To Be or Not to Be … Motivated

Richard Hill

After 4 weeks of employment and on-the-job training, the manager found that the young receptionist had forgotten to do the most basic things – again. Trying to cover up his mounting frustration, the manager asked, "Did you remember to brush your teeth this morning?" Surprisingly, the receptionist was not offended and only just a little bemused. "Yes…" she replied. "Well, I was just a bit worried because you haven't remembered to check the appointment book again and I've been reminding you every day!" "Oh…" she replied with the same lack of commitment as her first answer. Now the manager knew that this person was not a good fit for this job. The enthusiastic, bright energy that abounded during the interview had disappeared beneath something disengaged and disinterested. "What is going on in her head?" the manager asked himself, without the faintest idea of the answer. (A true story!)

Business consultants have increasingly realized that the interpersonal atmosphere contributes to motivation and teamwork, which are fundamental elements of a fulfilling workplace that also produces excellent results. However, many employers monitor, assess, and regulate worker performance, but often lack the concepts and tools to understand the dynamics underlying their employees' less desirable actions. Looking into the brain may help us understand some of the attitudes and actions that leave many managers pulling out their hair and wondering how to find a "good" employee.

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It is becoming clearer in the research that if we turn on a positive mindset, this increases the likelihood of activity toward producing benefit in many, if not all, areas of our being (Fredrickson, 2001). Turning on a negative or concerned mindset is not a problem if it is short-term and being used to manage a particular stimulus or disturbance. However, it becomes a problem if we stay in a negative frame for long periods (Alfonso et al, 2005). Mindset is a complicated concept in that all of our thought processes also incorporate the input of our bodies (autonomic nervous system, gut brain, heart brain) and our limbic systems. No thought stands alone. Taking mindset in this broad way, we can see how it directs our attention to particular aspects of the situation. The mindset that enabled our receptionist to brush her teeth and the mindset in which she couldn't remember to follow the most basic instruction turned on different sets of motivations, leading to mental and physical activities that created different sets of behaviors.

The experience of being motivated – meaning activated to turn our attention and activity toward – is central to success in business. Consequently, motivating people has become its own big business. Motivational specialists, speakers, systems, programs, and paradigms abound in the marketplace. Larger companies even hire teams specifically focussed on motivation and education. A quick Google search on "motivation" produces some 59 million results with pages and pages of companies and individuals motivating others to hire them. In this plethora of divergent material, one of the best textbooks I have come across is *Understanding Motivation and Emotion* by Johnmarshall Reeve (2005), now in its 4th edition.

Reeve describes a host of theories pertaining to motivation that have emerged over the last 20 or 30 years: cognitive dissonance from Festinger in 1957; flow theory from Csikszentmihaly in 1975; goal setting from Locke in 1968; learned helplessness from Seligman in 1975; self-efficacy from Bandura in 1977; and intrinsic motivation from Deci in 1975, to name some of the principal contributions. Deci, along with Ryan from Rochester University have gone on to develop the rich field of Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000a, 2000b), which is

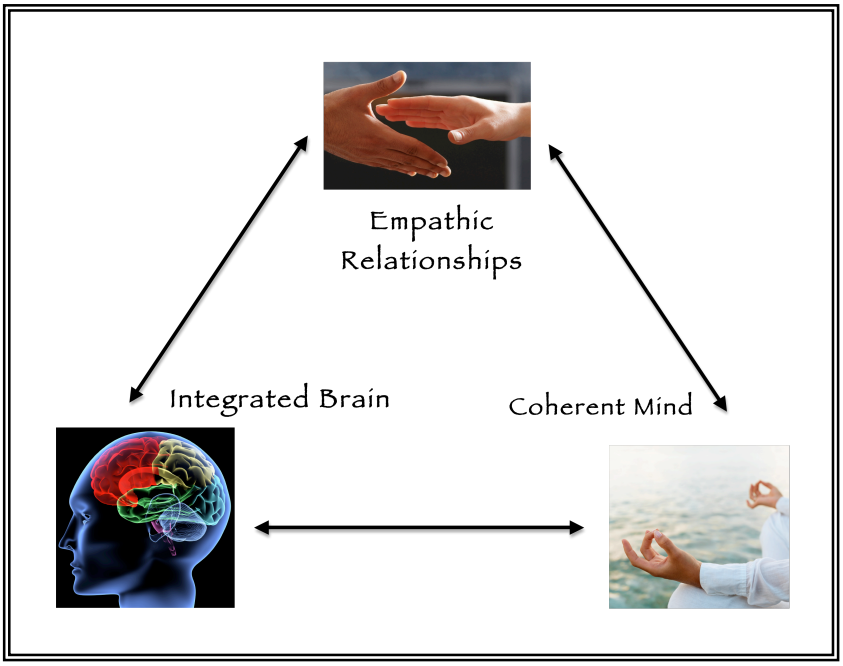
giving rise to more sub-theories. There isn't space here to go into these paradigms; however, we can say that each of these theories is well-differentiated, and one of the messages of interpersonal neurobiology (IPNB) is that they may then be ripe for linkage leading to integration. Understanding the neurobiological underpinnings of motivation may help point the way to such integration.

