

# **Beyond Talk: Creating Autonomous Motivation through Self-Determination Theory**

By

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Last printed: November 24, 2008

Thanks to Cam Cockrell (University of North Texas), Tim Miller (University of Kentucky), and Tim Mitchell (Georgia State University) for comments on earlier drafts. The first author gratefully acknowledges the financial support of the Gatton College of Business, the Von Allmen School of Accountancy and the University of Kentucky.

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## ***Abstract***

Many managers and academics have a passing familiarity with self-determination theory (SDT), which articulates the core principles that underlie sustainable motivation in organizations. But far fewer understand how to successfully implement a SDT intervention in the face of organizational pressure for short-term accountability and performance. We present the core principles of SDT, describe the principles that underlie successful SDT-based interventions, propose six steps (i.e., actions) that facilitate the creation of autonomous motivation, articulate the obstacles to successful implementation, and present examples of successful organizational implementations.

## **1. Introduction**

Who hasn't heard, and perhaps even chanted, the now-familiar motivational mantra? Motivation comes from the self, not from a desire for money. Managers should empower employees, foster decision participation, and support self-initiation and autonomy. Many managers and academics now recite this mantra; some even say that it is old news. Curiously though, when visiting organizations and observing in University classrooms, we find managers and academics who chant the mantra but fail to practice it when leading and teaching. This makes us think of a joke from Woody Allen's movie, "Annie Hall" (Internet Movie Database, Inc. 2007). In the movie, Woody Allen's character tells of a man who goes to the psychiatrist.

"Doc," he says, "you must help me. My brother thinks he's a chicken."

"Bring him in," replies the doctor. "I'll convince him he's not a chicken."

"No," the man exclaims, "we need the eggs!"

Managers, too, act like they "need the eggs". So they apply over-learned carrot-and-stick motivational strategies despite the fact that promoting autonomy actually yields more "eggs" (i.e., motivation). Walking the unconventional autonomous motivational walk often requires questioning organizational assumptions, making tough, sometimes unpopular, choices, and, taking risks. To avoid these risks, managers and teachers too often take the easy way—talking the politically correct talk but walking the over-learned walk.

In the Mann-Gulch fire, twenty-seven firefighters died because they would not drop their tools; because of the rapid spread of the fire, the firefighters' normally sensible instincts to retain their, now useless, firefighting tools contributed to their fiery

deaths (Weick 1993, 1996). Unfortunately, we observe many managers and academics who doggedly cling to the now discredited tools of command-and-control methods; these methods ensure the death of employees' motivation and pro-active engagement in work just as surely as the Mann-Gulch firefighters stubborn retention of their tools contributed to their untimely deaths.

Over the past 30 years, two of the authors, Edward L. Deci and Richard M. Ryan, have developed a theory of human motivation, called self-determination theory (SDT), that identifies the core principles underlying sustainable motivation (e.g., see Deci and Ryan 1985, 2007; Ryan and Deci 2000). Extensive, well-crafted research has explored its relevance to many domains, including business, education, sports, medicine, entertainment, and leadership. The intuitive appeal and strong evidential support for SDT have made it popular for many managers, teachers, and scholars to espouse its core principles; but practicing these principles is not easy. In this paper, we unravel a curious hypocrisy in the way managers often talk about, versus practice, motivating. We articulate the core psychological principles of SDT, describe six actions for applying SDT in organizations, discuss common impediments and obstacles to SDT-based interventions, and conclude with two cases of SDT-based successes.

## ***2. Self-Determination Theory and the Psychological Basis of Empowerment and Sustainable Motivation***

Organizational competition for top talent has intensified because of a shrinking working-age population and because companies increasingly realize that much of their sustainable value resides in their employees' heads. One common company response to this competition for talent is to complicate existing compensation and reward

schemes, seeking a tighter match of rewards to productivity in order to attract high skill employees. However, these programs often generate mistrust and fuel the cynical belief that management's real motivation is cutting costs rather than rewarding performance. Restructuring compensation and reward programs for an organization's critical workforce can pay off, but many restructurings fail because they are not based in the core principles of "autonomous", sustainable motivation. We next use SDT to describe the core principles underlying sustainable organizational motivation.

