The Puzzle of Motivation

Dan Pink
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Take-Aways

• Research shows that, with the exception of rote tasks, employee productivity declines when rewards increase.

• Incentives do not boost the conceptual creativity that workers require to succeed in business today.

• Yet the business world uses carrots and sticks to raise performance and productivity. Thus, “there is a mismatch between what science knows and what business does.”

• “Autonomy, mastery and purpose” are the most effective routes to human motivation.

• New workplace models have displayed success.
Recommendation

At the turn of the millennium, nobody would have predicted that an online encyclopedia to which anyone could contribute without getting paid and with little oversight could be a success. Yet that’s exactly how Wikipedia became the world’s go-to reference site. Career analyst Dan Pink connects the dots between motivation and performance. He explains why rewards rarely boost productivity. “Autonomy, mastery and purpose” are the only factors that truly motivate people. getAbstract recommends Pink’s dynamic talk to anyone who seeks to learn about human behavior.

Summary

Psychologist Karl Duncker created the “candle puzzle,” a cognitive science exercise that asks participants to adhere a candle to a wall so that, when lit, wax won’t drip on a table below. Participants have access to a candle, a box of thumbtacks and matches. The solution: Tack the thumbtack box to the wall, place the candle in it and then light the wick. The test examines participants’ “functional fixedness” – that is, their ability to view the thumbtack box as a candleholder rather than its prescribed purpose as a container.

Researcher Sam Glucksberg conducted a variation of the candle experiment to test the influence of incentives on work productivity. In his study, one group of participants garnered rewards according to how fast they solved the puzzle. A second group received none. Surprisingly, the group with incentives found the solution more slowly. Studies around the world produced similar results. However, when researchers asked participants to conduct the experiment when the tacks were already outside the box, the incentives worked. Thus, while rewards do boost productivity for rote tasks, they don’t promote the conceptual, creative thinking required to find solutions and pave new ground in the 21st-century business environment. Yet the business world relies on offering carrots and sticks, rewards and punishments, to raise performance and productivity. Clearly “there is a mismatch between what science knows and what business does.”

Researchers have found that three intrinsic human desires – “autonomy, mastery and purpose” – drive productivity. Atlassian, an Australian software company, has used this knowledge with incredible success. The firm gives its engineers a day every few months to pursue an idea of their choosing. Several software solutions and products have resulted from allowing employees free rein. Two American consultants created another workplace model called the “Results Only Work Environment (ROWE).” Employees work where, when and how they want, as long as they fulfill their job obligations. In ROWE workplaces, productivity rises, turnover rates drop and engagement skyrockets. The gap between research and practice is substantial. Business should consider that monetary incentives work only in a narrow set of routine conditions, that “if-then rewards” actually can impede creativity, and that the key to improved performance isn’t carrots and sticks but “the drive to do things for their own sake.”

About the Speaker

Dan Pink is a career analyst and a contributing editor for Wired. He wrote A Whole New Mind.