



How to motivate yourself

COVID-19 has affected all of our lives—including our careers. Whether you find yourself out of work and needing to reskill, or you're suddenly having to adapt to new ways of working, being self-motivated is essential.

Frequently, people think of motivation as something you either have or don't have. *"I'm a self-starter, but Ali isn't."* Unfortunately, this makes it seem like you can't change your motivation level. Instead, it is better to ask: *"What factors are motivating my behavior right now?"* With this lens, you don't focus as much on whether or not you are motivated, but whether the motivation you are experiencing is appropriate for goals you are pursuing, and the environment.

This guide offers insights on how to stop thinking of motivation as *"the fuel"* of your behavior and start using it as a tool to effectively *"steer and accelerate"* you towards your goals.



About the author

Dan Belenky is Director of Learning Science Research at Pearson. Prior to joining Pearson in 2014, he was a Post-Doctoral Fellow in the Human-Computer Interaction Institute at Carnegie Mellon University. Dan earned his PhD in Cognitive Psychology at the University of Pittsburgh, where he studied how student motivation interacts with (and is impacted by) innovative instructional methods. His current research projects explore how insights from cognitive psychology and behavioral science can be used to improve learner outcomes, at scale.

Do you believe you can do it?

A growth mindset will help you if you hit a bump in the road.

We all hit bumps in the road—it's inevitable. But what happens next? Some people may feel demotivated, taking the difficulties as a sign that they don't have what it takes to succeed. Others may see these difficulties as important parts of the journey—they feel driven to overcome these challenges as a way to improve and develop one's abilities and skills.

Academic research has explored these two different perspectives people may hold, labeling the idea that you have a set amount of ability which can't be increased a "fixed mindset" and the belief that your abilities can develop as a "growth mindset." In general, holding a growth mindset is associated with more persistence, less anxiety, and better outcomes than holding a fixed mindset. A growth mindset helps people who get temporarily lost to reorient themselves back in a productive direction, rather than just thinking, *"Oh well! I'm a bit lost so I'll head home!"*

How can you develop a growth mindset?

Careful reflection on your own thoughts is a good first step, particularly when you start to experience challenges or difficulties that show you are really starting to expand past what you've been able to do before. If you catch yourself thinking, *"I can't do this,"* try to add that you can't do it *YET*, but you will. It can also help to remember other times in your life when you've gotten better at something with time, effort, and practice, like learning to play a musical instrument or other hobbies.

Base progress on your own improvements rather than comparing yourself to others.

Setting goals at work and regularly reflecting on them contributes to increased focus and motivation. You will likely be encouraged to set "performance goals", which are job oriented and results focused, and "development goals", which focus on areas where you can learn and grow. You should strategically consider how you are going to determine your progress against these goals, and what kinds of motivation will best help you achieve them. Will you use self-referenced improvement as a barometer, (e.g., *"How have I progressed from when I started?"*), or compare yourself to others as a way to gauge your own achievement? Generally speaking, "development" goals benefit from a focusing on your own improvement and having a growth mindset, and there are some cases where "performance" goals can benefit from checking in on how you are doing relative to your peers. **Take a look at the differences:**

Basing progress on your own improvements

Associated with outcomes like improved interest and achievement, particularly in more creative tasks.

Related to more positive emotions and less anxiety.

Associated with more effective learning strategies.

Comparing yourself to others

If the task requires a lot of repetition to master, or is a routine task, comparing your performance to others can help you stay focused and improve output.

Can lead to negative emotions, like anxiety.

Associated with less effective learning strategies.



So, if you are starting out on a new career journey, make sure to focus internally: *"Where am I now and where am I going?"* Try to check in by observing how much you've progressed from where you started, and avoid making comparisons to how others are doing.

How rewarding is it?

Help yourself see that it's worth the effort.

We all do this—either subconsciously or explicitly. We ask ourselves, “How hard is it going to be,” and, “What do I get out of it?” before deciding to do a task. If you have the knowledge and skills to succeed, and understand the value of what you're doing, you are more likely to be motivated.

How hard is it going to be?

Known as “Expectancy”

- How good am I at these kinds of tasks?
- How hard does this particular task look?



What do I get out of it?

Known as “Value”

- How important is the task to me?
- What costs are associated with doing it? (What do I have to give up? What will happen if I can't do it?)

