

Where does motivation come from?

REFLECTIONS ON THE FOURTH COMPONENT OF DEMING'S SYSTEM OF PROFOUND KNOWLEDGE

The late Dr. W. Edwards Deming's principles for transforming management rested on what he called "a system of profound knowledge." This system consists of four components, each of which interacts with the others.

1. Appreciation for a system
2. Some knowledge of theory of variation
3. Theory of knowledge
4. Psychology

Psychology

This fourth component of the system of profound knowledge helps leaders to understand people, their interactions, differences, and different needs.¹ At the center of knowledge of psychology is a leader's ability to understand and differentiate between intrinsic motivation and the effects over time on intrinsic motivation of extrinsic motivators.

Is the appropriate leadership strategy, then, to try to motivate people? Or is it to remove barriers to their own motivation? Peter Senge wrote about this dilemma in efforts to achieve the goal of continuous improvement, "which remains an elusive target" for many American organizations.

Motivate them. From an extrinsic perspective, the only way to get continuous improvement is to find ways to continually motivate people to improve. [After all, Pavlov's dog salivated; it must apply to your co-workers!] Otherwise, they will just sit there – or worse yet, slide backwards. This leads to what workers perceive as management continually raising the bar to manipulate them.

Loose their own motivation with information and appropriate tools. However, from an intrinsic perspective, there is nothing mysterious at all about continuous improvement. If left to their own devices, people [not dogs, but people] will naturally look for ways to do things better. What they need is adequate information and appropriate tools.

From the intrinsic perspective, people's innate curiosity and desire to experiment, if unleashed [I might add, if not blocked], creates an engine for improvement that can never be matched by external rewards.²

Throughout most of his career, Deming's principles came across as a top-down intervention. The message seemed to be, "Top management, clean up your act and drive this thing!" Toward the end of his life, however, Deming shifted gears on us. He would say repeatedly during his lectures, "The transformation begins with the individual; all else follows."

As it relates to psychology, then, we as individuals must sit and ponder and examine our own individual, gut-level value system as it relates to the issue of motivation. Where do you fall on the spectrum of motivation? Do you fall toward the extrinsic end, believing that workers will not apply themselves to their work without some merit reward to pursue? That students will not apply themselves to their studies without some grade or honor roll status to pursue?

Or do you fall toward the intrinsic end of the spectrum, believing that people naturally want to contribute? That people naturally want to experience pride and joy and dignity in the work they do?

Deming couldn't answer these questions for us. Top management can't provide the answers, either. Rather, we as individuals have to make the call. Where do we fall on the spectrum of motivation?

The Deming management system is heavily skewed toward the intrinsic end of the spectrum. Motivation is not something that I do to people. Motivation comes from within, and all I can do is either set up or remove barriers to that intrinsic motivation.

So, where does motivation come from? Where do you fall on the spectrum of motivation?

Notes

¹ W.E. Deming, The New Economics for Industry, Government, Education, Second Edition, MIT Center for Advanced Educational Services (1994), p. 101.

² P. Senge, "Building Learning Organizations," Reprint from the Journal for Quality and Participation, March 1992, p. 3.

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