***a. Self-Determination Theory (SDT): An Introduction (or Review)***

Self-determination theory is rooted in a set of assumptions about human nature and motivation (Ryan and Deci 2000). Humans are inherently motivated to grow and achieve and will fully commit to and engage in even uninteresting tasks when their meaning and value is understood. Of course, some employees appear passive and unmotivated -- but this is learned; it results from past and perhaps even current work conditions undermining inherent motivation (cf. Amabile, Conti, Coon, Lazenby, and Herron 1996).

SDT's assumptions differ from those found in operant conditioning (Skinner, 1953) where behavior is assumed to be controlled mostly by external reward contingencies. Carrot and stick (CAST) approaches to motivation, such as those found in operant conditioning, lead to a heightened focus on the tangible rewards of work rather than on the nature and importance of the work itself. Such approaches can create short-term productivity increases by controlling people's behavior, but the resulting motivation is of poor quality – it is unsustainable and can create other negative consequences. For example, even advocates (e.g., Baker, Jensen, and Murphy 1988)

caution that CAST approaches can “work too well” by encouraging fraud, cheating, and deception. Further, emphasizing tangible rewards tends to undermine intrinsic interest in work (Amabile, 1993; Deci, Koestner and Ryan, 1999).

SDT focuses on, and nurtures an interest in, the intrinsic importance of work. This approach has been shown to link to better performance, especially in the complex, creative, and heuristic tasks (McGraw, 1978) that increasingly characterize modern work. According to SDT, humans have three core psychological needs: competence, relatedness, and autonomy. *Competence* is the belief that one has the ability to influence important outcomes. *Relatedness* is the experience of having satisfying and supportive social relationships. *Autonomy* concerns the experience of acting with a sense of choice, volition, and self-determination. It does not refer to independence, for people may well be dependent on others while acting autonomously. When acting from intrinsic motivation in a task, people’s experience is of having a choice and fully endorsing what they are doing; they do not feel controlled or compelled by forces outside themselves or even by controlling internal forces that demand and coerce. Satisfying human needs for competence, relatedness, and autonomy creates sustainable (i.e., enduring) motivation (see Figure 1). In the theory, sustainable motivation is called “autonomous” because it emerges from one’s sense of self and is accompanied by feelings of willingness and engagement. Therefore, managers and organizations that support satisfaction of these core needs will realize productivity gains by creating “autonomous” motivation.

Insert Figure 1 about here

Considerable evidence – too much for us to discuss in this paper – supports the importance of autonomy, competence, and relatedness for productivity, creativity, and happiness. For example, two studies of large U.S. banks found that employees who perceived greater autonomy support from their managers felt greater need satisfaction at work, performed better at their jobs, and, had lower levels of anxiety and depression (Baard, Deci, and Ryan 2004). Many applications in health care also show physical and mental benefits from meeting core psychological needs (e.g., Williams, Deci, and Ryan, 1998).

Additional investigation will surely contribute to an understanding of cross-cultural differences in goals, values, and happiness; however, existing evidence suggests that human needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness are universal - they transcend culture and context (e.g. Chirkov, Ryan, Kim, and Kaplan, 2003; Vansteenkiste, Zhou, Lens, and Soenens, 2005). As an example, two of the authors, along with several coauthors, studied the extent of autonomy, competence, and relatedness support at large and small companies in both a centrally planned (i.e., Bulgaria) and a capitalist (i.e., US) economy (Deci, Ryan, Gagné, Leone, Usunov, and Kornazheva 2001). They found that, regardless of company size or economic system, employees whose work environments supported their core psychological needs were more proactive at work and better adjusted psychologically. Recently, an international team of researchers compared the structure of goals among 1,854 undergraduates from 15 cultures (Grouzet, Kasser, Ahuvia, Dols, Kim, Lau, Ryan, Saunders, Schmuck, and Sheldon 2005). Results indicated consistency in the basic structure of participants'

goals across cultures, although there were “small differences” (p. 808) between wealthier and poorer countries in the relations among goals.

