To maximize your personal productivity and enjoy your work, identify and harness your motivated abilities.

The Keys to Turbo-Charging Intrinsic Motivation

Christine Robinson

Have you ever wondered why some people succeed and some don’t or why a long-sought-after promotion brought so much stress? Has your company ever sent everyone to special training, but the learning only “took” for a few? Do sermons about spiritual gifts and talents make you curious about your gifts and talents? When you read about intrinsic motivation, do you wonder what it means? Have you ever noticed how some activities seem to pass by quickly, while others seem to drag on, and on, and on? If you have answered, “yes” to any of these questions, then it is time to learn more about intrinsic motivation.

Uniquely Human

It all starts in your brain—although some might suggest that it would be better to say your soul. Psychology and religion disagree on the ultimate source of what makes each person unique. The spark of life that makes you more than strands of DNA powering a chemical factory carries with it something that makes each person an individual.

Whether you are in the nature or nurture camp, or somewhere in between, you have learned how to tell people apart. Faces, names, relationships, behaviors, and mutual experiences all help you differentiate between the people you know. They also impact your behavior and contribute to your uniqueness, as Judith Harris suggests.1 She also says that a combination of genetics, relationships with others, membership in different groups, and competition with rivals are the key determinants of individual behavior.

George Box once wrote, “Essentially, all models are wrong, but some are useful.”2 The quest to understand why we act as we do has led to many theories of behavior and motivation. Each theory has found some general usefulness in practice. A brief list of some of the more widely known theories includes the following:

- The operant conditioning theory of Edward Thorndike and B.F. Skinner postulates that you learn and repeat behaviors based on their consequences.3
• Douglas McGregor’s Theory X and Theory Y categorizes people as those who are lazy and require authoritarian management and those who want to do a good job and deserve collaborative and trusting management.3

• Frederick Herzberg’s two-factor theory talks about the difference between and the impact of motivators and hygiene factors.5

• Abraham Maslow’s hierarchy of needs looks at how physiological, safety, belongingness and love, esteem, and self-actualization needs, as well as cognitive and aesthetic needs, drive behavior. People whose lower-level needs are not met will focus on the actions that are most likely to satisfy those needs. Increased need satisfaction brings into play higher-order needs, introduces the possibility of taking the satisfied needs for granted, and redefines the ideal future (utopia).6

• Edward Deci’s cognitive evaluation theory looks at the concepts of self-determination and competence and their impact on enjoyment of activities.7,8

• Hackman and Oldham’s job characteristics model looks at the impact of core job dimensions of skill variety, task identity, task significance, autonomy, and feedback; the psychological states of work meaningfulness, responsibility for outcomes, and knowledge of results; and desired outcomes as determinants of how you decide what you will do.8,9

• Cultural archetypes, such as those identified for The Stuff Americans Are Made Of, identify those subconscious motivations that are absorbed as part of socialization.10

This profusion of models tends to break down when working with individuals. Although it is easy to classify people into psychological types using one of the many assessment tools on the market (such as the Myers Briggs® Type Indicator, the Strong Interest Inventory®, the California Psychological Inventory™, and the Fundamental Interpersonal Relations Orientation™ assessments); it is difficult to use a limited number of categories and characteristics to explain accurately why a person does what he or she does. Even the “best fit” category will not fit exactly. Personalities are wonderfully variable, so a finite number of categories will always fail to account for every attribute that makes two people (even Siamese twins) so completely different.

This leads back to thinking about the possibility that each person is born with (or develops early in life) a unique set of talents and dispositions, which make him or her an individual. Why mention this in an article on quality? This is important because it is exactly those talents and dispositions that can make the difference between success and failure. Arthur Miller, the founder of People Management International, says, “Everyone has certain abilities he or she is motivated to use, certain abilities he or she is not motivated to use, and many aptitudes he or she is neither good at, nor motivated to use.”11 When motivated abilities are harnessed, they lead to passion, energy, creativity, and productivity. When denied, they lead to stress, unhappiness, and frustration—negative drivers, which can prevent an organization from achieving its goals.

