

# Intrinsic Motivation at Work: What Really Drives Employee Engagement

by Kenneth W. Thomas

## 4 Four Intrinsic Rewards- Meaningfulness, Choice, Competence, And Progress

This part of the book will introduce you to the four intrinsic rewards that drive employee engagement, give you an understanding of their powerful effects, and provide you with a diagnostic framework you can use to build those rewards.

### The Four Intrinsic Rewards

During the compliance era when work was less meaningful, managers were forced to think about how they could make workers care about their work. So their motivational arsenal depended heavily on using rewards and punishments that were extrinsic to the work itself and on applying direct social pressure. It would likely surprise those old-school managers to learn that the key rewards that drive worker engagement today come directly from engagement itself—from the steps involved in active self-management that we discussed in the last chapter.

How is that possible?

Each of the events in the self-management process requires the worker to make a judgment—of the meaningfulness of the task purpose, the degree of choice available in selecting activities, how competently he or she is performing those activities, and the amount of progress being made toward the task purpose. <sup>[1]</sup>These four judgments, then, are logical requirements of self-management. But they are much more than that. They are not detached, arm's-length judgments—they carry a strong emotional charge. When the judgments are positive, their emotional charges *are* the intrinsic rewards of self-management—the emotional "juices" that energize and reinforce continued engagement. <sup>[2]</sup>In our research, Walt Tymon and I have found it helpful to refer to these emotional charges, or feelings, as a "*sense* of meaningfulness," "*a sense* of choice," and so on. <sup>[3]</sup>

So people feel good or excited about a task—whether it produces a quiet glow of satisfaction or an exuberant celebration—when these judgments are positive. Try that idea on for a while. When you feel particularly good about your work, doesn't it have something to do with realizing you're doing something worthwhile (meaningfulness), being able to do something the way you think it should be done (choice), performing some activity particularly well (competence), or making a significant advance toward accomplishing your purpose (progress)?

Figure 3 shows two ways of grouping these four intrinsic rewards.

	Opportunity rewards	Accomplishment rewards
From task activities	Sense of choice	Sense of competence
From task purpose	Sense of meaningfulness	Sense of progress

**Figure 3:** The Four Intrinsic Rewards

First, as shown in the rows of the figure, two of the rewards involve *purpose* and two involve *activities*. The sense of meaningfulness and the sense of progress have to do with purpose—the degree to which the work purpose is important or worthy and the degree to which it is actually being accomplished, respectively. In contrast, the sense of choice and the sense of competence come from work activities—from being able to choose the activities that make sense and from performing those activities well.

Second, the columns in the figure show that two of the rewards involve *opportunities* and two involve *accomplishments*. The senses of choice and of meaningfulness are feelings of work opportunity—being able to use your judgment and to pursue a worthwhile purpose, respectively—and come from the early steps of the self-management process. They convey the idea that this is good work to be doing—that performing these activities and pursuing this purpose are worth doing. The senses of competence and of progress, on the other hand, are feelings of accomplishment related to the performance of activities and attainment of the purpose, respectively. These two rewards come from the monitoring steps that occur later in the self-management process and provide the idea that the work is going well. Together, then, the four intrinsic rewards capture the feeling that you are actually accomplishing work that is significant and worthwhile.

Here are brief descriptions of the four intrinsic rewards, in the order they occur during the self-management process. They are adapted from the *Work Engagement Profile (WEP)* that Walt Tymon and I developed to measure them.<sup>[4]</sup>

- A sense of *meaningfulness* is the opportunity you feel to pursue a worthy purpose. The feeling of meaningfulness is the feeling that you are on a path that is worth your time and energy—that you are on a valuable mission and that your purpose matters in the larger scheme of things.
- A sense of *choice* is the opportunity you feel to select activities that make sense to you and to perform them in ways that seem appropriate. The feeling of choice is the feeling of being able to use your own judgment and act out of your own understanding.

- A sense of *competence* is the accomplishment you feel in skillfully performing the activities you have chosen. The feeling of competence involves the sense that you are doing good, high-quality work.
- A sense of *progress* is the accomplishment you feel in achieving the purpose. The feeling of progress involves the sense that your work is moving forward, that your activities are really accomplishing something.

