

LEADERS ARE SELF-MOTIVATED

That's the Problem.



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Let's be honest for a moment.

If you are in a leadership role, you probably don't need much motivation to do your job. You push through. You take responsibility. You care about outcomes. You find meaning in solving problems and making things happen.

While this is a self-powering system, it does create a blind spot for almost all leaders. And it's one most of us share.

The assumption many leaders never question

Most leaders carry an unspoken belief that if the work matters and people are paid fairly, professionalism should follow.

The issue isn't a lack of care or empathy. It's projection.

We assume all the others are wired just like us — self driven, self-motivated, internally disciplined. But in reality, most people aren't. And that gap sits underneath many of the engagement issues leaders find so confusing.

Comments by leaders like:

- "Why do some people just do the bare minimum?"
- "Why don't they take more ownership?"
- "Why do they need so much hand-holding?"

Are not character failures of staff. They are signals that the environment isn't working for the people inside it. This gap sits underneath a lot of 'Mystery' engagement issues.





What the workforce actually looks like

Over the years through our national engagement studies, client work and leadership conversations, a consistent pattern shows up inside most organisations. Going by the process of the Self Determination Theory as propounded by **Edward L. Deci** and **Richard M. Ryan**, we have found staff within an organisation to look something like this:

A small minority are self-motivated climbers (around 10%)

These people are ambitious, growth-oriented and internally driven.

They seek challenge and push themselves because they want to move forward.

Most leaders come from this group, which is exactly why we overestimate how common it is.

A group that comprises pride-driven professionals (roughly 15%)

They care about doing good work and maintaining standards. They do not chase titles; rather they actively avoid them.

These people are reliable, capable and often under-recognised.

Some are purpose-activated contributors (about 15%)

When leadership feels authentic and the work feels meaningful and purposeful, these people lift significantly and perform brilliantly. But when the leadership falls to the other end of the spectrum, they withdraw just as noticeably.

The largest group are transactional employees (around 40%)

Capable, pragmatic and realistic, this cohort operates on the belief system that work is primarily a trade, and time and skill are for pay.

They will meet expectations, but discretionary effort from them depends entirely on leadership and context.

Then there are burned-out loyalists (roughly 10%)

This is a cohort that used to care deeply for the brand. Many probably still do. But they are just tired, stretched and worn down by systems, change or constant pressure.

And finally, a small group of disaffected resisters (roughly 10%)

These people are loud, cynical and are often shaping the narrative more than leaders realise.

What I'm sharing with you in this article is not some personality test or a shiny new theory. It is not a formal psychometric tool either. This is a practitioner synthesis model. These labels are simple by design and are pure leadership language. They exist to help leaders see reality clearly and act on it.

Now remember that this is nothing about good people versus bad people. As leaders, it is about understanding how different people respond to the environment we create.

Why this matters more than most leaders think?

Most leaders sit in the first group — the self-motivated minority. So, without realising it we tend to believe that:

- Professionalism is automatic
- Purpose is obvious
- Effort should be self-managed

However, the reality is quite different. For most employees, none of that is true.

Professionalism, energy, and discretionary effort are context dependent. They rise or fall based on what leaders' model, reward, tolerate and explain.

When the context is weak, people don't rebel. Instead, they start retreating into their shell and just do their job, without any discretionary effort.

The real leadership challenge

The real leadership challenge is not to assume that everyone is motivated the way you are. Employee engagement improves when leaders start designing work conditions that allow different people to do their best work. This is where actual leadership-on-the-floor comes into practical play.

The bottom line

The best leaders remember that most employees are not self-motivated. And they don't need to be self-motivated in order to do exceptional work. Not everyone works a job for self-satisfaction. Many are probably just there to pay bills or out of peer pressure.

But that does not mean they don't have the required skills to deliver great results and that they cannot be motivated by effective leadership, a link to purpose and an engaging vision.

To bring out the best in such people, leaders need to:

- Create meaning for them regarding the work they do
- Earn their respect, not demand it
- Model the standards set
- Give them a reason to care for the brand

And this is not soft leadership. It is effective leadership. Remember that Leadership isn't about expecting more motivation from people but rather recognising that most people don't arrive at work wired the way you are. *And that's okay.*

So, stop trying to turn everyone into a self-motivated climber. Identify those that have the leadership quality in them to invest this effort.

For the rest, your job is to create clarity, meaning and consistency so that different people can bring their best version of professionalism to work.

The top 3 things Leaders must do to lift engagement

1. Raise context, not pressure

Don't just tell people 'what' needs to be done. Explain 'Why it matters' to them as well as to the organisation.

Connect daily work to outcomes people can see and feel. Such clarity increases engagement faster than incentives ever will.

2. Model the standard under pressure

People observe leaders' attitude and behaviour the most when times are tough. If you want professionalism, optimism and accountability from your team, demonstrate these during times of inconvenience. Behaviour beats preaching and messaging.

3. Stop leading everyone the same way

Your self-motivated high performers do not need the same type of leadership as your burned-out loyalists or your transactional majority. Different motivation requires different signals, without lowering expectations.



When leaders stop projecting their own drive and start designing the environment instead, employee engagement shifts from being mysterious to manageable, predictable, and ultimately, sustainable.

That's when people start to care about the work they do.

So, if you as a leader want to understand the composition of your staff in the spectrum of motivation and how best to engage them and give them the platform to go above and beyond, reach out to us.