Ron Friedman, Ph.D., is an award-winning social psychologist who specializes in human motivation. He has served on the faculty of the University of Rochester, Nazareth College, and Hobart and William Smith Colleges, and has consulted for some of the world’s most successful organizations.

Voiceover

This is Business Reimagined. Every week we talk with thought leaders and revolutionaries who are bringing innovation to their industries, like today’s guest Ron Friedman.

Ron

Recognizing that you do your best work when you manage your energy effectively, so that means, especially if you’re working for yourself giving yourself permission to take a nap in the middle of the day. Now I recognize that might be a kind of crazy talk for some people.

Voiceover

This is Business Reimagined with Danny Iny.

And if you’re loving the podcast and you’ve got a moment to spare, we’d appreciate a short review and 5-star rating on iTunes (if you think we deserve it).
Rod Friedman is an award winning social psychologist and frequent contributor to the Harvard Business Review, Fast Company, Forbes, and CNN. He is an expert on human motivation, which you can read all about in his latest book, "The Best Place to Work, The art and science of creating an extraordinary workplace." It's an invaluable resource for people in corporate environments and even more so for entrepreneurs who have the freedom to create their own workspaces. Ron's interest in workplace happiness actually started by noticing a lack thereof. You see, before becoming an academic, he interned at a law firm with dreams of becoming a high powered attorney. He quickly realized that lawyers are some of the unhappiest people in the world, and pivoted his career into academia.

You know, I think in many cases we pursue goals because we ask ourselves, "Can I do this?" We never bother to wonder what will it be like if I succeed at this? In my case the thinking was I really like the idea of learning new things, I like exploring new ideas, I wanted to become a writer, and I thought being a professor would be a way of achieving all of those goals. Then I got into the classroom and realized wow, I've taught this class, I'm going to teach this class again and then I'm going to do it for the rest of my life.

This laid some of the ground work for his current message about the importance of growth and variety. Ron hadn't figured out where he wanted to end up yet, and a job as a pollster caught his eye. Working in that environment is what really opened his eyes to the message he needed to share with the world.
Ron

In the process of being a pollster and working with a lot of corporate clients I came to recognize that there was really a massive divide between what scientists know are the factors that contribute to motivation, and creativity, and engagement, and how most organizations actually operate. It wasn't something I was expecting to find, it wasn't like I had a preordained plan, rather I got to the workplace and I came to realize, wow, all of these things that I just kind of took for granted as a psychologist because I'd study them for so long and I was surrounded by other psychologists who were also familiar with the same theories were just being ignored at most organizations.

Danny

It's not that organizations are intentionally ignoring science, it's just that they don't know what it takes to create great work spaces. Ron saw a need in the market and it intersected with a very personal need of his own.

Ron

That's where the decision came from is that I wanted to write something that I could then point to, and hold in my hand, and say, "I made this," right? "I made this." You don't have that feeling a lot of times in a lot of organizations because you often feel like you're working in an email factory where you come to your desk, you just write a bunch of emails, and you go home. That's not a very fulfilling role to play and so I wanted to do something a little bit different.
Ron wrote his first book, "The Best Place to work," to get the world out to the business world about the things that psychologists and scientists already knew about human motivation that organizations could apply to help and support their employees.

I think there are a couple of issues, one is that I think for a good portion of the material is just not known so I can give you some examples of that. For example, these are some of the more surprising things that I came across while writing the book is that exposure to the daylight over the course of the work day improves your performance at work. Working next to a window even though you might view that as potentially distracting, actually improves your performance at work. In fact, there's actually research showing that if you assign telemarketers to a chair by a window, that telemarketer is going to raise three thousand more dollars per year than someone who's randomly assigned to sitting inside in a cubicle somewhere.

The reason for that by the way is because daylight is physiologically healthy for us. When we're around daylight our body produces more serotonin which puts us in a good mood, it gets us producing more melatonin which enables us to sleep at night, and you can actually predict how satisfied employees at an organization are by the amount of daylight that actually hits the office floor. That to me is fairly surprising and that's something I think most leaders appreciate.

Another example of research that I think ...
Wait, before we go to more research ...

**Danny**

Sure.