***b. Regulation and Sustainable Motivation***

Evidence suggests that changing the work climate to support autonomy, competence, and relatedness changes the extent to which employees “internalize” work rules, standards, and procedures (e.g., Gagné and Deci 2005; Ryan and Connell, 1989), and act creatively, volitionally, and proactively. This result occurs because employees come to value the work itself and pay less attention to the carrots or sticks that are attached to it by management. In contrast, controlling work environments diminish employees’ experiences of autonomy, competence, and relatedness; they create what we call “external” and “introjected” regulation among employees. Externally regulated employees perceive workplace rules as externally imposed, and their motivation is to obtain rewards that are external to the work itself (e.g., praise, promotions, and financial benefits).

Introjected regulation occurs when people partially “digest” external workplace rules. Deep down, however, they doubt the validity of the rules and resist this partially internal pressure that they have taken in from socializing agents but not really accepted as their own. The experience of introjected regulation is one of internal conflict, tension, and a sense of being a puppet. For example, working to avoid guilt, or to feel like a good or worthy person, illustrates introjected motivation. When so motivated, people experience work as an obligation and their feelings of self-worth depend upon it. External and introjected regulation are associated with apathy, poor workplace performance, lower creativity, drug and alcohol abuse, and, poor psychological health



(e.g., Deci et al., 2001; Gagné, Koestner and Zuckerman 2000; Ryan, Chirkov, Little, Sheldon, Timoshina, and Deci, 1999). The use of rewards to pressure people to perform contributes to their external and introjected regulation (e.g., Reeve, Jang, Hardre, and Omura 2002; Tang, Kim, and Tang ,2000; Vansteenkiste and Deci 2003).

Nurturing feelings of autonomy, competence, and relatedness facilitates integrated regulation, which is the full internalization of previous external-to-the-self motivation (Ryan and Deci 2000). Integrated regulation obtains when people internalize, accept as their own and self-endorse work rules, procedures, and standards—that is, when the rules, procedures, and standards have been integrated into their sense of self. For those who act from integrated regulation, external rules have become internal convictions. Because they buy-in to the workplace goals, values, and structures, employees with integrated motivation experience work as providing meaningful choices, clear structures, and supportive relationships.

Intrinsic motivation is another form of autonomous motivation. Intrinsically motivated employees work for passion, pleasure, and interest. In contrast, integrated regulation occurs when people fully endorse the importance of the work even though they may not find it interesting. Integrated regulation and intrinsic motivation correlate with proactive engagement in work (Gagne and Deci 2005; Gagne et al., 2000) and high levels of psychological health (Baard et al., 2004; Deci et al., 2001). In the ideal workplace, autonomously motivated employees are intrinsically interested in their work, and have fully integrated (i.e., embraced) the work's value and its accompanying procedures and rules.

### **3. The Path to Enduring (Autonomous) Motivation**

According to SDT, fulfilling competence, relatedness, and autonomy needs is the foundation of autonomous work motivation. Although these principles are not easy to implement in organizations, research suggests six paths of change that help imbed the fulfilling of core psychological needs into the workplace (see Table 1).

Insert Table 1 about here
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#### **a. Asking open questions including inviting participation in solving important problems**

Building autonomous motivation requires supportive dialogue, and supportive dialogue begins with open questions that invite exploration of an important problem. The effective use of open questions is difficult for some managers and may require training (e.g., see Markland, Ryan, Tobin, and Rollnick 2005; Miller and Rollnick 2002; Vansteenkiste and Sheldon 2006). In our experience, some managers are more comfortable with interactive styles that prevent, rather than create, supportive dialogues. Potential impediments that lead to managerial monologues instead of supportive dialogues include the traps of a premature focus, confrontation, labeling, blaming, and playing an “I’m-the-expert” role.

