

The Psychological Roots of Motivation

Micro Video Script — Olivia G. McGill

Welcome to this BTS Rapid Learning Burst. Today's topic: The Psychological Roots of Motivation.

Mira's star performer, Amit, just gave notice and she's confused. She'd lured him away from a competitor because he was an industry expert, and she made a point to recognize him for his accomplishments and generously compensate him. "Why would he leave?" she wonders.

She asks one of Amit's colleagues if he has any helpful insights. "Well," the colleague responds, "He often complained about last-minute changes you made to his product designs. He said he was never consulted about them and often disagreed with them."

"They were just minor tweaks," Mira says. "If I knew they upset him, we could easily have worked things out."

While it's too late for Mira to get her star performer back, this experience taught her a critical leadership lesson, one reinforced by research. According to motivation expert Daniel Pink and psychologists Edward Deci and Richard Ryan, offering external rewards like pay and recognition will only get leaders so far. To fuel lasting motivation, leaders must attend to their people's three basic psychological needs—autonomy, mastery, and connectedness.

Autonomy is our basic need to experience freedom from external control. To promote autonomy, give people freedom over their time, the people they work with, the work they do, or how they do it. Also involve employees in decisions you make, consult with those impacted by your decisions, or at the very least, explain the rationale behind your decisions.

Mastery is our basic need to feel effective, use our strengths, and get better at what we do. To promote mastery, consider the goals you've set for your people. If a goal is too challenging for someone's current skill level, the person will start to doubt their abilities and feel diminished. If a goal is not challenging enough, though, the person won't have a chance to demonstrate what they're capable of or build on those skills.

Connectedness is our basic need to belong to a group and embrace its purpose. To promote connectedness, create opportunities for your people to develop authentic relationships with each other. Also remind them why they do what they do and how it contributes to the team. Research shows that even a brief reminder of the purpose of one's work can double their performance.

Through this lens, it's clear that Mira failed to recognize how important autonomy would be to someone like Amit, who spent years developing his craft and now expects to have ownership over his work. He likely felt that Mira's "minor tweaks" weren't minor at all. They were demeaning. And he

wondered, “Why hire an expert like me and then undermine the decisions I make?” Had Mira better understood the power of autonomy as a motivator, she still would have carefully reviewed Amit’s work and challenged his assumptions if she felt something wasn’t quite right – that’s her job as a leader. But she’d have let Amit respond to her concerns, and if they agreed changes needed to be made, she’d have asked him to make them.

Amit needed more autonomy, but imagine you have a talented employee who feels her skills aren’t being optimized. In a job that prevents her from achieving mastery, she’ll become disengaged and leave. Or imagine that a talented team member feels unheard in meetings and is often excluded from decision-making. That person will feel disconnected, become unmotivated, and you’ll lose them.

To avoid situations like these, leaders should solicit feedback and reflect on how well they support people’s autonomy, mastery, and connectedness. If they do this regularly, they’ll identify waning motivation in its early stages, learn what truly drives their people, and keep more top performers like Amit.

Thanks for watching.