

Case Study : Motivation

The context for this study, conducted by Brandon Irwin lead researcher, assistant professor in the department of kinesiology at Kansas State University and author of the HBR article, was to test assumptions about motivational practices – using the context of sports coaching and in this case, personal trainers.

The Finding : Words of encouragement do not inspire people to perform better during a workout.

The Research: Brandon Irwin asked subjects in a lab to perform two sets of abdominal exercises called “planks.”



Some people did both sets alone.



Results: The subjects who had partners all exercised longer during the second set than the subjects who were alone.



Others did the first set alone and the second with a virtual partner who was expert at planks and was projected onto a screen.

Half the partners were quiet



Those with silent partners did planks 33% longer



Half said things like “Come on,” “You can do it,” and “You got this.”



Those with “encouraging” partners did them only 22% longer.

The Drill Sergeant vs. the Present, Silent Type : Which Coach Is More Effective?

Irwin didn’t expect these very clear results. Constant encouragement did not have the intended effect of inspiring plankers to improve. However, having a partner who was better seemed to be very motivating, with a 33% improvement in performance, just as long as that person didn’t *try* to actively motivate, but were still present and attentive. He postulated that a big reason why superior partners are motivating is that people want to compare favourably with others. But if anything undermines the belief that a partner is better, you feel you don’t have to put in as much effort to achieve a favourable comparison. (Think about this in relation to a Mentor – usually more experienced, someone who has walked the path before)

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HBR Asked a Range of Insightful Questions about the Results :

When obtaining feedback from the participants in the study, it was found that the subjects with encouraging partners somehow became convinced that they were not acting in their best interest, but were self-serving and in some cases interpreted the pushing as the partner's need to win. In other cases they perceived the partners' ability to perform the goals given as being inferior to their own, thinking the motivational words were more for the partners motivation than their own.

The takeaway here for coaches and mentors is that they should speak directly, using the name of the mentee/coachee. The results don't suggest that all encouragement is bad – as both encouraged and present partners uplifted the results more than 'doing it alone'. Rah rah type words aren't as good as leading by quiet example. As this is work in progress, it does suggest that not only use people's names but address their needs directly, and specifically is the way to go.

HBR : This goal you used is so immediate. Many goals are long-term or much more complex. Maybe vocal motivation is needed in those situations?

A second study consisting of people riding exercise bikes over five sessions was conducted using a similar setup: some had virtual partners, some were alone. And in this study, all the partners were silent. The results were even more pronounced. Subjects with partners doubled their time on the bikes. The study then added another element: One group was told they were on a team and contributing to a team score over the five sessions, and as a result these subject with partners in that group tripled their time on the bikes.

HBR : Why does believing you're on a team make such a difference?

It's thought that a feeling of being indispensable, because of the shared goal to succeed/deliver, makes people strive more and work harder, and this is especially so if you know or believe you're one of the weaker links in the team. The bond becomes stronger and each member lifts' their game in order not to let others down.

HBR : These partners were strangers. Maybe vocal encouragement is motivating if the more skilled partner is a friend or a personal trainer—or a manager?

In some instances being partnered with a friend boosts performance more than being partnered with a stranger—but only when you think you're highly indispensable to the success of a group and are a team's "weak link." When you're simply performing a task alongside your friend but not as the team's weak link, there's still a motivation gain, but it's no different from the gain you'd see from being partnered with a stranger.

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HBR: Can't we just cut checks to motivate people and get it over with? Money must offset this?

No, it doesn't work. Monetary rewards for individuals seem to get in the way of motivation. In another study, subjects were offered one a ticket that gave them a chance to win an \$80 gym membership for every second that they held a plank. Subjects who exercised with a partner and had this extrinsic incentive held planks half as long as those with no opportunity for lottery tickets. The incentive seemed to fight with their intrinsic motivation. It created competing goals—help the team or get a gym membership—and distracted them from the more powerful intrinsic motivation from within.

HBR: Exercise is an easily measurable goal. Succeeding in an office is not always that clear-cut. Should bosses stop offering verbal encouragement to their workers?

When looking at teamwork in a business context and also within the setting of a physical activity, one of the factors that seem to be highly related to and predictive of performance is cohesion, whether the people in your group feel a sense of togetherness and cohesion. And whether there is the belief that any effort generated is important to team success overall. More research is needed, however if this hypothesis is true in the sporting arena, then we would expect the same principles would hold in business. This is the direction of new research., as we look to tease out how much of this sense of indispensability is relevant in other settings. And therefore how we might adjust approaches to motivation on the basis of the evidence that constant encouragement just doesn't work. (Authors Comment : Potentially also this is a variation on the extrinsic factor?)

HBR: Seems as if you'd have to get out of the lab and into the field for that.

That's exactly the case, and the results are aligned. A colleague looked at relay races in track and swimming. These are natural environments for getting data because of immediate comparisons with the person in the next lane and there's a team dynamic. So far, the results match: The weak links in the team perform better in the relays than they do on their own.

HBR: This interview is going well. Keep it up. We're almost done. You can do it. You got this.

That sounds condescending. You should have used my name. 😊