**Innate Motivation**

What should these critical success factors be called? According to Marlys Hanson, many terms are possible including innate motivation, giftedness, talents, motivated abilities, natural strengths, motivational patterns, and passion and purpose. They all can describe “the naturally endowed needs, drivers, or desires that motivate a person to some particular action or behavior” and result in the “effortless action people feel in moments that stand out as the best in their lives.”12

This innate motivation is something that expresses itself early in life and resists change.13 According to Miller, “we can change our bad habits, our values, our beliefs, our perceptions, our attitudes, our sensibilities, and our biases. But we have never seen any compelling evidence that proves that people can be changed at the level of innate motivation.”13 Yes, you can and do change. Maslow emphasized that as needs are fulfilled, other needs will become more important. This brings about changes to values, personality, and behavior.4 In addition, “Skills can be learned to increase effectiveness. Sloppy work habits or lifestyles can be reorganized. All of these improvements enhance who we are but do not change our basic design.”14 Just because you know how to do something doesn’t mean that you will be motivated to actually use that skill. The unchanging nature of motivated abilities means that organizations ultimately will be unsuccessful
when trying to change what motivates an individual. Their only option is to discover the nature of this motivation and harness it.

If not harnessed at work, your motivational pattern will express itself somewhere and somehow in your life. Whether in hobbies, volunteer work, sports, or some other type of activity, you will "actively seek out whatever it is that gets your motivational juices going." The extent to which these abilities are used will help define whether you feel satisfied and fulfilled in life. This is both good news and bad news; good news because knowledge of your innate motivation can help guide action toward what will be fulfilling, and bad news because "employee surveys tell us that probably only one third of all employees are engaged in work activities that use their motivated abilities at least 70 percent of the time." A related concern is that even if you are able to perform a task (due to education and/or training), any attempt to sustain performance which is not motivated will result in stress or an unconscious attempt to restructure the task so that it better matches motivation. Such restructuring is not done because you are self-willed, stubborn, or rebellious, but because the task cannot be done well any other way.

If you end up in a job that is a poor fit for your motivated abilities, it can be due to one of several reasons, such as:

- External rewards (typically money) may be too strong an attraction, overriding the knowledge or suspicion that the job would not be a good fit.
- Pressure from the organization (to be a team player or to "move up or move out") may force a poor career decision. It is not unusual to promote an outstanding engineer or sales rep and end up with a manager who lacks the motivated abilities to excel in the job.
- You may have a non-confrontational personality and couldn't say no.
- You may lack the self-knowledge that would have identified the poor job fit. Most people complete their years of formal education without learning what, how, or why they are motivated to learn. Similarly, performance reviews and job coaching typically fail to reveal the motivational patterns that drive excellence.

- The organization's leaders may have misrepresented the true nature of the job because they didn't understand the motivated abilities that would produce the best candidate.

Revealing Your Motivation

How do you discover your motivated abilities? Several books can guide the process or a consultant trained in using the System for Identifying Motivated Abilities (SIMA®) may provide value. A brief summary of the process follows.

Defining your motivational pattern begins with identifying several accomplishments that you enjoyed and felt you did well—achievement coupled with satisfaction—not experiences, milestones, or events of psychological significance. These achievements are then described in detail. Finally, the detailed descriptions are carefully reviewed, looking for patterns of behavior that reveal the underlying motivation. Several different motivational aspects are normally identified and are organized into what is sometimes called a Motivated Ability Pattern® (MAP). These broad motivational aspects are payoff, subject matter, circumstances, relationships, and abilities. Each of these aspects constitute a complex set of behaviors. Every individual will have a different mix of those behaviors that come easily and those requiring significantly more effort. The behaviors that come easily are preferred, dominate how you deal with life, and define your motivated pattern.

The central motivational result or payoff is the primary outcome that you seek to achieve when you tap into the other four categories. It is what makes you feel a sense of accomplishment and satisfaction. This can be personal performance, impact or effect on someone or something, personal power, goal achievement, or engagement in a process.

Recurring subject matter is something on which, with which, or through which you enjoy working. It can range from something very concrete to something quite abstract. It can consist of data, things, senses, people, or ideas and can be identified by looking at the nouns used in the detailed achievement descriptions. Most people will have more than one motivating subject that brings them enjoyment.

Motivating circumstances are the circumstances or situations that stimulate achievement.
This can include involvement, level of structure, environment and nature of external controls, type of recognition and level of visibility, amount of latitude, presence of competition, time constraints, performance measures, and many other types of circumstances. If motivating conditions are not present, there will be a tendency to exert little or no effort. If other motivating elements are present, an attempt might be made to create the needed motivating circumstances (e.g., a person motivated to solve problems might go looking for a problem to solve).

