

A Framework for Understanding Motivation

How Does Motivation Work?

When we think of motivations we usually consider them to be things which drive us in life. We think of them as outside influences. That idea is not quite right. In fact, motivations are *internal and individual*, and perform an *evaluative* function in life. When we consider doing something, such as losing weight, we evaluate the goal from many different standpoints: improving our health, having more energy, being able to keep up with the kids, how we will look better (vanity), saying good-bye to snacking, how we don't like to deprive ourselves, not liking the idea of getting up early to exercise, no more ice cream, and so on. Some of these things we desire and some we don't want to face. In doing this evaluation, we find some things – goals, needs, priorities, desires, wants, beliefs, preferences – prompt us to want to lose weight... and some which make us dread losing weight. They are all influences: some positive, some negative. We use them as filters as we evaluate whether we really want to lose weight or not. Based on that evaluation, we make our assessments, weigh our options, make our decisions, and come to have intentions. On the balance we will be motivated or not motivated. This tends not to be a conscious process for us. We make these evaluations about things all the time without even thinking about it. BUT, since this is how we naturally function, as leaders we can intentionally use these natural human processes in helping people do something new in church. Change happens in church when people make a positive evaluation to move from their current reality to a new future. The positive evaluation – prompted by the sum of the positive influences – motivates intentions in us to move towards something new.

A Simple Approach to Understanding Motivation

There are four basic factors that build a positive motivation to change, both for individuals and groups:

- Every person and every group has a collection of goals that are either straightforward and declared, or vague and sub-conscious. People feel motivated to act when the action will fulfill one or more of these goals. In fact, *motivation to change increases when one action will fulfill an increasing number of personal goals.*
- Motivation increases if you *believe that you are capable* of achieving this change (called “Capability Beliefs” or “efficacy beliefs”)
- Motivation increases if you believe that those around you (your family, your boss, your church, your neighbourhood) will grant you the opportunity and the support to do this new thing (called “Context Beliefs”)
- *Having positive emotional feelings about achieving this new thing* increases motivation as well.

Let's go back to our weight loss example again:

- Let's say that a recent visit to the doctor informed you that your risk of heart attack and diabetes is high because you are too overweight. That primordial goal

for survival kicks in. Losing weight instantly becomes a high priority goal. But you can also imagine many things that would come with the weight loss: the ability to hike farther, being able to keep up with the kids playing, your wife's appreciation! Weight loss soon becomes more than just survival – it would help a lot of things that you'd like.

- “But can I lose weight?” You remember past failed attempts to do it, and feel a little demoralized. But then you talk to two friends at work who both used “Dr. So-in-So’s Miracle Diet” very successfully. Their personal testimony and example gives you hope that it can work for you too. This approach to weight loss seems sensible and something that you can do with minimal suffering. You come to believe that you have *the capacity* to lose the weight.
- “But I will be all alone doing this!” Your family tells you they wish to support you. They agree to make the new meal plan the one the whole family uses. “If it is that healthy for people, we might as well all be on it” your spouse says. The kids commit to joining you on your exercise routine. So you come to believe that *your context* (in this case your family) will be supportive.
- Seven days into the new routine you get on the scales for the first time. You see that you are already down 3 pounds! Miracles happen!! This early, small success gets you excited about the possibilities and *makes you feel happier* about yourself. All of a sudden you find you have more determination.

One can imagine the motivational conditions for any challenge to change through these four factors. You can set up this simple scheme for motivation as a math equation. The four factors all multiply together (the * is a multiplication sign):

$$\begin{array}{ccccccccc} \text{Positive} & & \text{Strong} & & \text{Capability} & & \text{Context} & & \text{Positive} \\ \text{Motivation} & = & \text{Positive} & * & \text{Beliefs} & * & \text{Beliefs} & * & \text{Feelings} \\ & & \text{Goals} & & & & & & \end{array}$$

Strengthen any of these four factors and the positive motivation grows. This means that they don't all have to be strong. You may not be convinced you have the will power to lose weight (weak capability belief) but your family and medical support may be immense. Let's say they agree to help you curtail your snacking, so your worries about your low will power are not such a big issue. In terms of this formula, your strong context beliefs (“my family will help me”) makes up for the weaker capability beliefs (“I don't think I have the will power to do this on my own”). Positive motivation, even with a weak factor, can still remain high.

