

“Why Don’t I Do What I Know I Should?” Finding the Motivation to be Better

By Andy Core, MS



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*Lying in bed, you decide to stay up to watch Leno rather than go to sleep.
In the break room, you grab a doughnut instead of the whole-grain bagel.
At the department store, you buy a new outfit versus funding your savings account.
On the way home from work, you choose eating out over exercise.
At home, you are cranky instead of patient.*

GO THE EXTRA MILE at work, live healthy, give back, etc. You’ve heard these “no brainers” countless times. You know they are the right things to do, but you feel resistance toward doing them. Why? What barriers stand in your way and how do you overcome them?

“To know and not do is to truly not know.”

—THE DALAI LAMA

While researching and coaching nurses, surgeons and others in healthcare from almost every discipline, I would sit across from these intelligent and dedicated people and ask three questions:

1 To be better at work and in your personal life, do you know what you could do? They all said yes.

2 Do you know why you are not doing these activities to the level you could? They all said yes, and the answers would include all the usual suspects: not enough time, money, too tired, etc.

Number three is the “tough love” question.

3 Do you know someone who has less time, greater challenges and who does these “no brainers” better than you? They all said yes.

“My way toward the truth is to ask the right questions.”

—SOCRATES, FROM PLATO’S PROTAGORAS

For people in healthcare, the best question is less often, “What should I do?” than “Why am I not doing more of what I know works?”

Most self-motivation theories, including my favorite, the Self-Determination Theory, propose that your innate nature is to be motivated, optimistic and productive. If you do not feel that way, then you are simply not getting what you need. These unsatisfied needs create the powerful and invisible barriers you may feel between you and who you want to be. The less these needs are met, the greater momentum you feel pushing against you.

On the other hand, as you start satisfying more of these needs, what once created these barriers is now a propelling force. The more these needs are met, the more your energy, motivation and forward momentum will build and build and build.

To Achieve Optimal Motivation, You Need:

ENERGY—*the energized engage and the fatigued procrastinate*

How would a toddler who is too tired respond to being told to do something she is supposed to do? Resistance. The same thing happens with adults. Your state drives your decisions. A low energy state leads to procrastination or making bad choices. A positive energy state leads to optimism and motivation. Deeper sleep, frequent energy snacks, optimal hydration and bursts of physical activity are primary energy essentials.

COMPETENCE—*not what to do, but how can you make it happen*

You know what you should do, but you may not be confident in your ability to do it. Change of any kind is a skill. The more skilled you are at hitting your objectives, the more confident you are. Competence, confidence and motivation are indelibly intertwined.

PATTERNS—*making the complex easier, faster and more fun*

Psychologists from the U.S. Olympic Training Center believe that over 90% of our decisions are based on unconscious, learned behavior patterns. Imagine that you are challenged to make it through a giant maze. The first time through you feel lost, stressed and it takes you forever. The next time through is faster and less stressful. By the third try, however, you know the pattern. Now you can run through the maze in a tenth of the time and it is much more enjoyable. Your daily life is a series of patterns. Improve your patterns and you can reduce your stress, do more with less and have more fun.

FOCUS—*the main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing*

Are you focused on the outcome, say, losing weight, or on executing your daily objectives? According to Dr. Peter Haberl, sport psychologist at the U.S. Olympic Training Center, being focused on execution will not only reduce your stress but also beat an outcome focus seven days a week.

COMMUNITY—*being a part of and supported by something bigger*

The Self-Determination Theory of motivation suggests that taking an isolated approach to change is a serious demotivator. Support from your work environment, family and friends will motivate you, keep you on track and reduce the stress associated with changing. While men are more likely to take an isolated approach to change, both sexes are susceptible. Band together at work, ask for support, give support to others and energize your motivation through the power of community.

The first step to optimal motivation is gaining awareness of what is blocking you. Go back to the needs listed above and put a big “+” sign by what is adding to your motivation and a “-” sign by what is creating resistance.

The second step is to attend the ASORN conference October 25th in San Francisco, where I have the privilege of being your keynote speaker. I promise to provide stimulating, enjoyable and long-term solutions to the question, “Why do I not do what I know I should?” so you can be better and *better* and *better*.