RETHINKING LEADERSHIP, NOW THAT EVERYTHING ELSE HAS CHANGED

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RETHINKING LEADERSHIP, NOW THAT EVERYTHING ELSE HAS CHANGED

INTRODUCTION

Leaders and human resource professionals have twice the burdens keeping them awake at night. Traditional challenges[1] such as competition, industry disruption, emerging technology, lagging employee engagement, economic volatility, sales, and attrition and retention concerns contend with new[2] demands such as the need for

- accommodating the 73%[3] of workers who report they want a hybrid work option

- stemming the tide of mass resignations and labor shortages by throwing incentives and bonuses to the 40%[4] of employees who say they plan or hope to change jobs when given the opportunity

- handling DE&I issues

- creating a safe work environment

- putting out today's fires while preparing for an uncertain tomorrow

Despite that daunting list, organizations and leaders still need people to meet job expectations, make deadlines, follow ever-changing rules and protocols, and comply with safety regulations—all while achieving short-term results and long-term strategic initiatives.

Leaders are exhausted. And so are the people they lead. If a crisis is a terrible thing to waste, [5] organizations have an unprecedented opportunity to take advantage of this clarion call to rethink leadership.

But where do you turn for insight during this transition? For an innovative approach to leadership whose time has come, look to validated motivation science.
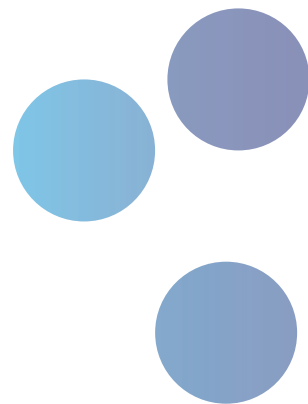
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1 e.g., Moritz, 2017; "19th Annual Global CEO Survey," 2016
2 https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/organization/our-insights/what-executives-are-saying-about-the-future-of-hybrid-work?cid=other-eml-alt-mip-mck&hdpid=c4c85744-7341-4dd1-b0fb-7433c361f373&hctky=3057725&hlkid=15ac26cf4a77450ca454898c4356b943
3 https://www.microsoft.com/en-us/worklab/work-trend-index
4 https://www.microsoft.com/en-us/worklab/work-trend-index
5 https://www.nytimes.com/2009/08/02/magazine/02FOB-onlanguage-t.html

ADVANCES IN MOTIVATION SCIENCE REVEAL THREE NEW COMPETENCIES FOR LEADING AN AWAKENED BUT OVER-STRETCHED AND COMPLEX WORKPLACE

What if leaders accepted that their job is to help people experience high-quality motivation? What if they realized they are more likely to achieve their desired outcomes by focusing on people's motivation? Would they lead differently? Would they be less likely to depend on external rewards to stimulate action and more likely to focus on facilitating people's thriving?

The good news is that we can teach leaders the truth about human nature, motivation, and thriving. And leaders can learn to facilitate their employees' thriving by learning a specific set of skills[6] to ensure people's psychological needs are satisfied.

- **encourage choice (autonomy)**
  Choice, or autonomy, is a person's need to perceive that they have options, that what they are doing is of their own volition, and that they are in control or are the source of their actions.[7]
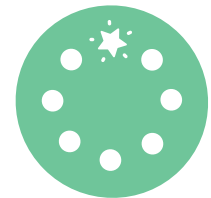
- **deepen connection (relatedness)**
  Connection, or relatedness, is a person's need to care about and be cared about by others, feel connected to others without concerns about ulterior motives, and feel that they are contributing to something greater than themselves.[8]
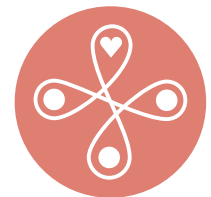
- **build competence**
  Competence is a person's need to feel effective at meeting everyday challenges and opportunities, to demonstrate skill over time, and to feel a sense of growing and flourishing.[9]

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Psychological needs are universal human needs. Global studies show that no matter your culture, generation, or gender, it is better to experience optimal motivation with joy and meaning than to experience suboptimal motivation with ego gratification and rewards.

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6 *Hardré & Reeve, 2009*
7 *Deci & Ryan, 2002*
8 *Deci & Ryan, 2002*
9 *Deci & Ryan, 2002*

This white paper reveals three foundational leadership competencies that provide *basic-need reinforcement*.