Let's look at why these intrinsic rewards are important to people, and why they carry such strong positive feelings.

This set of intrinsic rewards has evolved over time as my colleagues and I have analyzed more data and refined our insights. Much of this evolution is described in Thomas, Jansen, and Tymon, "Navigating in the Realm of Theory." The first theoretical publication of the model, in Thomas and Velthouse, "Cognitive Elements of Empowerment," listed meaningfulness, choice, competence, and impact. In later empirical and theoretical work with Walt Tymon, it became clearer that what we had earlier referred to as "impact" in the model was actually a sense of progress.

See the extensive academic analysis of the concept of engagement in the article by Macey and Schneider, "The Meaning of Employee Engagement." Their conclusions about engagement as a psychological state emphasize positive emotions and are very consistent with the model in this book. They note, in fact, that there is very strong overlap between the concept of engagement and psychological "empowerment," which is the term we used in earlier versions of our research program.

Kenneth W. Thomas and Walter G. Tymon Jr., *Work Engagement Profile* (Mountain View, CA: CPP, 2009). (An earlier version of the *Work Engagement Profile* was originally published as the *Empowerment Inventory* by Xicom, in Tuxedo, NY, in 1993. Xicom was acquired in 1999 by CPP.)

Thomas and Tymon, *Work Engagement Profile*, 9.

## Sense of Meaningfulness

I used to say that meaningful purposes were the ones that fit people's values. But meaningfulness is about the energy attached to a purpose, and *values* seems too dry of a word to capture that. The word *passion* conveys that sense of energy better, as in "a passion for \_\_\_\_." Meaningfulness, then, is about the passion you have for a task purpose.

People's passions tend to develop and change a bit over their work lives. Younger workers are deeply involved in learning the ropes about their work (and about life in general). So at that stage of life, their passions at work often involve showing that they can handle things. The phrases that describe these passions convey the sense that they are being tested and have something to prove: being able to "cut the mustard," "find their sea legs," "stand on their own two feet," "make a go of it," "earn their keep," or "make the grade."

But as workers begin to complete this stage and to realize that they *can* do the work, their passions tend to shift. They commonly have a "crisis of meaning" at this point, and they begin to need more from their work and lives. The work often feels empty, and workers find that they need to answer a new set of questions: "Okay, I can do the work. Now what do I want to do? Why?" In struggling with

these questions, workers begin to discover their particular areas of passion for work and to find those purposes that have meaning for them and that sustain them emotionally.

There is a fair amount of diversity in people's passions, in part because they are influenced by personal history. For example, both of my otherwise loving parents were not very good at listening. I find now that I have a passion for communicating ideas, which fires me up in the classroom and is sustaining me through the writing of this book. My friends, who have different histories, find great meaning in other types of purposes: fighting injustice, making beautiful things, pushing technological advances, getting teams to pull together, or making useful things with their hands. In any organization, this diversity of passion means that it is important to match individuals with the tasks that have meaning for them. This involves getting to know people's passions, making judicious task assignments, and asking for volunteers when possible—to allow workers to do their own matching of passions to tasks.

However, there is also a considerable amount of commonality of passion within most work groups—not totally, but enough to make it possible for groups to be energized by a shared, meaningful purpose. Some of this commonality comes from workers' self-selecting into fields of work that match their passions, and some comes from shared work history in the group. For example, some work groups will have a shared passion to develop a new product they believe in, or to develop a report that "knocks people's socks off."

Finally, shared passions also cut across individuals and organizations. The deepest of these are *spiritual* passions. I am not talking about spiritual in the sense of organized religion here, although religions speak directly to these passions. Rather, I am talking about a deeply felt desire to have one's life make a difference in the larger scheme of things, to make a contribution, to lead a worthy life that one can be proud of, to be "on the right path." As noted earlier, these passions often show up in terms of being of service to customers and of bettering society or people's lives in some way. In my case, then, my passion for communicating ideas has merged with a desire to help people: my deepest satisfaction in work is to give people insights that help their lives work better.

I invite you to stop for a minute to think about your own passions. What gets you excited at work? What touches you deeply?

