TALK
TO THE
ELEPHANT

DESIGN LEARNING FOR BEHAVIOR CHANGE

JULIE DIRKSEN

VOICES THAT MATTER™

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New
Riders

VOICES THAT MATTER™

- People learn from experience, so consider what prior experiences learners are bringing with them and how you can ensure that their first attempts at a new behavior are positive experiences.
- Use strategies to make the value more immediate, tangible, and real for learners.

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5
UNDERSTANDING MOTIVATION

(IN WHICH THE ELEPHANT CHANGES A LIGHTBULB)

I like lightbulb jokes. Turns out jokes are easier to remember if you stick to one joke genre. A favorite lightbulb joke is this one:

> **QUESTION:** How many therapists does it take to change a lightbulb?
>
> **ANSWER:** Just one, but the lightbulb has to really want to change.

It's an oldie, but it speaks to the fact that motivation is a crucial element for behavior change.

Also, when we're talking about learning and motivation, there are two different ways to think about it:

- **Motivation to learn:** What is the motivation of participants to pay attention and participate in the learning experiences?
- **Motivation to do:** What is the motivation of participants to actually do the actions or behaviors they are learning about?

In this chapter, I refer somewhat to motivation to learn, but I focus primarily on motivation to do. (The two are interrelated.)

THEY'RE JUST LAZY

As I mentioned in Chapter 1, I've heard the following kinds of things about the learners in projects I've worked on:

- We can't get learners to pay attention.
- We want our learners to be more self-directed.
- They aren't motivated.
- They're just lazy.

Really? They're just lazy? How did they manage to hire a whole bunch of lazy people? If that's the case, I'd look at their hiring practices, not their training programs.

I don't really believe the "lazy people" explanation. First of all, I don't know that many lazy people. I'm sure some exist, but most people I know are so busy they can't see straight. And second, "lazy" isn't a helpful guide for design, for many reasons.

In Chapter 4, I talk about the 37-competing-priorities situation: *Sometimes people just have more important things to do.*

And have you talked to them about it? Because you should view the assumptions you're making about why they aren't doing something with extreme skepticism until you've talked to them about it.

IT'S NOT ABOUT MOTIVATING PEOPLE

When I was working on this chapter, I got assistance from my colleague Matt Richter, who had to remind me that it's not about motivating people.

Wait. That doesn't sound right. How can the motivation chapter *not* be about motivating people?

In a 2012 talk, motivation theorist and research Edward Deci explained it this way (Deci, 2012):

> "Don't ask how you motivate other people. That's the wrong way to think about it. Instead, ask 'How can you create the conditions within which other people will **motivate themselves**?'"

We discuss more about how to do this later in this chapter and in Chapters 9 through 12, but it's useful to remember that you don't get to decide what people care about, so it's much better to focus on creating environments that support them.

PERSISTENCE OF MOTIVATION

When we look at motivation, we also need to consider the persistence of that motivation. Are you seeing the behavior because you are standing there looking right at the person, or will the behavior persist after your attention goes elsewhere? Will the person start with initial enthusiasm that will quickly fizzle when the 37 other things show up?

INTRINSIC AND EXTRINSIC MOTIVATION

Because most of the work I do is designing learning experiences for workplace environments, the most simple explanation for why someone should be motivated is the fact that *it's their job*.

If you are a student in a university, then it's essentially your job to learn and engage, so theoretically a motivating learning experience shouldn't be necessary.

But if we get to the point where we are saying, "They should be motivated because it's their jobs!" it's a bit like when a disagreement between a child and parent gets to the "Because I said so!" stage. Technically true, but not the most helpful position for either entity.

So I'm going to take as given the idea that "it's their job" is not the best motivation to rely on and look at some of the other factors that might influence motivation. People always make choices and have the ability to accept or reject behavior changes in many ways.

EXTRINSIC MOTIVATION

Extrinsic motivation is anything that comes from outside the person being motivated. It could be money, rewards, grades, certificates, fruit baskets, being featured on an influencer's social media account, a cookie, kudos, a ride in the batmobile, or—you know—a gift card.

Extrinsic motivation could also be due to the avoidance of negative consequences like getting written up, a bad grade, getting fired, getting stuck doing the dishes, public shaming, having your social media account suspended, or getting arrested.

INTRINSIC MOTIVATION

Intrinsic motivation is anything that comes from someone's internal motivation. Someone could study animation because they really love Japanese anime and want to make something cool, or they could learn French because they love things that are French and really want to be able to visit Paris, or they could become a human rights lawyer because they are fascinated by legal arguments and want to help people.

Sometimes things can start for extrinsic reasons and become more intrinsic over time. For example, someone could take a class about plant-based cooking because they think it will help them reduce a genetic risk for cancer, but then they come to really enjoy it because they like figuring how to make vegan cuisine that's delicious and satisfying.

Notice how the list of intrinsic motivators is different than the list of extrinsic motivators? Each item contains the word "because" and the reason is that person cares about that thing.

Extrinsic motivators also form a continuum. For example, someone could dread a bad grade for fully external reasons—they need a certain grade point for a job, for graduate school admissions, or to qualify for a scholarship or program. But they could also dread a bad grade because they are deeply invested in their identity as a high-achieving student, they like that feeling of having a perfect academic record, and (even when there are no external consequences to the grade) it would make them feel bad about themselves and their accomplishments to get a poor grade. This involves fully extrinsic forces—external messages and opinions about grades—but also involves internal wants and values.

So one way to start thinking about motivation is to consider why someone would care, aside from the fully external factors.

Marcella is creating a curriculum around clean sports (anti-doping) for student athletes. So, Marcella, why should student athletes care about clean sports?