

## Why Does Motivation Fail?

Better to light a candle than to curse the darkness.

—CHINESE PROVERB

One of the biggest criticisms of motivation as a persuasion tool is that the results often appear to be temporary. There is some truth to that notion, but only when motivation has not been properly utilized. Motivating or being motivated with the wrong things for the wrong reasons will never work. I call motivating for short-term results the “desperation cycle.” The desperation cycle describes our tendency to take the easiest path instead of the best one. We dwell in our comfort zones—places where we don’t have to expend much energy in analyzing our surroundings—and in these zones, we live by habit and routine. As a result, we become resistant to change. We are unlikely to stretch ourselves or strive for excellence. Fear of the unknown and fear of making mistakes are also reasons why we stay in our comfort zones. As Mark Twain said, “A cat that steps on a hot stove once will never step on a hot stove again, but neither will it step on a cold one.” The comfort zone is safe and familiar, but it keeps us paralyzed by fear and unmotivated to venture out.

Fear, however, will creep into our complacency. At some point, we realize that we haven’t accomplished any of the things we needed to do. Suddenly, we fear what we are becoming and where we are going as a result of neglect. As we contemplate our destination, we may panic, working frantically to make up for lost time. This frantic rehabilitation lasts just long enough for us to see exactly how steep the hill really is—how long the marathon will really take—and then our excitement begins to fade. We find ourselves lulled back into our comfort zone, numb to the stark realizations that had us panicked only a little while before. We’re then perfectly positioned for it to start all over again. Hence, we find ourselves in the “desperation cycle.”

Here’s a common scenario. Let’s say you have a high school reunion coming up, but for the past decade, you’ve been enjoying some of life’s finer foods (maybe

chocolate chip cookies). As a result, your clothes are feeling pretty snug. You don't want to go to your reunion in this ample state. You begin to fear what it's going to be like to show up at your reunion looking this way. Panic hits, and you vow that you will lose weight before the looming event arrives. To that end, you starve yourself. You even start to exercise. The pounds come off and you go to your reunion a slimmer and more confident individual. Then you get home and think that it'd be nice to continue shedding the pounds, but you realize it's harder than you thought. You begin to overindulge again, just a little bit at first then more and more as time goes by. You let your exercise regimen go. The weight returns, and the vicious cycle starts all over again.

### *Motivating the Unmotivated—Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs*

Great persuaders are able to find and fulfill unmet needs and wants. Two of the major keys to knowing how to motivate others are: (1) discovering their needs and wants, and (2) figuring out how to fulfill them.

Great persuaders know that not everyone can be motivated the same way at the same time. Many of us are familiar with Abraham Maslow's "hierarchy of needs." A renowned researcher and psychologist, Maslow proposed a hierarchy of needs that demonstrates the human needs we are most motivated to satisfy. The base of the motivational order begins with the fundamentals of life. These fundamental, life-sustaining needs must be met before the higher needs can be addressed. When lower needs are not met, the higher needs become less urgent.

- Self-actualization needs: realizing one's own talents, gifts, and potential
- Ego needs: respect, status, and recognition
- Social needs: affection, companionship, and inclusion
- Safety needs: protection from physical harm
- Physiological needs: food, sleep, and shelter

As the more basic needs are fulfilled, they lose their motivating power. We then move up the hierarchy and target needs in other areas. For example, if running water

is something we take for granted, then the need for a glass of water is unlikely to spur us to action. Conversely, if we can't meet this month's rent, then we most likely are not thinking too much about fulfilling our self-actualization needs. After all, as they say, a man with a toothache cannot fall in love.

To motivate effectively, be sure you address your audience's lowest unmet hierarchical need and then offer opportunities for that need to be met.

Don't make assumptions, either—they are often wrong, as you will see in the tables below. Great persuaders talk to the person directly and take the time to hear and understand their needs and wants firsthand. Below, you can see an example of how what employees want is one thing, while what their managers think they want is another. How much more effective could these managers be in motivating their team if they were really in touch with their employees? What we think others want and what they really want are usually two different things. Studies show that only one in ten people are recognized/motivated in ways that are meaningful to them.<sup>7</sup> Great persuaders can consistently find those wants and needs.