A (premature) conversational focus, in which the manager sets the conversational agenda, is one means by which supportive dialogues are co-opted. Confrontations, which often include labeling (e.g., “he’s a control freak”) and blaming (e.g., “you failed us here”), are likely to be followed by either quiet resentful assent or angry denials. Genuine (as opposed to feigned) open questions invite exploration. For example, asking “what do you make of this?” or “tell me what’s been happening around

that?” invite exploration of an employee’s perception of a problem. In contrast, closed questions such as, “have you tried fixing the problem by ...?” or “do you understand how important it is to ...?” place the manager in the expert role and imply the need for passive compliance from employees. Open questions raise problems for consideration without implying a preferred manager solution.

**b. Active listening including acknowledging the employees’ perspective**

Open questions are best followed by active listening that includes explicit acknowledgement of the employees’ perceptions of a problem. For example, in a SDT-based intervention at Xerox Corporation (Deci et al., 1989), teaching active listening was one of the three most important aspects of the intervention (along with providing non-controlling feedback and encouraging subordinate initiative). After the intervention, employees perceived more autonomy support from their managers and reported substantially improved attitudes. In addition, by receiving more support from immediate managers, employees developed more trust in the company’s top management.

Reflective listening, that is, the art of mirroring the emotional content of a message, is one important active listening method (Miller and Rollnick, 2002). It requires both careful attention and an empathetic personal style. Pragmatically, reflective listening consists of briefly restating the emotional content of a message back to the speaker. Such reflections may be simple (e.g., “it’s scary”) or complex (e.g., “on the one hand, you feel that...., while on the other hand, you feel that...”).

Summarizing, another active listening technique consists of briefly restating a speaker’s common themes and ideas gathered across a conversation. Such summaries may begin with statements that invite clarification of misunderstandings or

misperceptions (e.g., “What I hear you saying is...”). Statements of affirmation are also critical to active listening. Affirmations are sincere expressions of thanks or appreciation that may include acknowledging difficulties already encountered. For example, “I appreciate your getting right to this. I know this is a busy time for you.”

**c. Offering choices within structure, including the clarification of responsibilities**

SDT-based organizational interventions are rooted in individual choice and responsibility. Offering a menu of possible actions to address a problem logically follows from a dialogue based in open questions and active listening. An illustration of the power and possibility of supporting employee autonomy by offering choices occurred at a large telecommunications company (Gagné, Koestner, and Zuckerman 2000). The company received a government mandate to change its organizational processes to comply with new laws. This mandate included substantial downsizing. Managers engaged employees in dialogues about how to implement these changes but not, of course, whether to make the changes. Employees who perceived greater autonomy support from managers when the changes were initiated embraced the needed changes more willingly, both then and during implementation.

Clarifying responsibilities and contributions is also integral to a self-determination theory approach. For example, providing a meaningful rationale for an uninteresting task and acknowledging the employees' feelings of dislike or disinterest in it are important methods of acknowledging their perspective while clarifying their responsibilities. To illustrate the power of these methods, one of the authors, along with three co-authors, had research participants do a boring task – repeatedly pushing the

space bar on a keyboard to make a light disappear (Deci, Eghrari, Patrick, and Leone 1994). The results indicated that three factors — giving a meaningful reason for doing the task, acknowledging that many people found the task “pretty boring,” and using language that emphasized personal choice rather than external control — increased the time that people spent on the task, how useful they thought it was, and how much choice they perceived they had about completing the task.

A similar result occurred when a group of educational researchers designed an intentionally boring introductory lesson about Chinese (Reeve, Jang, Hardre, and Omura, 2002). Participants were given either a controlling reason (i.e., to pass a test) or an autonomy-supportive one (i.e., because it will be useful) for learning the lesson. Participants given the autonomy-supportive reason perceived the lesson to be more important and worked harder at it than did participants given the controlling reason.

The use of “internal” labor markets by Disney, Monsanto, and Shell illustrates another approach to facilitating choices within structure. Within constraints, these companies facilitate proactive behavior by allowing employees to change teams and projects to maximize their value to the company (Thomas, 2000). Similarly, GE’s commitment to streamlining bureaucracy by eliminating the extent of required approvals for project changes illustrates another approach to facilitating choice within structure.