IPNB and Motivation

Human beings are clearly driven by "needs" and "desires" that relate to "personal meaning" and "personal relevance" (Reeve, 2005). The nature of what a person considers meaningful springs from complex sources – some conscious and some unconscious, some based on social criteria (external) and some based on personal history, genetics, or temperament (internal). However, we also all have an intrinsic, genetically driven need for attunement and positive connection to feel satisfied and, at the neurobiological level, to maintain strong neural integration. This means that our needs are not only self-oriented, but also relational.

Siegel describes how internal and external processes are knit together in his triangle of well-being (2007), which illustrates the multi-directional interaction between the integrated brain, the coherent mind, and empathic relationships. Each of them supports the other in the movement toward complexity and well-being, and when any one process is out of balance, it affects the other two. For example, when our relational world isn't providing empathic connections, our brains don't have the resources to maximize integration, and our minds will likely feel less coherent.

Given the centrality of attunement and connection to brain integration/mental coherence, I suggest that motivational processes might usefully be replaced by interpersonal processes to discover and foster integration between all levels of the workplace system – within the brains and minds of individuals, between individuals (bosses, employees, customers), between groups, and between the organization and society. I propose that motivation has a better chance of emerging spontaneously from a robust interpersonal environment than from a work setting that emphasizes mainly tasks and results. Because of our society's current immersion in a winner/loser mindset (Hill, 2006, 2007), this shift toward interpersonal concerns is extremely difficult. Complexity theory tells us that complex systems – such as the brain/mind and systems created by the brain/mind – naturally move toward greater coherence unless constraints stand in the way (Siegel, 1999). The winner/loser mindset is a major constraint that sets people and organizations in competition with one another, interrupting the flow of interpersonal integration, and therefore also impeding neural integration and mental coherence.



The new movement for creating a better workplace experience is called *partnership* (Roche, 2009), where there is a proactive effort made to engage workers in a personal way. Once we clarify our personal sense of meaning and are able to connect that relevance to an interpersonally-based workplace, we have the foundation for supporting all the processes described by the triangle. This more balanced state of mind promotes a motivated mindset and

turns on a particular set of neural and physical processes that support continued effort on behalf of the organization. Neurotransmitters like dopamine and norepinephrine will be released in the mindset of positive anticipation (Coch et al, 2007), while oxytocin and serotonin are amplified in the mindset of positive personal relationships (Uvnas-Moberg & Petersson, 2005). These will enervate afferent vagal processes and other associated social engagement behaviors, such as expressive faces and lilting speech patterns (Porges, 2001). Positive emotions can expand in this neurobiological environment, engendering a sense of play and fun, which increases the brain's capacity for creativity and innovation (Fredrickson, 2001; Panksepp & Burgdorf, 2003). It is easy to sense the flow of energy and information through the three processes in Dan's triangle in this environment.

Some companies have been intuitively (and by trial and error) instigating these types of changes over the past decade or two. Car production lines have changed from the old ways begun by Henry Ford where workers repeated the same action, to teams that build a car from start to finish. Certainly this builds their feeling of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1994) and creates a sense of attachment to the vehicle itself. Pride in achievement is a positive outcome leading to a continuing positive mindset. Coupled with the bonding of the team and the creation of something that will benefit another person, this partnership workplace completes the triangle of engagement – mind/brain/relationship – that Siegel describes.

