



What Motivates Us?

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Daniel H. Pink

author of *A Whole New Mind*

DRIVE

The Surprising Truth
About What Motivates Us

[Daniel Pink](#) is a cultural observer who writes about academic research in ways that are accessible, interesting, and frequently surprising. He reminds me of [Malcolm Gladwell](#), a writer for *The New Yorker* who has written a number of popular books that draw extensively on academic research—*Blink*, *Outliers*, and *The Tipping Point*. It raises the question of why academics depend on others to translate their research, but that is a topic for another day. Daniel Pink's newest book is [Drive](#), which describes what science tells us about motivation. The central theme of his book is "the mismatch between what science knows and what business does." The findings that Pink describes apply to all kinds of organizations, including the School of Government.

Here in a nutshell is what Pink says about motivation. People are not "motivated solely or even mainly by external incentives." That includes money. Contingent rewards and punishments (so-called "if-then" rewards and punishments) can be effective in limited situations—for certain kinds of rule-based routine tasks—but they can "dampen motivation and diminish performance" for other kinds of tasks that require greater creativity. Notwithstanding all kinds of scientific research to support that conclusion, most organizations continue to focus on controlling the behavior of their employees with carrots and sticks.



What's the alternative? Pink identifies three ingredients for motivating employees to do their best and most creative work. First, give them autonomy to the greatest extent possible—over what they do, when they do it, how they do it, and whom they do it with. Second, give them the opportunity to move toward mastery in their work. Third, focus their energies on “a cause greater and more enduring than themselves.” According to Pink, “The science shows that the secret to high performance isn't our biological drive or our reward-and-punishment drive, but our third drive—our deep-seated desire to direct our own lives, to extend and expand our abilities, and to live a life of purpose.”

Those ingredients largely exist for faculty members at the School, or at least it seems that way to me. Faculty members have lots of autonomy in carrying out the mission of the School, and they have the opportunity for mastery in their work over the course of a career. Do we offer enough of the same opportunities for our professional staff? Do we give them adequate autonomy in carrying out their work—a lot of which requires finding creative solutions for many different kinds of administrative problems? Do we give them the opportunity to develop mastery in their work?

I am not trying to suggest that our staff is unmotivated. The nominations for our employee excellence awards illustrate that many of our staff colleagues already are highly motivated. Instead, the question is whether we have put in place the necessary ingredients for everyone—faculty and staff—to do their best and most innovative work. Given what we know about the science of motivation, have we created the kind of work environment—the necessary “scaffolding”—that fully encourages everyone's intrinsic motivation? Let me know what you think about Pink's ideas and how we are doing at the School. This is an issue I will be working to understand much better in the months ahead