This notion of life stages and transition has been familiar since the publication of two classic works in the 1970s. Daniel J. Levinson, *The Seasons of a Man's Life* (New York: Ballantine, 1979), and Gail Sheehy, *Passages: Predictable Crises of Adult Life* (New York: Dutton, 1976). See also the subsequent book by Daniel J. Levinson, *The Seasons of a Woman's Life* (New York: Ballantine, 1996).

For creative ways of enhancing this fit, see Jamieson and O'Mara, *Managing Workforce 2000*

There have been a number of recent management books that mention soul or spirit in the context of finding meaning in work. Here are a few: Block, *Stewardship*; Leider, *The Power of Purpose*; Jack Hawley, *Reawakening the Spirit in Work* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 1993); Lee G. Bolman and Terrence E. Deal, *Leading with Soul* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1995); Keshavan Nair, *A Higher Standard of Leadership: Lessons from the Life of Gandhi* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 1994); and Alan Green, *A Company Discovers Its Soul* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 1996).

## Sense of Choice

The experience of choice is connected to our early experiences with authority. Children are *dependent* upon parents, older siblings, and other authority figures. On the whole (but with exceptions, as every parent knows), children learn to comply with the requests of those authorities. We learn that these authorities know more about many things and control resources that are important to us, and we come to accept their right to make many decisions for us. In this position of dependency, we learn to be sensitive to authorities' desires, and we feel a pressure to satisfy them and to comply with their directions. Later, as teenagers, we commonly go through periods of *counter dependence* or rebellion. At this point, we discover that our own judgments have value and that parents and other authorities are fallible. So we go through periods of looking for—and reacting against—any behavior by authority figures that appears arbitrary or unfair. Ideally, most of us get through that stage and reach a more adult sense of *interdependence*. In that state, we realize that we and authorities both have useful but imperfect insights, and we work together to accomplish shared goals. We exchange information and views with managers, accept the need for them to make final decisions on some issues, and use our own judgment to carry out tasks over which we have some autonomy. Here, relations with managers have more of the quality of respect between adults rather than parent-child paternalism and dependency.

With this background, it isn't hard to see why the experience of choice is emotionally loaded for us and why a sense of choice is intrinsically rewarding. It's partly about feeling grown up. Chris Argyris began pointing out in the late 1950s that traditional management could stunt workers' development and keep them in a state of dependency. Today, psychologists also show how being treated in paternalistic or controlling ways can make us relive childhood feelings. We are likely to feel like children (small, dependent) or teenagers (resentful, rebellious) when we are told what to do and when our ideas are not listened to. In contrast, we feel more like adults when we exercise choice and are listened to. The notion of being able to make choices is so central to the experience of being an adult that a number of writers define the *self* as the part of us that chooses. Exercising choice is fundamental to the way we attempt to control events in our lives. The psychologist Richard deCharms described the experience of choice as the feeling of being the "origin" of one's own behavior, in contrast to the feeling of being a "pawn" of external events and forces. In a very real way, then, we lose our sense of self when we are not able to make choices—and we shut down emotionally and disengage from the task.

Choice takes on extra importance when we are committed to a meaningful purpose. Then a sense of choice means *being able to do what makes sense to you to accomplish the purpose*. It means being able to use your intelligence, take the best course of action, and make effective use of your time. In short, choice allows you to be performing those activities that you experience as useful. When you are not free to choose, on the other hand, you often find yourself trying to accomplish your work in ways that seem silly or like a waste of time—with resulting frustration. It is impressive how much frustration you can discover in many committed people by asking them about the pointless rules or directives that interfere with their work.

Finally, a sense of choice also gives you a feeling of ownership of the task. When you make choices about how to perform a task, you redesign it to some degree, and it becomes your own. You also feel personally responsible for task accomplishment—for the quality of your activities and the progress you make toward the purpose. After all, if quality and progress result from your decisions, you deserve to feel proud of those accomplishments. The opposite is true for having a low sense of choice. I find that few micromanagers seem to understand this. If a boss insists on making detailed

decisions for workers and events go badly, it isn't surprising that workers feel less responsible for the outcome than the manager would like. It was the boss's decisions that produced the result, not their own; they had little control over events.