Leaders can learn how to provide basic-need reinforcement and nurture a workplace where people are more likely to experience the optimal motivation required to achieve their goals, attain organizational results, and flourish simultaneously[10]. An added bonus: These competencies also fuel employee work passion and the inherent benefits of an actively engaged workforce.[11]

EXPLAINING BASIC-NEED REINFORCEMENT

The term *autonomy-support* is used in research to define the actions of a leader who considers the feelings and points of view of others, provides them with meaningful and useful information about rules and expectations, offers them opportunities to make choices and take initiative, and gives positive and constructive feedback.[12]

A leader who adopts practices that are autonomy-supportive has a positive impact on the satisfaction of basic needs and promotes more self-determined motivation.[13]

In this white paper, we refer to these autonomy-supportive behaviors as basic-need reinforcement.
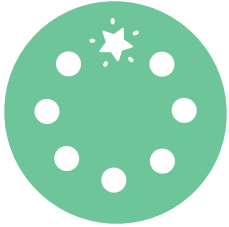
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10 *Fowler, 2014; Fowler, 2019*
11 *Shuck, Roberts, & Zigarmi, 2018; Thibault-Landry, Egan, Crevier-Braud, Manganelli & Forest, 2018*
12 *Gagne, 2014*
13 *Gagne & Deci, 2005*

BASIC-NEED REINFORCEMENT STRATEGIES

HOW TO ENCOURAGE CHOICE

Leaders erode a person's sense of choice by using controlling language, imposing goals and metrics, depending on rewards and incentives to manipulate behavior, micromanaging, and applying pressure to drive results.[14]

The competency of encouraging choice asks leaders to

- illuminate boundaries, then explore options within those boundaries

- present goals and timelines as valuable information necessary for achieving agreed-upon outcomes

- use noncontrolling language and asking questions to encourage choice

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People's internalization of circumstances determines their perception of choice. Many roles demand strict adherence to rules, regulations, and processes. How a leader communicates those limits can facilitate the employee's internal frame of reference toward or away from perceived autonomy.

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14 Hardré & Reeve, 2009

Providing people with choice and autonomy does not equate to freedom. Autonomy is a person's perception of choice, control, or volition, regardless of whether the leader granted permission.

Encouraging choice: Example 1

- Avoid establishing boundaries in a way that erodes autonomy, such as "When selling our pharmaceutical product, you must adhere to strict FDA guidelines including (state guidelines). If you go outside the bounds of these guidelines, you face immediate termination."

- Instead, illuminate boundaries and explore choices within those boundaries: "When selling this product, there are strict FDA guidelines including (state guidelines). You need to stay within these boundaries to protect your client, yourself, our company—and most importantly, the patient receiving the drug. Within these limits, however, you still have the freedom to make choices and decisions that will affect your client relationships, the quality of your proposals, and the effectiveness of your efforts. Let's talk about the choices you have that might influence how you approach selling this product."

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When leaders frame their message as needed insight or inside knowledge to help the employee succeed, they are less likely to generate feelings of being controlled by pressure, fear, guilt, shame, power, status, or tangible and intangible external rewards.

Encouraging choice requires communicating workplace requirements and performance feedback as data or information.

Encouraging choice: Example 2

- Avoid communicating deadlines in a way that erodes autonomy: "You must submit the team's report no later than July 20."

- Instead, communicate a deadline as a piece of valuable information that encourages a sense of choice: "Our project needs to be completed by July 20, so the CFO has time to review it before the board meeting on August 15. This spreadsheet proposes a project timeline so that each team member understands their role and can schedule their contributions appropriately. I propose that Joe have data compiled by April 1, that Sally's analysis is completed by May 15, and that I have conclusions completed by June 15. This schedule gives you time to generate the report between June 15 and July 20, so the CFO has time to review it before presenting it at the board meeting on August 15. Do you foresee any steps I haven't included in this proposal? Are there challenges I haven't considered that might influence this timeline or your ability to complete the report by July 20?"

Encouraging choice means asking non-controlling open-ended questions designed to promote awareness of options.

Encouraging choice: Example 3

- Avoid controlling language that erodes autonomy: "Your deadline for this goal is next week. You need to do whatever it takes and push harder to finish this one on time."

- Instead, use non-controlling language that prompts the individual to come to their own conclusions about how to achieve their goal:

  - You may feel that this task, goal, or situation was imposed on you. I know you face external pressure and strict protocols. What options can you identify that might help relieve the tension you feel and provide you with some sense of control over the situation?

  - Are you feeling pressured when you think about the task, goal, or situation? Where is the pressure coming from? Why do you think that is?

