

The Mystery of Motivation

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As long as humans have been here, so has the mystery of motivation. I say “mystery” because, while psychologists have thoroughly defined “motivation,” not one has come up with a fool-proof method that works for all. Even if we could come up with a recipe for motivating students to eagerly work hard at something they are not at first interested in, any teacher will tell you, it won’t work for every student. What motivates one may not at all move another.

I have mentioned before, Coach Wooden minored in psychology at Purdue University. When at UCLA as a coach, he observed many psychology classes and took notes. When coaching, he took copious notes on what inspired his players to work hard at something and came to the conclusion: The method of motivation is not entirely in the hands of the teacher, but has everything to do with the student.

Is it true then, if you have twenty students, you need twenty, custom-made, motivational strategies? This can be frustrating for the teacher that aims to inspire all students. But there is good news. After analyzing his detailed notes on the many players he studied, Coach noticed, they began to fall into categories or “types.” For example, when I asked him (years later) how he learned to motivate me, he said, “I remembered a player in the 1950s that was a lot like you. I went back to my notes and tried, on you, the things that worked for him.”

So let’s get started. Let’s study one student, me. Now, I had to think hard about this because I have never written it down. Those that knew me “back in the day,” will tell you, I was obsessed with basketball. No one spent more time in the gym than I did. The question is, “Why?” Here goes. Got your paper and pencil out? The source of my motivation changed as I matured.

1. The Motivation of Wanting to be As Good as Someone Else

When I was in my teens, the Lakers had Wilt Chamberlain, a 7’2” center who was amazing. He scored 100 points in one game and in another, retrieved 55 rebounds. When I watched him play on TV, I was inspired to be that good. The idea of jumping so high, getting your head even with the rim, grabbing 20 rebounds in a game, and dunking the basketball, was something I wanted to do also. So, I took my ball to an outside basket and practiced being like Wilt. I wanted to be as good as Wilt Chamberlain.

2. The Motivation Wanting to be Better Than Someone Else

I didn’t start playing basketball until I enrolled at Cypress Community College. My freshman year was a learning experience. That summer, I worked hard on my skills and tested them in the ghettos of Los Angeles. On one occasion, a strong, 6’8” player backed me toward the basket and dunked on me so hard, all the players fell down to the ground laughing at me. The next week, I came back and dunked on him. I was no longer motivated to be as good as someone else; I wanted to be better. I loved beating another player.

3. The Motivation of Wanting to be Recognized as Valuable and Needed

Cypress had a good team the next year and there was talk around the state about me being a player to watch. Our first game was against Cerritos College that had a center who was considered the best in California. In that game, I felt a heavy responsibility to neutralize him because my team needed me to do so in order to win. I outplayed him and made the final points to win the game. It was then that I experienced the wonderful feeling of being of value to the team. That sensation caused me to work even harder to become even more valuable.

4. The Motivation of Wanting to Please My Teacher

At Jefferson Middle School in Long Beach, California, I had a ninth-grade English teacher who loved

vocabulary words. She taught using the right words as an art, not only by presenting them, but also by example. I marveled at the beautiful words she used in her lessons. I came early to class one day and told her I had actually used one of her words that day. She smiled and told me, "Use a word three times and it's yours." I pleased her and it felt so good, I wanted to do it again. In basketball, I was motivated to work hard because I liked getting approval from Coach Johnson and Lubin at Cypress College. Being motivated to please parents can also fall into this category.

5. The Motivation of Wanting to Prove Someone Wrong

My stepfather often told me I wasn't going to amount to anything but he wasn't the only one. Two of my UCLA teammates tried to discourage me. After being selected to try out for the 1972 Olympic team, one teammate told me he felt sorry for me because I was going to get my butt kicked. One week before leaving for Virginia, where I was about to begin my rookie year as a professional, I was playing pick-up basketball in the old gym at UCLA. I got in an argument with a player who had graduated two years before and was already an NBA star. We exchanged words. He threw down the trump card when he said, "I don't care who the current center is on the Virginia Squires. You'll never beat him out. And you'll never lead that league in rebounding." That year, I was Rookie of the Year and the next year I led the ABA in rebounding. I would like to say, "Thank You," to both of my fellow Bruins.

6. The Motivation of Improvement

When at UCLA, Coach Wooden repeatedly preached the concept of not trying to be better than someone else, but never ceasing to try and become the best you can be. Knowing I wasn't going to be better than Bill Walton, Coach's sermons didn't work for me at first. I was caught up in the previous four motivational methods, all of which were extrinsic in nature. Coach was trying to get me to the point where my motivation to work hard was generated from within and from the feeling of improvement. It took a year but eventually I came around and discovered, none of the other methods came even close to the power of improvement.

Conclusion

I truly believe Coach Wooden knew these things about me because I found out later, he asked questions of everyone that knew me. He also observed me carefully and made it a point to ask me questions. Little did I know, he was studying me.

Even at 17 years of age, Bill Walton was a great player, better than I had ever hoped to be. I knew that when Bill and I enrolled at UCLA. The first pick-up game we played, I tried to dunk the ball at a full run and Bill blocked it above the rim. Welcome to major college basketball, Swen. I was thankful when practice started because Bill was on the freshman team and they practiced on a separate court. But once in a while, he was allowed to come work out with the varsity. At times he dominated. This guy was very good and I thought, 'I'm going to sit the bench for sure the next two years.'

Coach Wooden knew he had to move me to Motivation by Improvement quickly. He saw I was comparing myself to Bill and that was going to destroy me and make me give up. The first thing he did was talk to me. He told me I was probably not going to play much but that he needed me to develop so I could challenge Bill and make him better. He told me, if I did that, the team was going to improve greatly.

He used the data he gathered about me (except for number 6. I wasn't there yet.). In order to successfully move me toward intrinsic motivation (improvement), he never compared me to Bill Walton, never used reverse psychology, and rarely showed me he was pleased with what I did.

I still wonder what he learned from that player in the 1950s that he used on me. It doesn't matter. What does matter is that he studied his players and took notes and, after awhile, he noticed, sometimes, what helped one may help another. Perhaps that makes motivation a little less of a mystery.