**d. Providing sincere, positive feedback that acknowledges initiative, and factual, non-judgmental feedback about problems**

Praise can de-motivate by controlling or motivate by supporting competence and autonomy. Effective praise is sincere and specific; it acknowledges unique and unusual contributions. Praise that acknowledges mere compliance (e.g., “good, you did just as I

told you to do”) tends to feel controlling; in contrast, praise that acknowledges proactive engagement and initiative supports people’s competence and autonomy. An example is the comment, “I’m pleased that you took the initiative to analyze the work-flow requirements on your own. This is an important contribution to the project that I hadn’t considered.”

Consider the dubious praise system implemented in the research division of one Fortune 500 company. Managers were instructed to praise everyone regularly. Consistent with an operant conditioning approach, praise was to be immediate after observing praise-worthy behavior; indeed, it should be given regularly. But the idea quickly backfired, because employees perceived the mandated praise as insincere, controlling, and compliant — the managers now *had* to give it. Consequently, honest discussions between employees and managers, in which they reflected on employees’ creative and innovative contributions became less frequent. Further, employees reported that managers’ praise seemed to bear little relationship to what had actually happened. In short, the new policy caused managers to grasp for something / anything praiseworthy, which resulted in stilted praise that bore little relation to employees’ creative contributions to, and experience of, their work.

Effective managers must not only praise but must also provide sometimes-unwelcome feedback about work-place problems. Such feedback is best communicated as “just the facts” with neither criticism nor judgment, and with openness to hearing the subordinates’ perspective. Delivering such information simultaneous with a mandate for change and improvement (e.g., “your delivery times are down — you’ve got to fix this right now!”) promotes resentment and de-motivates. It also lessens the

likelihood that the employee will internalize the need for change and actively participate in creatively considering how to best make necessary changes. In contrast, delivering bad news along with open questions and active listening invites mutual exploration of the full range of possibilities for addressing problems, thus allowing the employees to learn from their less-successful endeavors.

**e. Minimizing coercive controls such as rewards and comparisons with others**

Some managers, including a few for whom we have worked, hold to a perspective that is still common in organizations, namely that money is the **only** relevant consideration in rewarding employees. For example, as many as one-third of U.S. companies use competition-based compensation schemes that pit employees against one another (McGregor 2006). Research suggests that everyone loses in such competitions; the motivation of the large number of “losers” declines as does the quality of the “winners” motivation (Vansteenkiste and Deci 2003). Consequently, the biggest losers are the organizations that implement such schemes.

SDT offers a constructive alternative approach. The SDT approach seeks to ensure fair wages and benefits but beyond this point, seeks to minimize the salience of compensation and benefits as a motivational strategy. Of course, employees in a SDT-based organization still get raises, are equitably compensated and are fired and promoted. But compensation and benefits are of limited value in creating motivation because they do not promote *autonomous* motivation. Managers and employees who work at organizations based in SDT principles are less concerned with the carrot and

stick of extrinsic rewards and more concerned with organizational productivity, well-being, and personal satisfaction.

Emphasizing differences in financial rewards among employees enhances the perceived importance of external rewards and magnifies perceived differences, however small or large, in compensation and benefits. The consequences of this low quality of motivation for productivity, happiness, and work place behavior are regrettable. For example, evidence from Australia, Bulgaria, England, Germany, Romania, Russia, Singapore, South Korea and the U.S. suggests that the more strongly people value money, the poorer their psychological health (Grouzet et al., 2002; Ryan et al., 1999). Research conducted in Hong Kong found that workers who care more about money are less satisfied with their pay and benefits (Tang, Kim, and, Shin-Hsiung Tang 2000). Results from both the U.S. (Stone, Bryant, and Wier, 2006) and Hong Kong (Tang and Chiu, 2003) indicate that workers who care more about money are more willing to engage in unethical and illegal workplace behaviors.

Certainly, poor compensation and benefits levels can interfere with employees' ability to achieve autonomy, competence, and relatedness. For example, an employee in a low-paying job may be unable to fund a child's college education. But salary increases create sustainable motivation only when they concurrently increase feelings of autonomy, competence, and relatedness.