Operating relationships are the ways you prefer to relate to others and the best way for a supervisor to relate to you. People function best in a single role: as an individual contributor whose effort does not depend on making others take action; as someone who influences others to take action but doesn’t want “overall responsibility for confronting others and dealing with adversity;” or as the leader/overseer responsible for putting others’ talents to use to accomplish a goal or get something done. Each person is "comfortable in a certain operating relationship with the authority figures in his or her life. Some people want close, supportive relationships, others want their leaders to point them in a direction and then get out of the way, and still others will work only for people who treat them as equals.”

Motivated abilities are the approaches to work which come naturally, which are absorbing and engaging, and which are identified in the verbs you use to describe what you did. They include both action (such as writing, building, and drawing) and thought processes (such as planning and analyzing). There are several sub-categories of motivated abilities; and authors differ on how many and what they are called. A typical list includes the following:

- **Learning/Fact Finding.** How do you learn or best take in information? This could be through reading, observing, trying, memorizing, asking, or discussing. This ties in with Howard Gardner’s theory of multiple intelligences and Maslow’s cognitive needs. Knowledge workers tend to be motivated to learn in several ways, are usually better-than-average students, and frequently allow their ability to learn to take them into “unmotivated” areas.

- **Visualizing.** What kind of mental images do you create? This includes conceptualizing, picturing, and imagining.

- **Evaluating.** How do you evaluate information to make decisions? This could be through analyzing, empathizing, weighing pros and cons, calculating, comparing, or assessing worth.

- **Planning.** How do you go about planning what needs to be done? This could be through organizing, practicing, picturing, setting goals, or strategizing.

- **Organizing.** How do you go about preparing to get the work done? This includes how information is used and could incorporate classifying, providing structure, rehearsing, gathering, etc.

- **Creating/Developing.** How did you cause the new object or idea to emerge? It could be through adapting, originating, inventing, growing, constructing, or designing.

- **Overseeing.** How do you work with or through others? Do you facilitate, direct, check, coordinate, lead, inspire, or manage?

- **Influencing.** How did you influence others to respond? Do you bargain, converse, teach, explain, write, suggest, counsel, nurture, or persuade?

- **Doing.** Do you take a "hands-on" approach? Do you operate, maintain, oversee, or manipulate?

- **Performing.** Do you seek an audience? Performing includes athletics, academics, music, acting, and the visual arts.

A thorough analysis of your intrinsic motivations will provide an “aha” moment as you recognize the key element of what motivates you.

**Motivation at Work**

If you are routinely able to utilize your inner motivations at work you will find you are more creative, effective, and productive. Motivated work will come more easily. You will have the ability to recognize work that doesn’t utilize motivated behaviors, allowing conscious effort to be applied. You also will have the ability to determine when a potential job change is not in your best interest. Finally, where the workplace cannot or does not provide fulfillment, motivational insight will allow you to identify fulfilling avocations or hobbies.
Managers who take the time to learn about intrinsic motivation, discover what motivated abilities are available within their workforce, structure jobs to take advantage of these motivations, and see that personal gifts are matched with job requirements will see better productivity, more creativity, and a happier workforce. They will realize that motivational programs, which focus on extrinsic motivators, will bring more transient results than focusing on intrinsic motivation.

Taking Informed Action
The insight provided by the motivational theories mentioned in this article is not complete; in part because the theories are more complex than can be discussed here, but primarily because they are all limited and cannot give definitive guidance for all situations. They can, however, provide knowledge and understanding that allows you to identify better which activities will best harness your passion for life and lead to happiness and success. The advanced brain functions that separate you from other animals allow you to think about what you are going to do before you take action. This process of deliberate thought and choice permits you to rise above your instinctual needs and reactions, as well as your cultural predispositions and motivated abilities, and lets you take an active role in creating your future.

References
12. Marlys Hanson and Merle Hanson, Passion and Purpose: How to Identify and Leverage the Powerful Patterns That Shape Your Work/Life, Pathfinder Press, 2002.

Author’s Note: Motivated Ability Pattern® (MAP) and System for Identifying Motivated Abilities (SIMA®) are registered trademarks of People Management International LLC.

Christine Robinson is a consulting quality engineer who has earned the following ASQ certifications: QE, CQA, and CMQ/OE. She specializes in quality systems development, documentation, and improvement. Robinson has more than 25 years of experience in quality for manufacturing operations and support, service, and nonprofit organizations. Contact her at cqechris@att.net.