**Danny**

I'm a bit of a pretend arm chair social scientists, meaning not really but I like to think that I am.

**Ron**

Uh huh.

**Danny**

I wanted to get into a little bit of, like how robust is this research? I'm channeling the listener a little bit, I'm channeling my own skepticism a little bit, but part of me is hearing this and thinking, interesting, the sales people sitting next to the window they're exposed to more sun, it does all this stuff but wait a minute. The window offices, the window areas tend to be more the prized wins, is it possible that it's the more senior, more successful sales people that get placed that, so you know, correlation causation.

Tell me how, you are a real scientist, not like me that you know, kind of plays one on TV sometimes. How robust is this research?

**Ron**

That particular example has a number of studies associated with it including meta-analysis which I site in the book. What you're pointing out is a critical point which is that maybe it is the case that someone who's more successful gets the window seat and so maybe that's why that person's productive. That's the difference between a
correlation and experimental design. Experimental design is you bring people into an office space and you randomly assign them to where they sit, and then you look at their productivity. In experiments in which people have been randomly assigned sitting next to a window or not sitting next to a window and then they look at their performance then you can determine that in fact it was causality that led to this change.

If you think that's surprising let me tell you something that's even more surprising which is that if you take people and you randomly assign them and you put half the people in a room with plants, versus another half of people that don't have access to plants, the people with the plants are going to perform at a higher level. Another example, you let people decorate their office, that person is not only going to be more productive they're actually going to like their organization more, they're going to be more loyal to it, less likely to quit.

These are just examples of environmental factors that influence our performance at work. All of this, this is kind of the pleasure that I had in doing this is that I got to sit there and literally look at all of the data and pick out the studies that I thought were worth noting. There were some things that I thought were interesting but not worth noting. For example, bringing dogs to work. Kind of cute but I think it's, I'm not so impressed with that research, I didn't put it in the book. Here is an example of things that organizations and leaders really need to consider as they're making decisions, especially entrepreneurs. Many of us who are just starting our businesses have the
opportunity of being selective in where we're going to work, where we're going to setup our organizations. Having that information is really key.

Danny

Do you evaluate kind of the relative impact of these things? I can imagine somebody reads your book and they come out with like a laundry list of like, here are all the best practices, all of the good things I can do. You know what, I've only got so many hours in the day, and so many dollars in the bank, and I've got to prioritize. Let's say for example I have one hour this week, am I better off reading a book that will teach me something about how to do my job better or am I better off decorating my office? If I have a hundred dollars am I better off investing in a better monitor so I can see better, am I better off investing in some plants for my office?

How should business leaders think about those trade offs?

Ron

That's a great question. Well I mean there's always going to be trade offs, it all depends on your particular situation so I don't think there are any hard and fast rules about you're a person who needs to go out and buy some plants right now because I don't know what your situation is. I don't know, are you sitting next to a window, is your chair comfortable, do you have enough lighting, is there noise in your office? Those things, what I would argue actually is to first make a list of all the things that are distracting diluting your attention. Start there, because those things are probably going to have a greater impact than a plant, or a picture up on your wall.

Danny

My position is fairly fortunate, I work from, well sort of from home, sort of from an office, it's across the backyard. I've got a comfortable space, I've actually got plants in the window, et cetera. Here's a challenge that is unique or rare in the business world
but very common in our neck of the business world which is I run a distributor organization. We're thirty-two people right now, we're spread over six countries. We're in Canada, the U.S. Mexico, the UK, India, and Russia. Everyone's working from home, everyone's work environment is unique. It's not like I have an office space and I control everyone's desk. What do I do in that situation? How do I create a work environment that is more conducive, and more productive, and healthier for my team in a situation where I don't really control their work environment and it's their home? There's only so much I can encroach and tell them what to do there.

Ron
Right, I think that's a great question. In fact, I've been getting a lot of questions like that is, how do I build a great place to work when most of my team is virtual? I can't say that I have a well thought out response to this because this book was really written for organizations that are run in one place, one location.

Danny
Quote unquote, real companies.

