavior. (A good reason to have conversations with people about their underlying reasons for pursuing delegated goals.)

Another reason for the disconnect for the ranking of motivators between employees and their managers: employees don't understand the true nature of their own motivation.

An employee who feels trapped in her job, feels she is being taken advantage of, or feels overwhelmed by what is being asked of her, may ask for more money. Under her breath, she is saying, *They don't pay me enough to put up with this.* What she doesn't understand is that there will never be enough money to make up for the void created when her psychological needs for autonomy, relatedness, and competence are not satisfied. People cannot ask for what they don't know they need.

Leaders and individuals operating from outdated beliefs such as Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs and Reinforcement Theory are perpetuating ineffective motivational practices. The bad news is that we have paid a high price for working with traditional approaches to motivation: stifled creativity and innovation; mental and physical disabilities; high insurance rates; absenteeism and turnover; unsustainable performance; escalating costs and expectations for incentivizing desired behavior; compliance and defiance rather than alliance on goals and initiatives. The good news is that this is where the real science of motivation emerges as both a radical departure and an exciting opportunity.

The purpose of this manifesto is to challenge your potentially unexplored leadership beliefs that influence, and maybe even sabotage, your approach to motivation.

Your Beliefs Determine the Way You Lead

How would you complete these belief statements?

1. **It's not personal, it is just _____.**
2. **The purpose of business is to _____ _____.**
3. **Leaders are in a position of _____.**
4. **The only thing that really matters is _____.**
5. **If you cannot measure it, it _____ _____.**

These are particularly sticky beliefs that erode workplace motivation. Have you thought about where these common beliefs come from? They are so entrenched in organizational consciousness that we accept them without question. I have yet to find a leader who couldn't complete most, if not all, of the belief statements. This poses a potential problem. Unexplored beliefs become the foundation for programmed values. Then, these programmed values become the basis for rules, processes, procedures, actions, and your leadership behaviors.

Your mission, should you choose to accept it, is to challenge these beliefs and examine how they undermine your people's optimal motivation, and then consider alternative beliefs and best practices.

Challenge the First Eroding Belief: It's not personal, it is just business.

Every day you deliver information, feedback, or news to those you lead that affects their work, livelihood, opportunities, status, income, mood, health, and/or well-being. How is this not personal?

Employees probably spend more of their waking hours connected to work and interacting with their coworkers than family members. Yet, managers believe their actions are not personal and just business! Are you kidding?

Whatever your beliefs, one thing is true: What you say and do *feels* personal to the people you lead! Therein lies the issue. *Feelings*. The f-word in organizations. Do you believe that expressing feelings does not belong in the workplace? If so, challenge yourself by asking: How did this belief become so commonly held? Where did *my* belief come from?

One possibility for why feelings are discouraged in the workplace: Managers do not have the skill to effectively deal with them. True, some employees do not self-regulate well and may let their emotions get the best of them from time-to-time. But the fear of unruly emotions is disproportionate to the occurrence and severity of emotional outbreaks.

All emotions are acceptable, but not all behavior is acceptable. Notice, acknowledge, and deal with the emotions of people you lead. Learn the skill of asking mindful questions to help individuals decipher their own emotions without judgment and then choose the most appropriate behavioral response given the situation. Practice your own self-regulation by listening to your heart and acknowledging the crucial role that feelings play in your work and life.

Challenge the belief that it's not personal, it's just business. Activate optimal motivation with someone you lead by adopting a different belief: **If it is business, it is personal.**

“Unfortunately, despite your positive intentions, there is a high probability that you are trapped in counter-productive practices eroding people’s optimal motivation.”

Best practices that support people’s psychological needs for autonomy, relatedness, and competence include ...

- Acknowledge and validate people’s feelings and emotions.
- Offer pure descriptive feedback rather than evaluative feedback or personalized praising.
- Promote mindfulness by asking open-ended questions and facilitating a discussion about options.

As you change your belief about feelings in the workplace, watch how your leadership practices change—and how your people respond.

Challenge the Second Eroding Belief: The purpose of business is to make money.

When you hold the belief that money is the purpose of business, you are likely to focus on dashboard metrics, over-emphasize results, and resort to pressuring people to get those results. You may be tempted to employ questionable ethical practices or choose quantity over quality, short-term results over long-term results, and profits over people.

How would your decisions and actions be different with the following belief? *The purpose of business is to serve.*

Hard-nosed businesspeople push back with a traditional argument, “You can serve all you want, but this soft stuff doesn’t make you money and if you don’t make a profit you will go out of business. Then you won’t be serving anyone.”