**f. Develop talent and share knowledge to enhance competence and autonomy**

Employees may value educational opportunities and promotions primarily as: (a) coveted external rewards, or (b) opportunities for increasing autonomy, learning new



skills (i.e., competence), and collaborating with others. The former is associated with controlled motivation and the latter with autonomous motivation; differing reasons for wanting these outcomes influences their effect on performance. To illustrate this point, consider how much professors publish before and after they receive tenure (i.e., permanent job security). Some professors publish less in the years after they are awarded tenure because their motivation for publishing was primarily their desire for tenure (i.e., an extrinsic reward). But other professors publish because of intrinsic interest in, or a commitment to the importance of, their research and scholarship; these faculty publish as much or more after receiving tenure.

When managers use educational opportunities as external rewards (i.e., carrots), employees feel controlled; this creates controlled rather than autonomous motivation. Hence, one would not expect enhanced engagement and performance as a result of using educational opportunities as rewards to compete for.

In short, the benefits of educational opportunities and promotions to motivation depend on why employees desire them and how and why they are offered. Offering educational opportunities as a means to personal and professional development will create positive motivational effects. In addition, increasing awareness of the possibilities for learning and advancement opportunities to help meet core psychological needs will create similar beneficial effects. But it is important that offering such opportunities support autonomy, so using these opportunities to manipulate employees will backfire.

#### **4. Impediments to Sustainable Motivation: “Accountabilism” and Short-Term Rewards**

Why do many smart managers and academics remain mired in the muck of “Theory X” motivational approaches (McGregor 1960, 1985; McGregor and Cutcher-Gershenfeld 2006) even if they are familiar with and may espouse SDT principles? In our experience, short-term performance pressures and rewards and the pressures of “accountabilism” are formidable impediments to implementing SDT approaches in organizations. We next consider these obstacles to SDT-based interventions; following that, we conclude by considering two examples of organizations that successfully implemented SDT-based interventions.

Managers are under pressure to perform, to meet deadlines, to make short-term budget and earnings forecasts, in short, to make *their* managers look good by showing improvement. One of us once worked cleaning welds at a steel fabrication plant where the workers had a saying, “What goes around, gets passed down.” Specifically, bosses who are under pressure usually create pressure for their subordinates. CEOs pressure Vice Presidents (VPs); VPs pressure top-level managers; top managers pressure mid-level managers, and so on down to the guy who cleans the building at night.

Two of us, along with three co-authors, once investigated whether people under pressure would, in turn, pressure others (Deci, Spiegel, Ryan, Koestner, and Kauffman, 1982). Participants were asked to teach other participants to solve some spatial-relations problems. The “teachers” were divided into two groups: one group was held accountable for their learners’ performance. They were told to insure that their subordinates achieved high standards. No mention of accountability was made to the

other group.

We were surprised by the learning periods that followed. Those who were pressured with accountability—and surely most every manager and teacher is—behaved very differently from those in the other group. Teachers who were pressured with accountability for learning results talked more than twice as much as those in the other group, and gave three times as many instructions, criticized more than twice as often, used nearly three times as many controlling words such as “should,” and were rated by trained observers as being much less empowering. In short, by pressuring the teachers, we created supervisors who, in turn, pressured their subordinates, thus resembling the managers we often meet in organizations. They know (at least superficially) about more effective methods for motivating, but, under pressure, they revert to over-learned, deeply embedded, old-school motivational methods. And what happened to the learners in this study? Not only were those assigned to the accountability condition less satisfied, they were also less effective in solving the problems on their own. They complied with the teachers’ orders, but were much less effective in finding problem solutions.

