

Motivational Task Design

Joel Dignam

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Designing Motivational Work

For volunteers or staff to be driven to do their work, it must be motivational, both 'extrinsically' and 'intrinsically'. 'Extrinsic' motivation comes from the environment of the work: do I like my team? Do I care about the goal? Do we have fun? 'Intrinsic' motivation, on the other hand, is about the task itself: its context and design.

Often we look at extrinsic factors to address flagging motivation. People aren't coming back to phone banks? Let's have a celebrity join the session to excite the volunteers. Now, it's not as if this is necessarily the wrong approach. But too often we neglect the intrinsic elements of the work.

Thus, at *Organise 2015*, Anita Tang and I ran a workshop on how to design tasks to make them more intrinsically motivational. Anita and I are ourselves volunteers and organisers. We've experienced motivation or frustration in our own work as well as the responsibility to create motivating work for others. We are also both alumni of Harvard's course 'Leadership, Organizing and Action'. This course introduces some useful ideas around designing work, and we wanted to share them.

Before you read further, answer this question: if you think of the time you were most motivated in your work, what was going on? What was it about the work? If you want to be more precise: think of a specific task you work on, that you find motivating. What is it about that task?

We asked this question in our workshop and, well, the answers weren't really surprising at all. People found work motivating when they had autonomy - when they were trusted and given specific, unique responsibilities. People loved having a sense of impact, of knowing what they had achieved. People wanted a connection between their work and their goals - to be able to see the part they had played in bringing about the world they wanted.

These answers aligned perfectly with the work of Wageman and Hackmann, which Anita and I wanted to share. These researchers argue that motivation requires three states: experienced meaningfulness, experienced responsibility, and knowledge of results. You should be contributing to something worthwhile, you should have a distinct role to play, and you should know how well you are doing and what the outcomes are. These are the three 'critical psychological states.'

Achieving these states requires designing work with respect to five 'core job dimensions'. The first three dimensions contribute to experienced meaningfulness:

- **Skill Variety.** The work should involve multiple skills, covering the heart, head, and hands.
- **Task identity.** The work outcomes should be evident in the end result - the difference made should be clear.

- **Task significance.** The end result should actually matter, should help to make the world more as it should be.

The fourth dimension contributes to 'experienced responsibility':

- **Autonomy.** The task should promote a degree of freedom in choosing methods to achieve an outcome.

Lastly, the fifth dimension contributes towards 'knowledge of results':

- **Feedback.** The worker should be able to know how well they are doing and the consequences of their work.

While not every dimension can be maximised for every task, improvements are possible for every task, even 'boring' ones. Participants in the workshop talked about redesigning recruitment stalls so more methods were available to sign people up. People suggested incorporating debriefs more consistently, to improve feedback. Someone from an activist call centre had the idea of breaking down the skills required into more different elements and facilitating staff to focus on and improve different skill elements for each shift. I loved this idea, which would improve skill variety, and autonomy, and feedback.

As organisers, we know there are many elements to our power-building work. We can't underestimate the power of story and relationships to help in growing our base and fostering commitment. Structure and strategy help to create strong, purposeful teams. And we can change things around the work itself to make the experience more pleasing: team drinks, recognition ceremonies, and picnics.

We can also design every task to be so motivating that contributors - staff or volunteers - look forward to it. By improving skill variety, task identity and task significance, we can increase experienced meaningfulness. By offering autonomy, we give the experience of responsibility. And feedback promotes knowledge of results. More motivating work means more people participating more often, more effectively. It's not just how we give our people the experience they deserve. It's how we build our numbers and power and capacity. It's how we win.

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