Ron
A real company, yeah. I wasn't going to say that but I appreciate you putting it out there. That said one of the things that I argue in the book is that there are small things that you can do that will have a big impact. For example, giving people a small budget that they can use to customize their workspace regardless of whether you have a real company or a virtual company. An example of this is Etsy, or DreamWorks. Both of these companies when a new employee joins their company they get a
small budget, I think it's a hundred dollars, to customize their workspace. The idea there is there are a couple of research studies that support this technique. One is that if you can provide people with a comfortable workspace they're more likely to be effective. It's because when we're not comfortable, we're sitting in a situation where the lighting's not great, when there's noise, our attention is divided. We're not quite as capable at being completely focused. That's one argument for investing in people's comfort.

Another argument is that when people get to customize their workspace they tend to feel a sense of ownership, and a sense of identity. If you walk around an organization and you look at the people who have put up some pictures on the wall versus people who have just kept their space the same as when they first received it, people who have put pictures on their wall are actually more likely to be committed and less likely to be thinking about leaving. It's not because they have put a picture on the wall and now they feel like something strange happened, but rather it's because they now identify with their personal space, they're kind of territorial about it in some way.

When you provide people with opportunities to customize their workspace they become more invested in doing a good job.

How much can you as the company lead that? If you have a culture where it's okay and encouraged, yes. Come bring, put photos of your family and all of that, obviously that's great. I mean still that only goes so far, you can't ... telling someone, "Hey,
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bring a photo of your kids and have it here by Monday." I don't think that's going to, that won't do anything for morale or engagement. How far does that go?

Ron

I certainly would not encourage you to mandate that everybody bring in a picture of their kid. What I do think you can do is model the behaviors you're looking to see, and this is one I think of the bigger things in the book is that leadership is not about the values that you place up in your lunch room, or the mission, or the vision statement. It's really about the behaviors of the people at the top of the org chart. It's because we are born with a mind that is built to mimic the behavior of those around us, and we spend more of our time and more of our attention focused at the people at the top of our organizations. If you're looking to build an organizational culture that is effective of bringing about the results you're looking for you really should focus on yourself as the leader and model the right behavior.

In your case Danny if you were building an organization where everyone is in the same space you can model the behaviors that you're looking to see by customizing your workspace and offering people a budget. I would be surprised if the majority of people didn't take advantage of your generosity there and just so happens it's going to benefit their performance, and benefit you in terms of having lower turn over.
Danny

Cool. Ron, tell me about some situations where you have seen or you've seen through the research of companies doing things that are just interesting or counter intuitive that you'd expect most executives to hear that and be like, "Huh, really?"

Ron

Well what we're seeing in the last few years is a very interesting trend of organizations actively paying employees to work less. The reason they're doing that is because they've come to realize that if you have employees who are working around the clock on the evenings and on the weekends, those employees are going to take a hit to their engagement and it's because they're burnt out. Once upon a time we had to make plans if we wanted to work in the evenings or on the weekend, we had to take our work home physically with us. Today it's the opposite where you actually have to make plans not to work because we're all carrying around an office with us in our pocket in the form of a smart phone. You're seeing a very interesting trend of companies that are going against the grain.

One example that I absolutely love is BMW where they shut down the servers at a certain hour every night so that you can write an email to your employees but that emails not going to arrive in the inbox until the next morning. Then there's the example of Daimler, which is another German auto manufacturer where they have the server delete any messages that are sent to people who are on vacation. If you send an email to me Danny and I'm on vacation you'll get an auto response that says, "Ron's away on vacation, if you need to reach someone here's his assistants email. If
you really do need to reach Ron email again on Monday when he comes back because this email will be deleted from the server." That does a couple of very interesting things. One it prevents me from getting caught up in writing emails on my vacation because I can't even access them, I never get to see those emails. More importantly is it allowing me to come back to the organization and not have to dig myself out of email for the first week. I really like that practice.

Danny

That's actually something that people can do on their own whether the organization does it or not. When I went on my honeymoon I put an auto responder in place and I wrote, I was very proud of the copy. I'm not going to remember it exactly, but something to the effect of, "I'm on my honeymoon, I'm away with my new wife. I get hundreds of emails a day, I'm going away for ten days. Rather than come back to thousands of emails I'm just going to delete everything that came in during this time, so if it's important please email me when I get back. If you need to reach me in an emergency here is my wife's cellphone number, call her, and if you can convince her that it's important she'll give me the phone. If not, you'll be responsible for our first fight as a married couple."