The three stages described here—dependence, counterdependence, and interdependence—are widely used now. They were introduced into the literature on organizational development by Warren G. Bennis and Herbert A. Shepard in "A Theory of Group Development," *Human Relations* 9, no. 4 (1956): 415–437.

Chris Argyris, *Personality and Organization: The Conflict Between System and the Individual* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1957).

This is a frequent theme in the literature on codependency. See, for example, John Bradshaw, *Bradshaw on: The Family* (Deerfield Beach, FL: Health Communications, 1988).

For example, this definition of self was prominent in the est movement introduced by Werner Erhard in the 1970s. For a somewhat sympathetic biography and statement of the est philosophy, see William W. Bartley III, *Werner Erhard* (New York: Potter, 1978). More recently this same notion has been captured by viewing the self as "agent." See, for example, Barbara L. McCombs and R. J. Marzano, "Putting the Self in Self-Regulated Learning: The Self as Agent in Integrating Will and Skill," *Educational Psychologist* 31 (1990): 819–833.

Richard deCharms, *Personal Causation: The Internal Affective Determinants of Behavior* (New York: Academic Press, 1968).

This link between autonomy (choice) and experienced responsibility for outcomes was described in J. Richard Hackman and Greg R. Oldham, *Work Redesign* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1980), 79, 80.

## Sense of Competence

Performing task activities is the most visible part of most jobs, so many writers have offered explanations of what makes this performance rewarding. A number of related terms have been used, including competence, mastery, and artistry. I'm using the more established term *competence*, but this intrinsic reward is complex and often includes bits of those other related feelings as well.

The idea that performing activities well is intrinsically rewarding became popular in the late 1950s, when psychologist Robert W. White wrote a classic article, "Motivation Reconsidered: The Concept of Competence." Even infants, he noted, take pleasure in learning to master skills and keep repeating tasks for the *simple pleasure of doing them well*. This sense of competence motivation, he argued, is built into all of us to help us acquire the skills that we need to survive and to thrive as a species. In the 1970s, Edward Deci began publishing psychological research that showed how a sense of competence can keep people engaged in anagrams (word scrambles) and other activities. Getting positive feedback about doing something well is often enough to keep people performing an activity—doing it for the sheer pleasure of enjoying the resulting feelings of competence. The power of this reward is apparent in the universal popularity of recreational games. There are even a number of pastimes—like spectator sports and some performing arts—where much of our reward comes from the pleasure we get in seeing *other* people show great competence.



In the context of a meaningful purpose, performing activities well takes on an added significance. If you are pursuing a meaningful purpose, and you have chosen activities that you believe will accomplish that purpose, then performing those activities well also means that you are *serving that purpose*. In other words, you are aware that performing well is making an important difference in achieving something you care about. Consider surgeons at work in an operating room. They may be enjoying their skill and dexterity, but a large part of that enjoyment is in knowing that the competence of their actions is helping a patient.

I find that some of the sense of competence also involves a kind of aesthetic or artistic satisfaction, as though we were all artists working in different media. That is certainly true for me as I am writing this section of the book. I am trying my best to express these ideas clearly—to clarify the ideas and to pick the right words—and to make the sentences flow. When it seems to be going well, I feel a sense of artistry that helps to sustain me. My inner voice says things like "Yes, that's a nice sentence" with an intensity that ranges from satisfaction to excitement. Consultant Dick Richards has described this experience of artistry in his wonderful little book *Artful Work*. Like artists, we gradually master the fundamentals of our various crafts—that is, we learn to be technically sound—and then learn to improvise and create new variations to meet the uncertainties that the new work brings us. We are used to the idea of craft workers' being artisans, so that the word *craftsmanship* suggests a kind of artistry. However, service work can also involve artistry. For example, there is a competent way of handling difficult customers that I can only describe as graceful. The same is true for skilled teachers. The relationship between competence and artistry also holds for managerial jobs, as spelled out in Peter Vaill's book, *Managing as a Performing Art*.

Research also shows that we tend to be most engaged in the task when we are performing activities most competently having all our attention on meeting the challenge helps us perform well but is also a positive experience in itself. It is characteristic of peak performance. When people become fully engaged in doing good work, they often become so engrossed in the task that they lose track of time and are surprised to learn how quickly it has flown by.

