

training

Engagement Training for Leaders

Updating their motivational “common sense.”

BY KENNETH W. THOMAS, PH.D.

Research shows that the core drivers of work engagement are “intrinsic” rewards—positive feelings about the work itself that keep employees energized and engaged. In a global study of 50,000 people, the Corporate Leadership Council found that these feelings were *four times more powerful* than rational considerations about pay and other “extrinsic rewards.” Furthermore, research shows these rewards result in higher levels of concentration, performance, retention, organizational loyalty, and feelings of professional development—as well as reduced levels of stress.

Yet research also shows that leaders underestimate how important intrinsic rewards are to employees, and over-rely on monetary rewards instead. In effect, most managers are still using the “commonsense” economic assumptions about motivation that worked three decades ago—when typical jobs involved highly structured manufacturing work that offered few intrinsic rewards. Those motivational assumptions now need to be updated to fit today’s more knowledge-based

work and the expectations of newer generations of workers. This article will look at how creating engaged organizations begins with helping leaders understand and internalize principles of intrinsic motivation.

According to the *Work Engagement Profile (WEP)*, a diagnostic assessment that compares the intrinsic reward levels of a team with national norms, the four categories of intrinsic rewards include:

- Sense of **Meaningfulness**: the feeling that your work contributes to an important purpose
- Sense of **Choice**: the feeling that you are free to choose how to best accomplish your work
- Sense of **Competence**: the feeling that you are performing your work activities in a competent, high-quality manner
- Sense of **Progress**: the feeling that you are accomplishing your work purpose – that things are on track and moving forward

The irony is that while managers place a high value on their *own* intrinsic rewards, they often lack a clear picture of what the key intrinsic rewards are or how they operate. In creating an engaged team,

therefore, it may be effective to begin by helping leaders themselves tune into the impact that these have in their own work.

We find that leaders are quick to recognize the importance of these intrinsic rewards to their own energy and engagement. As they learn to do so, they become more fine-tuned in their self-diagnostics. Rather than simply feeling their work isn’t as engaging as it might be, they now can identify the reason—the specific “energy leaks” that are occurring. For example, a leader might say: “The work I’m doing is very meaningful and I’m performing my activities competently, but I’m frustrated by the lack of *progress* on this project, and feel I haven’t been able to make my own *choices* about how to approach this task.”

Once the leader identifies which rewards are low—in this example, a sense of progress and a sense of choice—he is introduced to the unique “building blocks” for each of the rewards. These are the conditions that enable or strengthen that reward, and provide a checklist to identify the specific causes—and

remedies—for any rewards that may be low. According to the Work Engagement Profile, these building blocks include:

- Sense of **Meaningfulness**: non-cynical climate; clear values; an exciting vision; relevant work; and whole tasks
- Sense of **Choice**: authority; trust; security to take reasonable risks; clarity of purpose; information
- Sense of **Competence**: knowledge and models; positive feedback; skill recognition; challenge; and high, non-comparative standards
- Sense of **Progress**: collaborative relationships; milestones; celebrations; access to customers; measures of improvement

Continuing the example, the leader might address the feeling of a lack of choice, saying: “It’s not clear that the board trusts my judgment enough to accept my ideas on how to run this project.” He then can formulate an action plan to address deficient building blocks, which might include steps such as having a heart-to-heart discussion with key stakeholders about their ideas and what information they need to feel comfortable with the approach the leader wants to take.

The leader in our hypothetical example also identified a lack of a sense of *progress* in his work. As previously noted, the building blocks for this particular reward include collaborative relationships, milestones, celebrations, access to customers, and measures of improvement. Examining this particular “energy leak” more closely, the leader might say: “We’ve been trying to make improvements in our services without really knowing if it’s making a difference for our customers.” To address this, he might take the action of developing a measure of customer satisfaction.

Or, if he discovered that part of this energy leak on progress stems from a project that is dragging on, he might include in his action plan identifying important milestones for that project that illustrate how far along the team actually has come. Additionally, he might post the milestones and chart the progress so the entire team can visualize the progress and get re-energized in moving it along. He might also reinforce additional building blocks to the sense of progress by sponsoring team celebrations as they pass milestones.

Once leaders have bought into the importance of the four key intrinsic

rewards, and have validated this framework against their own experience, you then can shift the focus to the intrinsic rewards their direct reports are receiving, and what the leader can do to provide the building blocks for those rewards. As a practical matter, leaders can’t address all these building blocks at once, so a vital part of the training involves helping them identify high-priority building blocks that are likely to make the largest difference in building or sustaining engagement in their team.

At this point, we like to hear managers say, “After all, it’s just good common sense.” We, of course, recognize that it is a better “common sense” than what they began with.

Ken Thomas is author of CPP Inc.’s “Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument,” as well as the “Work Engagement Profile” (with Walter Tymon) and the instrument’s User’s Guide, which contains designs for its use in management training, executive coaching, team-based interventions, and other applications. Thomas is also author of “Intrinsic Motivation at Work: What Really Drives Employee Engagement.”



CPP, Inc. | 1055 Joaquin Road, 2nd Floor | Mountain View, CA 94043
Tel: (650) 969-8901 | Toll free: (800) 624-1765 | Fax: (650) 969-8608 | www.cpp.com