Ron

That's fantastic, now in fairness you can do that as an entrepreneur. If you worked for a manager you might not be as brazen as having put that email, and that's why I think it's really critical to say to your employees, "Not only is this possible but we encourage you to do this, we've built this program and we want you to use it because we recognize that having a happy honeymoon with your spouse is going to make you a better employee." Probably my favorite example in the book is a company called Full Contact in Denver Colorado, they're a software organization. At Full Contact not
only are you encouraged to take a real vacation but you will actually receive a seventy-five-hundred-dollar bonus if you can manage to take a vacation without checking your email once. All of these are practices that demonstrate that companies are starting to recognize that if you want people to be as engaged as possible you actually need to carve out space for them to replenish their mental energy on a regular basis.

Danny

I really like that, that's intense.

Ron

Yeah, you're going to use it?

Danny

I mean seventy-five hundred dollars is a lot of money and part of my brain is going to, how would I operationalize that? I mean they're a software company, I'm sure they did something with the servers. How would I know if people are checking their email?

Ron

You know what? You don't have to have that policy, the truth is if you just did what we just discussed which is by allowing people to not receive their email, having them do that automated email, and then not allowing them to check their email during their vacation. I think that is ninety percent of the way there and the seventy-five hundred dollars isn't necessary.
Danny: Cool, so tell me about, before we started recording you were starting to tell me about a tennis practice of grunting and what that teaches us about organizational change. I was like, "That sounds cool, let's save this until we're recording."

Ron: Yeah, so it's the story of Monica Seles. Monica Seles in 1990, she's sixteen years old, she's playing for the French Open Title, and she's been a professional tennis player for one year. The match starts out in a way that looked great for her. She's playing Steffi Graf, Steffi Graf makes this tremendous comeback, and now they're in a tie break. She wins, she ends up winning the match. The interesting thing about this is prior to Monica Seles almost no players in tennis history had been grunting. If you look at tennis today almost all the players are grunting, male and female.

Danny: What does that mean for someone who's not a tennis, like who doesn't watch tennis? What does that mean, grunting?

Ron: It means this unnatural sound that comes out of your mouth as you're playing tennis.

Danny: As you whack the ball it's like, "Uh."

Ron: Exactly.
Okay, got it.

Ron

You get that nonstop now, and in fact there have been now new rules set in place to prevent players from grunting, allowing the referees to penalize players who are too loud. In some matches you had fans coming to the match not only with ear plugs, but with ear muffs. They're sitting in the fans ... a display of demonstration of disapproval. The point of the story is, is that Monica Seles essentially created a new social norm in introducing grunting to tennis and now almost all players grunt and it demonstrates that when you look at the people at the top of the chain they're the ones whose behavior get mimicked. When Monica Seles got to the top at the age of sixteen she essentially had reached a position of leadership within tennis and then that behavior became mimicked by everyone around her.

As we discussed we're born with a brain that's designed to mimic behaviors, so if you're looking to change behavior what you really should do is model the behaviors you're looking to see. The people around you are invariably going to mimic it on some level.

Danny

Interesting. Talk to me about, you've written this book, it's done very, very well, you're speaking in front of audiences, you're spreading your message far and wide. Where do you go from here? What's next? Is there another book that's in the works?
Is this the drum that you're excited to be banging on? Let me ask you a different way. It's been like what, a couple years now since the book came out?

Ron

No it's only been fifteen months.

Danny

Okay, so a year and change.

Ron

Yeah.

Danny

It's traditionally published right?

Ron

Yes, Penguin.

Danny

Okay, again there's a gap of you know, a bazillion years from when you finish writing it to when it actually gets published.

Ron

Right.

Danny

Since you finished the manuscript to today, it's got to be at least a couple years. What have you seen change in terms of the way workplaces are ... is this stuff catching on? Are people getting it? Is there resistance? What's the situation?