Finally, we may also have feelings of virtue when we are meeting our own standards of competent performance. We stand a little taller as we feel that we are "doing it right."

Robert W. White, "Motivation Reconsidered: The Concept of Competence," *Psychological Review* 66 (1959): 297–333.

Edward L. Deci, *Intrinsic Motivation* (New York: Plenum Press, 1975).

Dick Richards, *Artful Work: Awakening Joy, Meaning, and Commitment in the Workplace* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 1995).

Vaill, *Managing as a Performing Art*

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (New York: Harper & Row, 1990).

## **Sense of Progress**

Children tend to have an obvious and touching hunger for immediate gratification. On a car trip, they continually ask, "Are we there yet?" They want to be there now—wherever they are going. As

people grow into adults, they generally learn to take on longer tasks and develop patience. But the need for reinforcement doesn't go away; it simply changes form. The childhood need to "be there now" evolves into the need to feel that you are getting there—that you are making progress. In many ways, progress is the bottom line of purposeful work. Is the purpose being realized or not, and how quickly? Having a meaningful purpose can be enough for you to begin a task with enthusiasm, but you need to keep experiencing a sense of progress toward that purpose in order to sustain that enthusiasm.

Some people ask me whether the ultimate intrinsic reward doesn't come from actually accomplishing the purpose—from the thrill of crossing the finish line. It is true that you may have the most intense positive feelings at that moment. For most meaningful purposes, however, climactic moments like this are a very small portion of your time on a task. Olympic athletes, for example, prepare for years for their brief moment of victory—and most of them lose the race or fail to make the team. It clearly takes some reinforcement along the way to keep them going. In addition, many task purposes don't seem to have clear-cut finish lines. For example, committee members may identify an important problem, collect information, draft a report, brief their recommendations to another group, see actions taken, and observe the gradual effects of those actions. Rather than having one big moment of triumph, they take a series of smaller steps forward—what Tom Peters called "little wins." On a day-to-day basis, then, it is this evidence of progress that keeps people going. So it seems more accurate to talk about a general need to make progress on a task and to treat the final completion of the task as just one step in that progress.

Consider how central the notion of progress (or lack of it) is to our experience of our work and of our lives as a whole. We ask each other, "How's it going?" We answer with phrases like "moving forward," "on track," "moving ahead," or "getting there." If we feel no sense of progress, we say we are "stuck," "at a standstill," "in a rut," "going nowhere," or perhaps even "losing ground" or "backsliding." You can probably think of other words that capture this sense of progress.

The *rate* of progress on a task is also important. Jack Welch, former CEO of General Electric, spoke vividly of the energy that he and his employees got from moving forward quickly on work tasks. "Speed," he said simply, "is exhilarating!" Again, think of the words people use to describe their rate of progress on tasks. If progress is swift, we use terms like "stepping out," "cooking," or "smoking." If slow, we use other phrases: "plodding" or "barely making headway." Feel the difference in energy level between *plodding* and *cooking*.

Feelings of progress are problematic for many types of jobs. For example, I recall a workshop that Walt Tyman and I gave at a meeting of human resource professionals. When they completed our *Work Engagement Profile*, they scored relatively low on a sense of progress. This was an important insight for them and helped them to identify more clearly the vague sense they had that something was missing in their work. In the discussion that followed, they were able to pin down several building blocks for progress that were missing in their work—milestones, measurement of improvements, and celebrations—and to identify action steps they could take to provide them.

Feelings of progress are sometimes problematic for managers as well. In the 1980s, for example, psychologist Harry Levinson wrote a classic article titled "When Executives Burn Out." In it he referred to the "special kind of exhaustion" that managers are likely to feel when they expend energy with few visible results.

Now that we've examined these four intrinsic rewards and why they are important, we'll look next at how they work—and their effects.



Tom Peters, *Thriving on Chaos: Handbook for a Management Revolution* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1988), 366.

This quote is from a video, *Speed, Simplicity, and Self-Confidence: Jack Welch Talks with Warren Bennis* (Schaumburg, IL: Video Publishing House, 1993).

Thomas and Tymon, *Work Engagement Profile*

Harry Levinson, "When Executives Burn Out," *Harvard Business Review* 59, no. 3 (May–June 1981): 72–81.