It is true: business must make a profit to sustain itself. But it is an illogical leap to conclude that profit is therefore the purpose of business. You need air to live, plus water and food. But the purpose of your life is not to breathe, eat, and drink. Your purpose is richer and more profound than basic survival.

To paraphrase what I have often heard Ken Blanchard proclaim, “Profit is the applause you get from creating an optimally motivating environment for your people so they want to take care of your customers.”

There is definitive evidence that organizational vitality measured by ROI, earnings by share, access to venture capital, stock price, debt load, and other financial indicators is dependent on two factors: employee work passion and customer devotion. It does not work the other way around—organizational vitality does *not* determine customer devotion or employee work passion.

The nature of human motivation is not in making money. It is in making meaning.

Challenge the belief that the purpose of business is to make money and consider an optimal motivation belief: **The purpose of business is to serve—both your people and your customers. Profit is a by-product of doing both of these well.**

When you believe that the purpose of business is to serve, you lead differently. Try these best practices ...

- Help individuals align to work-related values and a sense of purpose.
- Provide an honest assessment of skills and training needs.
- Clear time for inherently motivating projects.

Watch how your people respond. Then notice the results and accept the well-earned applause in the form of organizational vitality.

Challenge the Third Eroding Belief: Leaders are in a position of power.

Imagine you work for a large organization and are on an elevator going to a top floor. Mid-way up the elevator stops and a man gets in the elevator—the company’s CEO. Even though you have never met him, you recognize him from all-company meetings. Your heart races a bit. You wonder if you should say something. You are excited at the opportunity to introduce yourself; but you worry about interrupting his thoughts or making a bad impression. Before you make up your mind about what to do, the elevator stops and he gets off. You are frustrated at yourself for not taking advantage of the situation; you are a bit angry with him for ignoring you. Suffice it to say, if it was someone of lesser stature, or if you hadn’t recognized him as the CEO, the dynamic would be different. The leader didn’t do anything but get in the elevator—yet you were affected emotionally and physically.

“The nature of human motivation is not in making money. It is in making meaning.”

“Managers need to be incredibly mindful and clear about the types of power they have and use. Most leaders will be surprised by the potentially negative emotional impact that results from having and using their power, in almost all its forms.” These are the words of Dr. Drea Zigarmi, who found himself surprised by the strength of his own research on how a leader’s power affects people’s motivational outlooks. Even when you don’t have intentions to use your power, just having it creates a dynamic that requires your awareness and sensitivity.

The bottom line is that power undermines people’s psychological needs. It’s not just your use of the power; it’s people’s perception that you have it and could use it. Your power demands that people need to exert more energy self-regulating to experience autonomy, relatedness, and competence. As Zigarmi puts it, “Power is very precious stuff. It entices the leader into flights of self-delusion and separateness from those they lead.”

Challenge the belief that you are in a position of power. Consider the difference with this optimal motivation belief: **Leaders are in a position of empowering others.**

You can use all your power attempting to motivate people, but it won’t work if you want them to experience an optimal motivational outlook. Instead focus on ways to empower others...

- Invite choice. Explore options within boundaries.
- Explore individuals' natural interest in and enthusiasm for the goal.
- Provide a rationale and share information. Discuss your intentions openly.

Experiencing optimal motivation is something people do for themselves. But the workplace you create has an enormous influence on how likely—or challenging—it is for people to self-regulate, satisfy their psychological needs, and experience optimal motivation.

Challenge the Fourth Eroding Belief: The only thing that really matters is results.

I recently asked over 300 people who spontaneously filled in the blank by yelling in unison, “Results!” to consider the effect this tyranny of results has on the workplace. It was not easy.

Leaders tend to tune out as soon as you mess with results. Executives cannot imagine what else matters at the end of the day besides results measured by dashboard metrics. I’m asking you what I asked of them: consider three alternatives to the traditional results focus.

Option #1: Redefine and reframe results. It isn’t that people don’t want to achieve organizational metrics and assigned goals (especially when they are fair and agreed upon). But, too often, the way metrics are framed promotes a negative internalizing of goals—feeling pressured or bribed into action—eroding any sense of autonomy or relatedness (two of the three psychological

needs needed for sustaining energy to achieve those goals). You can help people shift to a more optimal motivational outlook by clarifying the underlying values behind your dashboard metrics.

When Express Personnel Professionals announced sales goals at a recent conference of franchise owners, they reminded franchisees that the purpose of their business is to put a million people to work. Their well-articulated metrics would be a measure of how well they fulfilled their noble purpose.

Frame results differently and trust individuals will still achieve necessary metrics.

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Option #2: Set high-quality goals. Research shows that leaders need to help their people avoid potentially external goals relating to...