Ron

Yeah I think more and more organizations are interested in this material and the reason for it is because again, it's based in science. We have data that proves that it's accurate. I think there has become a growing acceptance of data driven practices. In my lectures I often sight the example of Money Ball, and how that completely
changed the world of baseball. For those of you who aren't familiar Money Ball, and
the movie Money Ball talks about Billy Bean and how he for years, for generations
really, baseball teams assumed that if you drafted home run hitters you'd have a
winning formula, you'd have a winning team. Then they started bringing on
Harvard researchers and looking at the data. What they discovered by looking at the
data is that in fact it's not home run hitters that generate wins but rather it's the
players who have high on base percentage, the ones who take walks and hit singles.
They're the ones who are getting on base and when players get on base they're more
likely to score runs, and that leads to a winning baseball team. That insight
completely revolutionized the sport of baseball.

Like baseball we have now reached a point in the research on the workplace where
we know exactly what's going to raise everyone's performance, it's no longer a
matter of guessing. We have data that shows this is what you need to do, if you need
to engage the people around you, if you're trying to motivate them, if you want to get
them more creative. Now all we really have to do is put the research to use and I
think there is a growing acceptance of this idea, and of data driven approach within
most organizations.

Cool, so I've got one last question as a kind of cap stone that will drive this home I
think to a lot of our listeners. A lot of our listeners are solopreneurs, they're building
their businesses, they may aspire to have large teams at some point in the future,
they may work in corporate environments that they want to get out of. In the core of
what they do they're kind of working on their own, they work from home, maybe they have a little office. That's the same scenario you're in, I mean you're basically self employed, you have your own kind of workspace, how do you apply all these things that you've learned to the construction of your work environment and routine?

Ron

Well I'll say a few things. One is I think from a motivational standpoint we really need to prioritize variety and growth over salary and perks. This is one of the key insights of the book is I think that we have become accustomed to assuming by looking at places like Google and all those organizations at the top of the fortune magazine best places to work list that building a great workplace requires millions of dollars. In fact, nothing really could be further from the truth, if you want to have a great work experience having a variety of different tasks and being focused on activities that you really want to do, those are the things that drive happiness and success not how much money you're bringing in.

The other thing I would say is recognizing that exercise really can have a transformative effect on how productive we are. There's all this research showing that when we exercise on a regular basis we get more blood flowing to the brain so we're better able to focus, we activate the memory regions of the brain so we're soaking in information at a higher rate, and we're placed in a better mood which is critical for all the collaborative activities that we're taking part in. Regardless of whether you're working in an organization or you're a solopreneur you're going to be engaged with other people. Being in a good mood isn't just a nice to have, it's fundamental to being successful.
Finally, what I would say is that we really need to make time to restock our mental energy. It's not just about whether you have access to a window, or a decorated workspace. Recognizing that you do your best work when you manage your energy effectively. That means, especially if you're working for yourself, giving yourself permission to take a nap in the middle of the day. Now I recognize that might be kind of crazy talk for some people, but the amount of data that we have showing that if you allow yourself twenty to thirty minutes per day where you just lay down on your couch, close your eyes, you're going to have higher creativity, higher memory, better focus, you're just going to get a lot more done. Not only are you going to be healthy but you're actually going to be a lot more productive.

All of that are things that anyone can apply to having not just a better and more successful day but just having a more productive career.

Voiceover

*That was Ron Friedman with his message of workplace happiness and how it effects productivity. Whether you're a CEO, manager, or a self employed solopreneur the idea here is the same, personalize your space, keep pictures of people you care about, and if you don't have a window step outside for a quick walk. Then as a manager encourage your employees to do the same. If you'd like to learn more go to Ron's Site at Ignite80.com, that's Ignite 8-o.com.*

*This has been Business Reimagined with Danny Iny. Join us next time as we talk with branding thought leader Martin Lindstrom.*
They sit on the floor and ask him one simple question, "What are you most proud of?" This kid pauses for a second and he points at an old worn down pair of sneakers. Lego seems completely surprised because they expected him to answer a PlayStation, or Sony this and that, but he didn't. They ask him, "Why?" He says, "Because I'm the best skater in town, and these pairs of shoes are real evidence for me because when you slide down a skateboard it creates a wear and tear in a certain angle. This becomes my trophy." That was a moment where Lego realized that time is not in essence among this generation if you make them become storytellers. Out of that change and they started the process of developing the Lego movie.

Voiceover

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