I am about to begin work with a company that hand crafts golf clubs. The owner wants me to help his workers discover a personal connection to the work they do. We will try to engage them not only with the process of making the golf club, but to the emotions of the person who will use the club. We will encourage them to imagine the club hitting the ball well and the pleasure of creating something powerful and intentioned. This is very much in the philosophy of Zen Buddhism – *to be the club.*

For employers or employees to just use a workplace for self-focused purposes – to turn a profit or earn a living - creates an environment that supports dishonesty, charade, and manipulation as it does in any relationship. The recent research on mirror neurons gives some insight into how and why a charade can't hide the truth for long: mirror neurons respond to the intention within actions (Iacoboni et al, 2005), so both employer and employee sense what is really happening, even if they can't verbalize it. We may be able to sense how this incongruence disturbs mental coherence and the possibility of trusting relationships, so brain integration will also suffer.

Perhaps we need to reappraise the social hierarchy in the workplace. Rather than determine contracts of labor, we might develop contracts of mutual growth and development. As offered above, I suggest that one of the fundamental barriers is the prevalence of the winner/loser world mindset (Hill, 2006; 2007) that creates disconnection and disengagement. The resulting frustrations, disappointments, and sense of failure, leading to fear and anger, can all come from struggling to be a winner rather than working toward mutual aspirations. These emotions are easily projected onto an employer who seems to hold all the power and control. The employer may also experience the struggle to be a dominant leader, while being stressed by the fear of being abandoned by staff or

having an insufficient bottom line.

At the bottom of all interpersonal experience is the desire for secure attachments, and these are rooted in experiences of attunement, respect, and empathy. In a socio-economic world where material gain and personal ambition become disconnected from relationship, the workplace can become a soulless milieu where everyone is in a battle and each person is on his or her own. Because of societal constraints, it seems that our natural desire for positive social engagement can easily be overshadowed by the prevailing mindset of profit at all costs.

Let's return to the receptionist from the beginning of this article. What may have been happening in her world? She may have implicitly taken in a view of work that is culturally engrained – a job is a place of disengagement to be endured until the weekend comes. In the No. 1 hit single by the Australian group *The Easybeats* in 1966, *Friday on my Mind,* we hear this mindset memorialized.

Monday morning feels so bad,
Ev'rybody seems to nag me
Coming Tuesday I feel better,
Even my old man looks good,
Wednesday just don't go,
Thursday goes too slow,
I've got Friday on my mind

Gonna have fun in the city,
Be with my girl she's so pretty,
She looks fine tonight,
She is out of sight to me,
Tonight....I spend my bread,
Tonight...I lose my head,
Tonight...I got to get tonight
Monday I have Friday on my mind.

Harry Vanda and George Young (1966) caught the mindset of their generation, but perhaps this song still strikes a familiar chord today.
Our receptionist may also have been focusing entirely on financial survival, and not finding any personal resonance with the work. Over time, the internal engine of meaning that supports motivation was no longer engaged, so whatever interpersonal connection she may have experienced in the interview faded, her mind became less coherent, and her brain no longer integrated around the tasks at hand. Instead, she may have looked for interpersonal engagement in the social world of Facebook, or simply drifted into a half-dissociated state, waiting for Friday.

Even though every person comes to work carrying their implicit world and attachment style, a workplace grounded in practicing interpersonal integration as the foundational sound business practice stands a better chance of fostering everyone's strengths. For this reason, I support and encourage the movement toward *partnership* systems, although there is still an unsettling amount of profitability and productivity motivating the way this is being implemented in some organizations. Regardless, we must begin somewhere in order to change the social mindset. The real bottom line is that the workplace is a *life*-place and we have too little time to participate in the experience of life to nullify 8-10 hours a day, 5 days a week, for 40 or 50 years. Let's find and develop a vision and practical processes that encourage interpersonal richness to permeate our entire living landscape – even the workplace.

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