  - How do you feel about the choices you made this week? What choices did you make that you wish you had not? Why? What choices did you make that you are glad you did? Why?
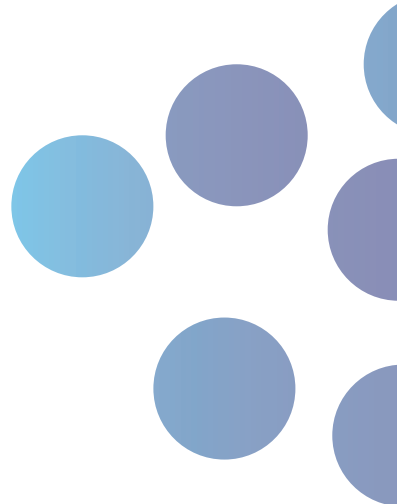
HOW TO DEEPEN CONNECTION
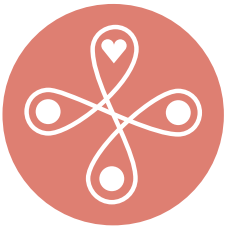
Leaders erode a person's sense of connection by failing to provide
a rationale for work, promoting metrics without meaning, ignoring feelings,
driving for results without awareness of personal concerns, and generating
isolation through a lack of justice and transparency.[15]

Deepening connection asks leaders to

• demonstrate empathy and caring through listening and acknowledging
  expressions of negative emotions

• offer pure and informational feedback rather than personal or
  evaluative praising

• promote mindfulness by asking open-ended questions to deepen
  connection

Deepening connection requires proactive listening combined with
an acceptance that an employee's negative affect and sentiments
are potentially valid reactions to a problematic or unappealing situation.

Deepening connection: Example 1

• Avoid downplaying or diminishing emotions: "You shouldn't feel that
  way. Everyone has failed at one time or another. You just need to work
  harder next time."

• Instead, provide an opportunity for the individual to acknowledge
  emotions: "It seems you might be wrestling with this right now. If that's
  true, I hope you feel comfortable using me as a sounding board. Talking
  through what happened and what you're experiencing might enable
  you to make sense of it or even come to peace with it."

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15 Fowler, 2014

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Deepening connection also requires a high degree of self-regulation by the leader to stay focused on the employee's needs for expression rather than their own—including the leader's need to praise someone.

Deepening connection: Example 2

- Avoid giving personal and evaluative feedback that erodes connection. Praising a person may result in momentary good feelings for the person receiving your positive opinion, but also may increase the risk of the receiver being dependent on external positive evaluation rather than their internal state of being: "You made me happy when . . . ; I was so glad that you . . . ; I'm so proud of you."

- Instead, provide pure and informational feedback that deepens connection: "One of your goals for this project was to break down silos within the company and gain participation from a variety of departments. I noticed that you received endorsements from three departments on the report you generated. How do you feel about your effort and the outcome?"

Deepening connection means asking non-controlling, open-ended questions designed to align goals and situations to values, purpose, and sense of meaning.

Deepening connection: Example 3

- Avoid focusing on tangible and intangible external rewards that almost always result in suboptimal motivation:
  "If you really focus over the next couple of weeks you can still make your bonus and qualify for the sales trip."

- Instead, ask questions that help the individual find deeper, more profound, and sustainable reasons for achieving their goal:

    - As you think about this goal, how does it align with your values or work-related purpose?

    - What about this goal reminds you of the contribution you make to others through your work?

    - Why would achieving this goal be meaningful to you, aside from the incentives, rankings, and sales trip?

HOW TO BUILD COMPETENCE

Leaders erode a person's sense of competence by focusing on performance outcomes at the expense of learning outcomes by punishing mistakes, and by failing to provide appropriate direction and support so people can demonstrate skill over time.[16]

Building competence asks leaders to

- provide training and appropriate leadership style for the person's level of development

- promote mindfulness by asking questions to build competence

- establish norms for individuals requesting feedback instead of having them wait to receive the feedback they need to learn and grow.

One of the most effective strategies for building competence is to flip the feedback. Explain that you are always willing and ready to provide feedback but find it's most effective when you provide it after being asked. Establish a norm that weekly or biweekly, your team members proactively solicit feedback on their progress and performance.

Building competence: Example 1

- Avoid giving empty and unsolicited feedback that doesn't build a person's competence: "I'm happy to see that you met your goal in time."

- Instead, acknowledge their progress and comply with their request for feedback: "I appreciate the update on your progress. Let's discuss what you did that worked, what you might have done differently in hindsight, and what you learned that would help you on similar goals in the future."

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16 Gunnell, Crocker, Wilson, Mack, & Zumbo, 2013

People need to feel a sense of progress. They can be satisfied snowplowing on the bunny slopes when they first put on a pair of skis. But if their goal is to ski on expert slopes, they will become disillusioned with suboptimal motivation if they don't master the beginner's slope over time.

