Brief Manager-Employee Dialogs: 
A Self-Determination Theory Perspective

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1. The managerial problem of motivation

- Management often relies on **extrinsic motivators**: bonuses, performance indicators, competition, etc.
- "**How else** can I motivate my people?"
- But people are **intrinsically motivated** and spontaneously active
- Only in contexts where they **don’t thrive** do they stop being active
- We can motivate people by creating **conditions for flourishing**
2. Self-Determination Theory (SDT)

- SDT is a psychology of human motivation, development and well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2017)
- By nature, humans are spontaneously active and tend to integration.
- But this process is not automatic. Certain "nutriments" must be provided.
  People have psychological needs:
  - **Autonomy**: Feeling in charge of one’s life. Acting out of volition, from a sense of self, endorsing one’s actions. Not independence.
  - **Competence**: One’s actions lead to desired results. Sense of mastery.
  - **Relatedness**: Caring, belonging, love, fellowship
3. How managers can provide autonomy support to employees

- **Perspective taking**: See things from the employee’s perspective
- **Acknowledge feelings**: See and accept the employee’s emotions
- **Give information** – about what is about to happen
- **Provide a rationale** for requested behavior (why it is important)
- **Provide choice** – not everything needs to be fixed
- **Avoid controlling language** (‘You must’, I want you to…’)

4. Brief dialog with autonomy support

**Task delegation** (how to ask people to do a task)

• “Sarah and David: I would ask you to take assignment X. It is an important part of our mission. I think it's realistic that you solve it using resources in amount A. You can do it before date B. Is that realistic?”

**Inviting employees’ input** (making sure they “own” the task)

• “How do you think the task should be tackled?”

• “You have a lot of experience with this. How can you bring it into play?

• “Good work! Sarah, you mentioned three approaches and the second is spot on, I believe. David, can you help her?”
5. Competence support to employees

- Recognize the employee’s **skills**
- Support their own **initiatives**
- Introduce **structure** (framework, instruction: ‘Try to do like this’)
- Provide optimal **challenges** (a little over competencies)
- Avoid negative language usage (e.g.: "It’ll never work. I doubt that you can. You're disappointing me.")
- Provide **feedback** indicating direction and progress
6. Brief dialog with competence support

Gathering info about **task progression**
- “Are things on schedule?“
- “Have you structured the task so you can manage it?“
- "Do you have the resources needed?“

**Giving feedback** about direction and progress
- "As far as I can see, you've solved the task in this way X. Excellent!“
- “You’ve done the first part of the task really well, but I'm worried about your scheduling. May I suggest you spend an extra day on quality assurance?“
- “I know you always go for the optimal solution, but our resources are limited here!"
7. Relatedness support

- Organize the work so it will be carried out in teams.
- Emphasize that everyone is unique and important
- Highlight each employee’s contribution
- Avoid competition and jargon that creates an “us-them” mindset
- Recall the larger, common goal (laying bricks or building a cathedral)
8. Brief dialog with relatedness support – in a team meeting

**Common goals** – in the team meeting

- “Everyone, find a specific, smaller task you have accomplished today and let the rest of us know how it contributes to the cathedral”
- "Think of one thing you've done in a different way, successfully. Show how this helped complete the task in a better way.”

**Team flourishing** (hearing how people are doing)

- "How’s it going with the task?“
- “How are you three coming along? Are you on top of things? “
- “You seem busy, Eliza. Would you like somebody to assist you?”
9. Concluding: Managers’ brief need support

- **Alternative** to extrinsic-based management
- Manager focuses on **supporting** employees’ psychological needs
- And how: Through **brief dialogs** held with individual employees
- This is our response when busy managers ask: “How do I **motivate quick-and-dirty** if not by extrinsic means?”
- “Do it **quick-and-clean**”