Short-term performance pressures, such as those imposed in the Deci et al. (1982) study, are particularly insidious to motivation quality, because old-school, carrot-and-stick approaches can boost short-term performance, especially on easy, unambiguous tasks (Gagné and Deci, 2005). But the cost of this short-term boost is inferior quality performance (e.g., compliance with orders versus problem solving), and, sometimes, corporate financial fraud (Benston and AEI-Brookings Joint Center for Regulatory Studies 2003; Dembinski 2005; Grandori 2004). Further, higher workforce

turnover, particularly among the most creative, and lower job satisfaction and less proactive engagement inevitably follow the pressure that produces these short-term increases. Hence, old-school motivational strategies often deliver short-term gains and create long-term problems. But some managers, and many politicians, are concerned only with the next promotion or election. They seem to follow John Maynard Keynes' dictum, "in the long-run, we are all dead."

We borrow David Weinberger's (2007) term "accountabalism" to refer to the tendency of accountability to create over-learned, command-and-control reactions. Accountability mandates are ubiquitous in U.S. business and education, as reflected in the "Sarbanes-Oxley" and "No Child Left Behind" legislations. In the wake of widespread accountabalism, it is not surprising that the principles of empowerment, autonomy support, and sustainable motivation have failed to take root and grow. Of course, every manager and teacher is accountable for results. But accountability need not inevitably create the "to-do blues" of command-and-control management. We next consider two example organizations that successfully broke through these obstacles.

*a. From Accountabalism to Autonomous Motivation at Xerox*

To better learn how to overcome the aforementioned organizational obstacles to empowerment, two of us partnered with Xerox Corporation to create sustainable, autonomous motivation among managers and their service employees during a period of economic downturn (Deci, Connell, and Ryan, 1989). At the time of that work, Xerox was struggling, layoffs were common, fear was pervasive, and performance pressure was intense. Surveys indicated that subordinates felt pressured and controlled, rather than supported, by their managers. The managers themselves were also dissatisfied;

interviews indicated strife within teams. For example, in one service unit, the team consisted of isolated managers who feared talking to each other about their work group problems.

The researcher-consultants perceived that the managers needed to learn to support one another, to support employees' self-determination, to provide informative, non-controlling feedback, and, to understand and acknowledge subordinates' perspectives. Accordingly, the researcher-consultants designed the intervention to achieve these results. The intervention in each of several districts around the country began with the change agent spending an initial day with the district manager to understand his perspective, explain the intervention process, and elicit commitment to it. The primary intervention occurred at a two-day, off-site retreat for the management team. In the beginning, the managers were quick to express anger toward the company for what "it was doing to them," but they were reluctant to talk directly to each other about their management team problems or problems in their work groups. Solving such problems required that managers take a hard, unnatural first step: admitting that the problem wasn't just "out there". Getting past this barrier led to the realization that the management team and their work groups were struggling. This insight initiated the process of sharing strategies for changing these dynamics.

Unearthing the managers' feelings required patience and listening without judgment. Slowly, during a two day off-site retreat, the managers' discussions evolved from blaming the company's top management towards acknowledging their resentments toward one another. Finally, they began acknowledging one another's strengths and contributions. In two subsequent half-day meetings, the change agent met again with

the management team, listened to their concerns, and, when asked, suggested strategies for managing group dynamics.

Following these sessions, the management team was happier and more effective, and, managers had more positive attitudes toward their teams. They now felt mutual support within the management team, and this helped them create functional work groups. By sharing problems and strategies with one another, they functioned as productive teams. They were able to take the other's perspective, which is a critical feature of autonomy support and empowerment. The accountability pressure from the corporation remained; but the managers no longer reacted by slipping into the rut of over-learned, command-and-control strategies. They were able to absorb, and "vent" the pressure from above without passing it down. Trust in, and support for, one another created a buffer that allowed the managers to end the process of passing down the pressure and commands to subordinates. Within their work groups, they began applying their newly found skills of empathetic listening to create functioning teams that supported subordinates' self-initiation and self-regulation.

Once managers were more open, engaged, and trusting, they were eager to learn about their managerial styles. Toward this end, the change agent attended a work-group meeting with each group. The employees had met the change agent, so it seemed natural for him to attend and observe. After each work-group meeting, the agent met with the manager. He encouraged the manager to think about what had gone well, and then turned to what had gone poorly – that is, what might be done differently next time. Mostly, the consultant encouraged self-reflection among managers, modeling how to empathize with subordinates' needs and perspectives and

avoid letting their own feelings of pressure manifest in pressure on subordinates.