- Social recognition, such as increasing the number of friends or contacts to improve social or professional status.
- Image and appearance, such as losing weight to look good at a reunion.
- Material success, such as earning more money, buying a luxury car, or moving to a prestigious neighborhood.

Instead, leaders need to help individuals set goals that promote more optimal motivational outlooks, such as...

- Personal growth (improving listening skills or practicing mindfulness).
- Affiliation (nurturing a mentoring relationship or enhancing working relationships with others).
- Community (contributing to something bigger than yourself, or making a difference).
- Physical health (losing weight as a means for increasing energy or changing your eating habits as a way of lowering blood pressure).

Consider the real and meaningful difference in the expression of these two goals:

- If you make your numbers, you are more likely to be in the Winner's Circle and qualify for the reward trip.
- If you make your numbers, you are more likely to be solving your client's problems and making a difference.

Individuals will benefit from higher-quality goals. It is also a way to shift from results to meaningful results.

The quality of goals your people set determines the quality of their experience. The values behind the goal determine the value of the goal.

Option #3: Do not imply that ends justify the means. If you believe results are what really matter without considering why those results are meaningful and how people go about achieving them, you are in essence saying the ends justify the means. What a sorry picture this paints. We do not need the science of motivation to prove that means matter. We witness the scandals and horror stories of people, organizations, industries, and countries who prize ends over means every day in the news.

A graphic illustration is captured in the Academy Award nominated 2005 documentary *Enron: The Smartest Guys in the Room*. You could read the book upon which it is based, but then you

wouldn't hear the unnerving taped conversations between giddy energy brokers celebrating as California is ravaged by fires and people are losing everything they own—and their lives. The brokers knew the fires would spark energy demands and prices, ensuring the results for which they were being held accountable.

Enron is considered one of the ugliest business scandals in American history. But it is more disturbing as an example of what happens when people prize results more than the means to achieve them. You ache for those who suffered at the hands of the energy brokers, but also for the brokers themselves who were addicted to motivational junk food so unhealthy it poisoned their morals. The brokers have responsibility for their own actions, which is why I promote every individual learning the skill of optimal motivation. However, leaders are also responsible for creating cultures based on beliefs that erode autonomy, relatedness, and competence—and lead to inhumane behavior.

A focus on results may yield short-term gains. However, those gains are at risk and compromised when people feel pressure instead of autonomy, disconnection instead of relatedness, and “used” without a sense of the competence they have gained.

The evidence is clear: people *can* achieve the results you want, even if their psychological needs are thwarted in the process. But, their negative energy and lack of well-being makes it rare for them to sustain or repeat those results—let alone exceed them.

Reframe the belief that the only thing that matters is results. Consider this optimal motivation belief instead: **In the end, what really matters is not just the results people achieve, but why and how people achieve them.**

“ If leaders rule out people’s emotional nature at work—including their own—because they are not skilled enough to cope, we all lose what it means to be fully human.

Observe the shift in people's energy—and your own—when you focus on what really matters in the workplace through best practices such as these.

- Promote autonomy by presenting goals and timelines as valuable information necessary for accomplishing agreed-upon outcomes instead of dictates of ways of holding people accountable.
- Deepen relatedness by helping individuals reframe goals so they are meaningful to them while still achieving the outcomes required.
- Develop people's competence by providing them with the appropriate direction and support needed for their level of development.

Focus on meaningful results that satisfy people's psychological needs and result in optimal motivation. Then, trust the numbers will add up to the results you were seeking.

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Challenge the Fifth Eroding Belief: If you cannot measure it, it doesn't matter.

As with all the eroding beliefs, completing this statement falls off the tongue. I was a longtime aficionado of SMART goal setting when the “M” stood for “Measurable.” However, over time, I found that a specific, measurable, attainable, relevant, and time-bound goal simply was not SMART enough. I changed the “M” to “Motivating” and moved measurable into the “S” (Specific). Adding another dimension to make my goals more emotionally compelling worked for me. It seemed to work for others, too. Now the science of motivation explains why.

The nature of things that cannot be measured. Setting measurable goals and outcomes is important. Having a defined finish line in front of you can be positively compelling. Leaders can help ensure a higher level of results by reframing *measurable* goals into *meaningful* goals. However, we need to move beyond SMART goal setting and embrace aspects of work that are not easily measured.

Case in point. If you are a parent, you probably have SMART goals for your child’s education and acquisition of skills. But, how would you answer this question: *What do you most hope for your child?* Most parents tell me they hope their children experience meaningful relationships, enjoy a profound connection to the world, contribute to society, give and receive love, fulfill a noble

purpose, are passionate about their work, discover what makes them happy, feel safe and secure, perceive they have choices, are able to navigate and master the world around them.