Building a person's sense of competence requires the leader to understand that in the beginning, everyone is a learner who needs high direction that provides structure, guidance, and specific how-to instructions. But, as an employee's experience, competence, and commitment develop over time, a leader must exercise flexibility to provide the appropriate amount of direction and support—while still encouraging growth and learning.[17]

Micromanaging occurs when a leader provides too much direction to someone who has demonstrated competence. Overdirecting someone who has shown competence before, but suffers from low performance due to lost commitment, further erodes motivation and confidence to perform. However, failing to provide enough direction to someone with low capabilities erodes a sense of competence—impeding performance even further.

Building competence: Example 2

- Avoid micromanaging someone who has demonstrated competence in the past: "It appears that the beta test failed to meet the required standards. I've outlined what you need to do differently. You've got one more try, or we risk losing our funding."

- Instead, with someone who has demonstrated competence in the past, provide an opportunity to problem solve and build competence: "Given the results of the beta test and the demanding timelines for meeting standard requirements, let's explore your options, discuss what you need, and decide how I can help you get where you need to go."

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17 Blanchard, K., Zigarmi, D., et al., 1993

Building competence means asking questions that mindfully remind the individual of their innate need to learn and become more effective at meeting everyday challenges.

Building competence: Example 3

- Avoid judgment and using reverse psychology to prod people into action: "You seem to be moving backwards instead of forward. Do you think you have what it takes to make this work?"

- Instead, ask questions that help the individual tap into their inherent love of learning and need to recognize progress over perfection:

    - As you think of your week, what did you learn that might help you in the future?

    - I appreciate how you strive for perfection. But it's important to learn from mistakes and build on what's working. What progress did you make this week? What do you need to continue making progress?

    - What new skills are you developing from pursuing as you pursue this goal?

WHY ASKING QUESTIONS TO CREATE CHOICE, CONNECTION, AND COMPETENCE IS EFFECTIVE

Leaders often ask for progress reports on a goal. But the nature of their questions can thwart rather than support people's psychological needs—especially if people feel the leader's reasons are self-serving.[18] Instead, leaders can ask goal-related or general questions to stimulate a person's experience of choice, connection, and competence.

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Leaders can provide basic-need reinforcement every day by asking the right questions. Asking people to reflect on recent decisions encourages choice. Asking people to consider how they fulfilled values or found meaning in their work deepens connection. Asking people what they've learned builds competence.

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18 Zigarmi, D., Blanchard, K., et al, 2004

Questions are effective because they facilitate people's internal frame of choice, connection, and competence. They encourage a person's self-regulation by promoting mindfulness, a nonjudgmental state of awareness that enables one to recognize options and alternatives.[19]

The health benefits of mindfulness are widely accepted.[20] Neuroscience also shows a significant correlation between mindfulness and creativity; empathy with others; and the direct experience of choice, connection, and competence.[21]

RETHINKING LEADERSHIP REQUIRES RESKILLING LEADERS

Rethinking leadership is a process. An excellent first step is to educate leaders on the empirically proven benefits of supporting people's psychological needs—and affirm that people's optimal motivation is a tactical and strategic advantage. Leaders directly influence employees' development and performance by ensuring that their team members are optimally motivated to achieve goals and meet everyday challenges. But they also help assure sustained high performance and well-being that fuel the upper end of employee engagement known as work passion—and all the ROIs associated with a highly engaged workforce.

When leaders understand the nature of an optimally motivated workforce, they also become aware of thwarting people's psychological needs through traditionally sanctioned leadership competencies. But they may be reluctant to let go of the old carrots, sticks, command-and-control approaches, and manipulative behaviors without new skills to replace them.

Reskilling leaders means teaching them basic-need reinforcement strategies through new leadership competencies: encourage choice, deepen connection, and build competence. Learning to provide direction while satisfying people's psychological needs is essential for creating a vital workforce that flourishes and achieves results.

19 Brown, Creswell, & Ryan, 2015
20 Langer, 1989
21 e.g., Brown & Ryan, 2003

⊙ MOJO MOMENT

Ask leaders what they want *from* the people they lead, and they are clear on their expectations. Ask leaders what they want *for* people, and they pause. But it doesn't take them long before to realize they want people to experience productive and meaningful work, have opportunities for continuous growth and learning, and have the well-being and vitality to have happiness, joy, and peace at the end of the day. In short, they want people to thrive.

Optimal motivation is the path to thriving and getting results. So, when leaders focus on what they want *for* people, they direct their efforts to satisfy people's need for choice, connection, and competence. Ironically, leaders get the results they seek by shifting from what they want *from* people to what they want *for* people.
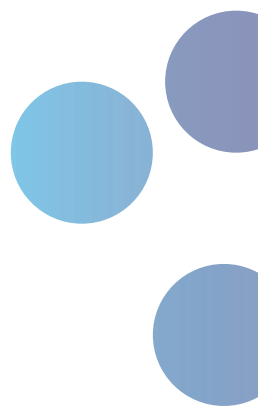
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