*b. From Accountabalism to Autonomous Motivation in the Kansas City, KS Public Schools*

The surge of “high-stakes” testing in public schools is another example of the unfortunate growth of accountabalism (Ryan and LaGuardia 1999). For example, the US No Child Left Behind (NCLB) law mandates that all states test their students and show improvement (Ryan and Brown, 2005). In response to NCLB, many states initiated or expanded their high-stakes, test-based accountability systems. Many studies document various dysfunctional consequences of NCLB and the accountabalism strategies it fostered (e.g. Moon, Callahan, and Tomlinson, 2003; Clark, Haney, and Madaus, 2000; Amerein and Berliner, 2002). Nonetheless, one approach to comprehensive school reform—namely, First Things First (FTF)—uses SDT principles to transform schools in ways that improve graduation rates and test scores in spite of the NCLB-induced problems (Gambone, Klem, Summers, Akey, and Sipe, 2004). James P. Connell from the Institute for Research and Reform in Education developed the FTF model to reform under-performing schools that serve primarily students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

FTF changes school structures in ways that create opportunities for teachers and students to satisfy their needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness while also improving their teaching and learning. This begins by breaking large schools into small learning communities (SLC) of about 350 students and 18 teachers. Students, and their teachers, remain within their SLC throughout their years at a school. The SLCs create small student and family advocacy groups within which the students experience a

greater sense of relatedness with an adult in the SLC. Teachers receive substantial professional development and educational instruction to make learning more engaging and optimally challenging. They also work in teams to improve teaching quality. Administrators learn how to provide autonomy support to teachers, who in turn, learn how to support students' autonomy.

These and related methods have dramatically improved graduation rates and achievement in schools throughout the Kansas City, Kansas district and in other sites in the U.S. For example, during the first five years the reform was fully implemented in Kansas City, school attendance, students' relationships with teachers, levels of engagement in learning, achievement, and, high school graduation rates all improved (Gambone, Klem, Summers, Akey, and Sipe, 2004).

## ***5. Summary and Conclusion***

SDT identifies the principles that underlie the creation of long-term motivation in organizations. It appears that bold managers who are willing to apply SDT principles need not choose among organizational productivity, creativity, and employee well-being—they can achieve all of these goals by the strategic use of sustainable motivators applied to an organization's critical workforce. Nevertheless, significant obstacles exist to successfully implementing SDT approaches in organizations. Despite its seemingly common acceptance as evidenced by the way managers' talk, organizational resistance to implementing SDT approaches is substantial.

For some, learning the SDT "walk" requires unlearning existing motivational strategies. Supporting employees' workplace autonomy, competence, and relationship building are surprisingly resisted, perhaps partly because learning the skills needed for



a SDT approach often challenges managers' long-held beliefs about human motivation. In addition, accountabilism, short-term performance pressures, and short-term performance rewards are a powerful trinity of obstacles to creating sustainable motivation in organizations.

When strategically applied to critical workforce segments, SDT principles and practices build long-term business value. For managers who are more interested in long-term than short-term payoffs, a SDT approach offers a humane alternative to cutthroat, internal competitions that pit employees against one another. In an era of escalating competition for knowledge talent, what could be a better managerial legacy than helping employees achieve their most important psychological needs and in turn improving organizational productivity?

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**Table 1 – Creating Enduring (Autonomous) Motivation**

1. Ask open questions and invite problem-solving participation.
2. Actively listen and acknowledge employee perspectives.
3. Offer choices within structure including the clarification of responsibilities.
4. Provide sincere, positive feedback that acknowledges initiative, and, factual, non-judgmental feedback about problems.
5. Minimize coercive controls such as rewards and comparisons with others.
6. Develop talent and share knowledge to enhance competence and autonomy

**Figure 1: The Foundation of Sustainable (Autonomous) Motivation**