An Example of How To Use This Formula

It is important to think of building on positive motivations using this kind of scheme when it comes to any important proposed change in the life of a congregation. Let's say the Missions Committee wants to propose to the Session that the congregation start an “In From The Cold” project – a common outreach project today among urban churches.

Here's how "Inn From The Cold" works. One night a week volunteers prepare a hot meal for a group of the homeless and then supervise that group as they spend the night sleeping in the church hall. The Missions Committee, even before it brings the recommendation forward, is already anticipating the worries, uncertainties and the concerns that elders and members may have. How might it shape the proposal? Here's some ideas using this motivational scheme:

Goals:

The committee can list a number of goals which people will find appealing to fulfill... all goals that the Inn FromThe Cold Project could fulfill for them. If one project can help fulfill a number of goals for people all at the same time, the greater becomes the motivation to act. For example they can highlight:

- Faith Goals: starting a project like this can become a way of acting on what the church believes. The committee can speak to Christ's call to feed the hungry and invite in the stranger (Matthew 25:31-46). The project will give members an opportunity to act on their faith convictions, which will in turn bring more meaning to their faith.
- Faith Yearnings: in recent years congregational members have been talking about the need to do mission "at our doorstep". Sending money to Presbyterians Sharing is still good, but feels impersonal. A growing number of people are yearning for a more concrete, personal mission project for the congregation to do right here. "Inn From The Cold" will meet that kind of desire.
- Beliefs about church life: in congregations we tend to believe that it is a good thing to work together as a community. A project like this will give an opportunity for this church to become a stronger community through sharing this common work.
- Personal growth: engaging in a program like this is an excellent way of going deeper in your faith.
- Building and security goals: many church people want to know that their building and its facilities are well kept and kept safe. They also want to feel safe while in the building. The committee can speak to security issues around this program to reduce the fear in some that having the homeless in the church building will not affect the building or be a security issue for members using the building at the same time.
- Personal impact: those who participate in running this program will know the personally rewarding feeling that comes from helping others. Many people desire to feel that their personal act of compassion has made a difference.

Capability Beliefs:

The elders may think it is a wonderful thing to do, but be skeptical about whether the church can really make such a program happen. "Will we get enough volunteers to make the commitment to run the program week by week?" In other words, they may wonder if the church is capable of running the program. The elders' capability beliefs can be strengthened by:

- Having a list of members who are already committed to running the program if the Session agrees to it.
- Have a budget to show how much it is going to cost that also demonstrates the affordability of the program.
- Show how this program will not conflict with current church programs which also use the building.
- And so on....

Context Beliefs:

So far so good, but some elders may think it is a monumental task given that “we’ve never done this before”. What kind of support is there for us in trying this new thing? The committee could come forward with:

- The offer of help from a church in the community that has been running the program for a few years now. They have agreed to help this congregation plan the program and to help run it for the first month. Leaders from this other church are also willing to come in to make a presentation to the whole congregation on their experience with the program.
- A local supermarket has agreed to provide some standard food stuffs on a weekly basis, free of charge.
- Another Presbyterian Church in town likes the idea of “Inn From The Cold” but doesn’t have the kind of facility needed to run it. They have offered to support a program here.
- And so on...

Positive Feelings:

The Session is impressed by the conviction, determination and thorough planning of the Mission Team. The presentation ignites the imagination of the elders, and the elders start to catch the spark of the Mission Committee’s enthusiasm. They start to get excited themselves about doing this. The initial weeks of the program prove to be very successful since so much support was given by people from the experienced neighbouring church. That positive experience breeds confidence, greater determination, satisfaction and excitement.

A Word About Goals

Now that you are getting a sense of how motivation works, I need to share a few thoughts about personal goals.