How to increase expectancies (the belief you will succeed)

- Think about a time you've been successful before. What happened then that you can apply now?
- Look at one of your peers that is experiencing success. What strategies do they use? What can you learn from them? Could they mentor you?
- If you're facing a big challenge, break it into smaller chunks and celebrate the smaller achievements on the way to the bigger goal. Ask your line manager to think this way too.
- Your belief about whether your effort will lead to meaningful changes in ability can impact expectancies, so think about using some of the strategies discussed earlier about growth mindset. Set appropriate, challenging goals, and if you catch yourself thinking, “I can't do this,” try to add that you can't do it **YET**, but you will.

How to increase perceived value (how important the task is to you)

- A task can be seen as valuable because it is inherently pleasant (it is fun), because we can see how it will help us do something we want to do (it is relevant), because it would increase our social standing (it looks good), it gives us some external reward (we get something else of value when we do it), or many other reasons.
- Think about how the task in front of you links to the goals and priorities of the company. If you can't see a link, should you be working on this now? Discuss with your manager.
- Think about how a task links to your personal career goals. For example, will it allow you to get the project management experience you want? Will it help you gain visibility, which could raise your prospects of promotion?
- Consider the people you will work with on the task. Will you feel like a meaningful part of a group? What can you learn from them? How can they expand your network?

Do I need external incentives?

External rewards can increase motivation, but internal factors are better in the long run.

Another approach for increasing motivation relies on extrinsic (external) factors—rewards of various kinds, or the avoidance of punishment—rather than internal factors.

Sometimes you don't have a lot of control over your external rewards. But, where you do, they can be useful. For example, you can set up a plan to reward yourself for achieving some sort of goal (e.g., “When I finish this online course, I'm going to watch that new show I've been looking forward to!”). Positive feedback from our peers can also be a powerful motivator (e.g., “I will get so many 'likes' on LinkedIn when I post about finishing this certificate!”). You can contribute to the motivation of those around you by taking the initiative to recognize them. This can also have an impact on your own wellbeing.

But while motivation can certainly increase when rewards are introduced, if you rely solely on extrinsic rewards, you're more likely to give up when things get hard, to lose interest, and to burn out. In addition, if you start receiving extrinsic rewards for something you already enjoy doing, it could lead to an “overjustification effect,” where the intrinsic motivation decreases over time.

So, make sure to focus more on the strategies covered earlier, which improve your internal motivation.



These different aspects of motivation all provide ways of increasing your engagement and perseverance. If you are having a hard time sticking with activities, stop and reflect on what you are feeling.

- Are you not sure if you are the kind of person who can succeed? Use growth mindset strategies and increase your expectancies.
- Worried that others are doing better than you? Orient your goals around the progress you've already made and how much further you'd like to go.

If you want to dig deeper into understanding your motivational profile and what makes you tick, rigorous psychological assessments can be useful (though you may be safer avoiding "personality quizzes" you find online). Remember that if you experience struggles, it doesn't mean you are not motivated, it just means you need to find a way to better align your motivation so you can steer and accelerate towards your goals.

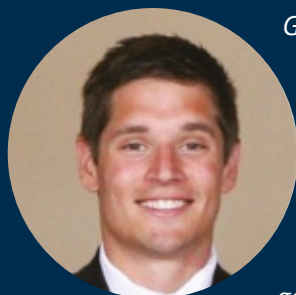
Here, two individuals share their stories about how they've taken charge of their own motivation.



For me motivation has always been in levels, i.e. forcing yourself to stay in the moment as it relates to that level. If you are doing a mundane task that seems like it has no impact on the bigger picture always do it by starting with the end in mind, not your tasks end but rather the end of the entire process, that allows for a small mundane task to teach you something about your business. How does this task affect the end consumer. Focus on the process not the next promotion.

An example in the food industry would be a person who buys ingredients for the product might think it is a boring task, but those ingredients get processed to create the food we sell, which gets distributed to stores, which get sold to customers and drive the business if done right. Motivation in a company is key! You need motivation to encourage team members to learn beyond just what they are doing. It is key to success in careers because it helps you see how each piece fits together to create company growth and helps you perform at the high level in each role you take. Finally, always seek to work for or with someone who has the heart of a teacher! They will help you learn important life and career lessons.

Jason Agnew, CalifourFoods



Growing up playing sports, competition played a huge factor into how I learned to work through challenges. Being around other competitive individuals motivated me to try things I would have thought impossible had I not witnessed these individuals complete them in front of my eyes.

After sports were over, I took a position managing several high performing sales professionals. It was eye opening seeing the different ways each individual found motivation to achieve their goals. Some found motivation internally while others were inspired by recognition in front of their peers. It opened my eyes and made me realize not everyone sees the world through my lens, but can achieve a similar outcome through different motivations.

Jake Skow Lhoist, Sales Manager



Are you using some of these strategies to motivate yourself? Tell us how. efficacy@pearson.com