The things that parents most hope for their children are those things that cannot be easily measured. I find the same phenomenon happens when I ask leaders what they most hope for their people at work. Leaders may express it in different terms, but what they want for their people is a positive sense of well-being.

At the heart of what leaders hope for their people is the satisfaction of psychological needs for autonomy, relatedness, and competence. At a deep level, leaders want the people they lead to have the benefits that come through the emotionally compelling aspects of work, yet leaders continue to focus attention on just the opposite. They focus on what they can easily measure.

As in life, the most rewarding aspects of work are the things most difficult to measure.

If you believe the statement *If you cannot measure it, it does not matter*, ask yourself why.

Is it outside your comfort zone to deal with the emotional nature of things not easily measured?

Is it because you believe your job is to control things, and it is difficult to control something not easily measured?

Some things are best left unmeasured. One of life's great joys is eating in Italy. Ask anyone who has traveled there—food tastes better in Italy. I had the profound experience of attending a weeklong cooking course in Tuscany. I say *profound* because it literally changed the quality of my life—not just my cooking, but also my perspective on day-to-day living. The chef refused to provide exact measurements for anything he made. “How can I tell you how much water to put in the pasta dough? It depends on the quality of your flour, and the kind of day—the temperature, the humidity. You must add some water and oil until it feels right.” He was also hesitant to commit to a menu or plan for the week. If the zucchini flowers were blossoming, we would have fried squash blossoms; if not, then the ripe tomatoes would become the centerpiece of a Caprese salad. The chef was really teaching us mindfulness—to be present in the moment, to notice the world around us and be aware of our many options and choices. The food becomes a possibility for something profound. People can taste the difference.

Challenge the belief that if you cannot measure it, it is not important. Put this optimal motivation belief into practice instead: **If you cannot measure it, it is probably really, really important.**

Of course, there are many things in life and work we need to measure. Baking pastries is a science where measuring makes the difference between a fluffy cupcake and a hockey puck. But a true growth step for leaders is to become more comfortable promoting things that cannot be easily measured and more mindful of what they generate. Like feelings. If leaders

rule out people's emotional nature at work—including their own—because they are not skilled enough to cope, we all lose what it means to be fully human. That is too high a price to pay for being comfortable.

Challenge your own comfort zone as you lead with best practices that encourage people's psychological needs.

- Explore individuals' natural interest in and enthusiasm for the goal.
- Emphasize learning goals, not just performance goals.
- Encourage self-reflection and growth. Legitimize mistakes as part of the learning process.

Observe the shift in energy when you focus your leadership on things that cannot be easily measured—things such as love, joy, and gratitude. Your people will eat it up.

“ Challenge your own comfort zone as you lead with best practices that encourage people's psychological needs.

Challenging Motivation Beliefs, Perceptions, and Outdated Practices

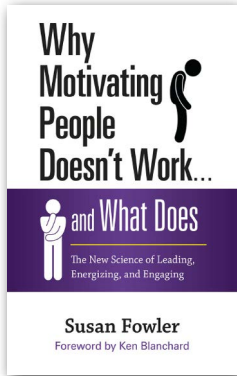
The real story of motivation is that all human beings long to thrive. We are learners who want to grow, enjoy our work, be productive, make positive contributions, and build lasting relationships. Not because of promises of external rewards or pressure, but because it is our human nature to make these things happen.

Our desire to thrive may be innate, but thriving doesn't happen automatically—especially at work. People gravitate toward psychological growth and integration, but that doesn't guarantee it will happen. Human thriving in the workplace is a dynamic potential that requires conditions of nurturing.

As a leader you either facilitate, foster, and nurture your people's flourishing, or you disrupt, thwart, and impede it. It all hinges on your beliefs. At the end of the day, your leadership beliefs will either promote or erode people's opportunity to experience optimal motivation in the workplace. Is your focus on what you want *from* people or what you want *for* people?

Ironically, when your focus is on what you want for people, the result will be what you want from people. 🧠

Info



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR | Susan Fowler has over thirty years' experience as a researcher, consultant, and coach in over thirty countries around the globe in the field of self leadership. She is the creator and lead developer of The Ken Blanchard Companies' Optimal Motivation product line as well as the creator and lead developer of Situational Self Leadership, the organization's best-of-class self leadership and personal empowerment program. She is the bestselling coauthor of three books with Ken Blanchard: *Self Leadership and The One Minute Manager*,[®] *Leading at a Higher Level*, and *Empowerment*.

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