

*When faced with “I can’t get my staff to change” we should consider if we’ve inadvertently drifted to an “avoiding punishment” strategy and could be appealing to higher levels of moral development for motivation*

## Motivation and Moral Development Stages

(2014)

Motivation is a universal issue. We struggle to motivate ourselves to do what we want and need to do, especially to do what’s good for us. Burnout is always just around the corner. Staff complain that their clients aren’t motivated while program managers and leaders complain that their staff aren’t motivated. Frustration often leads to “how can I make them do it?”

I believe we can be more successful motivating ourselves and others if we target our efforts to the level of moral development the person we’re trying to motivate is at. Traditionally there are four levels of development:

- 1) Avoiding punishment
- 2) Seeking out rewards
- 3) Internalizing rewards and rewarding ourselves
- 4) Connecting to more universal values or principles above our own self interest

Note that no one is always at any level. Depending on the situation and on our morale and inspiration any one of us may be operating at any one of these levels. Nonetheless, we all have a predominant level.

Each of these levels responds to different motivators

- 1) Threat of and actual punishment
- 2) Promise of and actual rewards
- 3) Appeals to self interest and actual self advantage
- 4) Appealing to values and actual promotion of values

Note that for each of these there is motivation from anticipation and from consequence. We’d expect the anticipation to only work with trust and consistency in follow through of actual consequences.

Attempting to motivate people at a higher level than where they actually are is likely to fail, since they’re usually not really aware of the higher levels existence. For example, some mothers who lose their children who are fearful of punishment aren’t likely to even see the possibility of rewards if a family reunification plan is implemented so they avoid contact with the court and their social worker expecting only punishments. On the other hand, attempting to motivate people at a lower level than where they are leads to people feeling disrespected and undermines collaboration.

We're likely to initially try to motivate people using the same level of motivation that would work best with ourselves. For example, self motivated leaders are likely to "hire good people and get out of their way so they can do good work". Reward motivated staff are likely to praise and reward their clients. When this doesn't work, we're all likely to drift down to the lowest level in our frustration rather than refine our approach at a higher level.

Motivational messaging can be adapted to meet the level people are at. For example if we're trying to get staff to implement a new Evidence Based Treatment we could tell them:

- 1) If we don't do this, one of our competitors will and we'll be at risk of losing our jobs. If we just pretend we're doing it, there are auditors who will be reviewing our charts for fidelity to the model who will catch us.
- 2) If we do this correctly we can become a center of excellence and attract additional resources.
- 3) Learning this additional practice will allow you to have another tool in your kit and you'll be able to help more people and feel good about the work you're doing.
- 4) It's important for us to be giving our clients the best services we can, ones that have been scientifically proven to be effective.

Similarly, data driven accountability efforts can be adapted to meet the level people are at:

- 1) Quantitative benchmarks and expectations can be developed and people can be punished for not meeting their requirements. Negative events can also be quantified and people punished when they occur too often.
- 2) Quantitative benchmarks and expectations can be developed and people can be rewarded for meeting or exceeding their requirements.
- 3) People's input can be solicited as to what benchmarks and expectation would be valued by them and then given access to the data to evaluate and reward themselves and modify their own behaviors to improve their achievements.
- 4) Data can be developed that demonstrate that people are meeting higher values and the shared mission.

Each level of moral development has strengths and weaknesses that impact motivation:

- 1) People who avoid punishment are likely to avoid all responsibility and become passive, helpless, victims in their lives. Avoiding responsibility is rarely a formula for success. Instead it can become a formula for not acknowledging or learning from your mistakes, being avoided by collaborators, and being unable to control your own life. Extreme appeals to external "fairness" are frequent since the punishment isn't seen as deserved. Motivation is almost always short lived because fear of consequences can't be maintained consistently over long periods without a pervasive culture of coercion.
- 2) People who seek external rewards are at the mercy of the people around them and external circumstances and struggle to sustain self-reliant efforts when their self responsibility isn't

rewarded. Systems with misdirected, irrational, inconsistent, or contradictory incentives create internal conflict and confusion that saps their motivation.

- 3) People who are internally motivated can sustain ongoing motivation if they're able to create their own space, but that may lead to loneliness, isolation, decreased team investment, and resentment of others not pulling their own weight. There is a risk of personalizing everything good and bad. Motivation can then depend on if they feel personally valued or not.
- 4) People who are external value driven can sustain motivation if they feel they are serving a higher cause well. They have the moral certitude that they're doing the right things for the right reasons. There is a risk of moralizing conflict, "demonizing" opposition, and resisting compromise to principles and values. There is also a risk if their core values are discredited of feeling betrayed and purposeless.

Although each level has its strengths and weaknesses, in general people are likely to be more successful if they advance levels. Therefore, it is a good long term strategy to try to help people continue their development from wherever they are.

- 1) People can be made more aware of the possibility of rewards. We can "catch them being good" fill the environment with rewards and let them see their peers being rewarded. They may also need help with an internal process of feeling that they have value to others or that the world is a reasonably benign place so that rewards seem more plausible.
- 2) People can be helped to understand the rationalization for rewards so they can internalize the process and begin to reward themselves. Empowerment efforts can help strengthen people to value and reward themselves. Help in developing and articulating individual values and principles can build a foundation for self reward.
- 3) People can be exposed to other people who share their values and principles so they begin to feel larger than just individual values and principles. Feeling part of a larger movement, allied with an inspiring and meaningful shared vision statement, and connecting with a higher power or spiritual movement can build more universal values and principles. Developing compassion and empathy for others can help people move beyond our personal self centered perspectives as well.

However, moving up each level in the hierarchy means less direct control for the motivator.

- 1) Punishment can be precisely directed and feels like we're "making" someone do what we want. Many punishments are more or less universally effective. Once an "effective punishment" is found it can be used to repeatedly control someone else's behavior. (Conversely, if effective punishments can't be found, we often feel helpless – "there's nothing I can do with them.")
- 2) Rewards are somewhat less easily controlled. It's more individualized what rewards people will respond to and even any individual may vary from time to time as to what rewards will work. There is a sense that the person has to "buy into" the reward. That gives some power and control to the person we're trying to motivate. (This level can get to the point of "what's in it for

me?” and “scratch my back and I’ll scratch yours” where the motivator feels manipulated and used.)

- 3) Internalized rewards are heavily under the person’s own control. They only do “what I want to do”. The motivator has to prove that it’s really important to the other person to get them to do what they want them to do. There often has to be trust and a strength of relationship to motivate self rewarding people to do something for someone else.
- 4) Motivating by connecting to higher values or principles takes things even further out of personal control. The motivator has to prove that it’s the “right thing to do”. There often has to be a sense of shared vision and higher purpose.

If we already feels like we’re not able to motivate someone well enough, it may feel counterproductive to help them develop further because our personal control over them will decrease. It’s easy to forget that the goal is to improve their behavior not to increase our control of them.

As I’ve spent some time thinking through common situations using the lens of stages of moral development, it seems to me that some of my common frustrations and mistakes are clarified. Hopefully I can motivate myself to use what I learn.