

dear residents

Internal vs Instrumental Motivation

September 11, 2022

Dear Residents,

I am back in Dallas – adjusting to the time change. It wasn't that hot in Karachi, but it was very humid especially after all that record rainfall. I hope you are having a good September. The weather is more tolerable now. I think the scorching summer is finally over.

In 2009, Daniel Pink published [Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us](#). I didn't read the book until a couple of years later, but it did shape some of my early ideas about residency training. Pink dismantled the carrot-and-stick motivational strategy and presented several compelling studies that supported the concept of intrinsic motivation which he broke down as driven by 3 elements: autonomy, mastery and purpose.



[Some researchers](#) have suggested that we should replace the term “intrinsic motivation” with “internal motivation” and “extrinsic motivation” with “instrumental motivation.” This is how they explain it: intrinsic implies that the activity in question is inherently pleasurable, which doesn’t always address that many motivations involve hardship and struggle (like becoming a doctor). Instrumental motivation is concerned with rewards (salary, bonuses, promotion, prestige etc.)

We seem to be driven by both internal and instrumental motivation, but it turns out that [instrumental motives may weaken internal ones](#). Engagement-contingent and completion-contingent rewards significantly undermine self-reported interest. This upends the premise that being rewarded for activities that are aligned with your internal motivation would augment your engagement. It doesn’t. Imagine if we “rewarded” you in some way for attending noon conference – this idea has been floated many times. I have always believed that you will attend noon conference because you are motivated to learn, to get some food and socialize with your colleagues. I’ve avoided mandatory attendance tracking (in my view it would act as a negative reward or “stick”). If we gave out rewards for attendance, research suggests it may actually diminish your internal motivation to attend conference! Go figure. Human psychology is so counter-intuitive. I have resisted making anything mandatory (unless truly forced by external regulations). Forcing compliance based on the desires of others or external regulators risks extinguishing internal motivation and self-determination.

You have taken on the struggle and hardship to become a physician and have subjected yourself to the rigors of residency training. You are driven by a purpose that aligns with who you are what others need from you. You should be given as much control (autonomy) as possible and given the opportunity to hone your skills (mastery). Instrumental motives will drive us all – but we must resist their pull. Unfortunately, salary, promotions, prestige, and the desire to meet the expectation of others will continue to exert longitudinal influences on your careers and actions. All the same, I hope that you listen to that core desire within you – that purpose that drives you through this tough journey of training. Is medicine a job, a career, or a calling? Those who view it as a calling are more fulfilled with the work itself, rather than from the instrumental rewards that may result from it.

The practice of medicine is an art, not a trade; a calling, not a business; a calling in which your heart will be exercised equally with your head.

- Sir William Osler

Warm regards,

Dino Kazi