First, it is easy to get a little muddled about goals here. After all: people are a collection of many different goals all held in different priorities. Think of a root system of a tree. The roots bring the necessary nutrients and water to the tree to make it flourish in life. Reduce the number of roots or their effectiveness and the tree’s ability to thrive declines. The same thing applies to the goals we wish to achieve. Taking our last example: the goal of implementing an In From The Cold Program is like the tree we

want to grow and thrive. For this to happen, this program needs to have many roots which are many goals in the lives of individuals as well as in the life of the church overall. As people come to see that some of their life goals can be fulfilled in achieving this congregational goal of implementing this program, their motivation to make this program happen will grow.

Many personal goals are individual needs:

- for security, support and reassurance,
- for community, spiritual growth and guidance,
- the quest for personal development in the areas of personal meaning, self-esteem, fulfillment and identity,
- to have our self-interests and preferences met.

Other motivating goals in life don't revolve around need. One important group of personal goals is our beliefs in faith, since those beliefs can promote motivating goals. For example, a strong personal belief that Christians are to help their neighbour in need can motivate an individual towards a strong intention to help with the In From The Cold Program.

Kennon Callahan in the "Stewards by Design" program says that in church people there are six broad motivational keys. The key may be a good goal for one's congregation (eg. To build more community in the congregation). The key could also be the consequence of a goal's fulfillment (eg. Growth in church membership can create hope for the church's future). The six keys are:

- Compassion: sharing, caring, giving, loving, serving
- Community: good fun, good times, belonging
- Hope: confidence, assurance of the grace of God
- Challenge: accomplishment, achievement, attainment
- Reasonability: data, analysis, makes good sense
- Commitment: duty, obligations, loyalty

For the grassroots in our churches and for the unchurched, the most significant motivational keys are the first three: compassion, community, hope. Among congregational leaders and clergy it tends to be challenge and commitment. Leaders must learn to speak the language of the led and appeal to what moves them. If leaders are able to articulate goals that can foster a sense of compassion, community and hope, the goals are more likely to be accepted and pursued.

Each of us individually – and each church as a group – is a collection of goals. The more of these that are positively activated, like the roots of a tree, the stronger the motivation to make this initiative thrive. According to some of the research I've read, the most important factors are the goals.

A Word About The Emotions of Motivation

We have all seen satiric images of revival preachers whipping up the crowds and leading many people to respond. People's feelings can be great motivators for action.

Emotions fulfill two functions when it comes to motivation. Like goals and agency beliefs, emotions provide an evaluation of problems, opportunities and goals, providing a first gut-level "yes" or "no" to some new direction. This evaluation can happen instantly – even before the person has had a chance to think about something! Emotions also serve an arousal function, and thus provide a key source of energy in motivation.

Making the emotional side of motivation the dominant factor is best suited for short term issues (where response time is more critical). For example, yelling "the church is burning" ignites people's fears of dying. That is a great time to tap into the emotional side as the dominant factor! But when it comes to most issues of church life the emphasis should be on the other three. If feelings are emphasized, then people's commitment to making something happen can change when their feelings change. If motivation is sought by appealing to feelings predominantly (guilt, fear, anger), then people can later feel manipulated once the heightened edge of the feeling has dissipated. But, if the fulfillment of strong motivating goals is held up, if people's context and capability beliefs are strengthened, then positive feelings will follow.

Conclusion

The next time that you, as a leader, wish to influence people, think of the issue through the lens of this formula:

$$\begin{array}{cccccc} \text{Positive} & & \text{Strong} & & \text{Capability} & & \text{Context} & & \text{Positive} \\ \text{Motivation} & = & \text{Positive} & * & \text{Belief} & * & \text{Belief} & * & \text{Feelings} \\ & & \text{Goal} & & & & & & \end{array}$$

How does this formula help you frame the issue before you?

How does it help you pinpoint the motivational needs of your congregation?

How might it help you shape your leadership efforts?

How might it help you present your point of view?

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