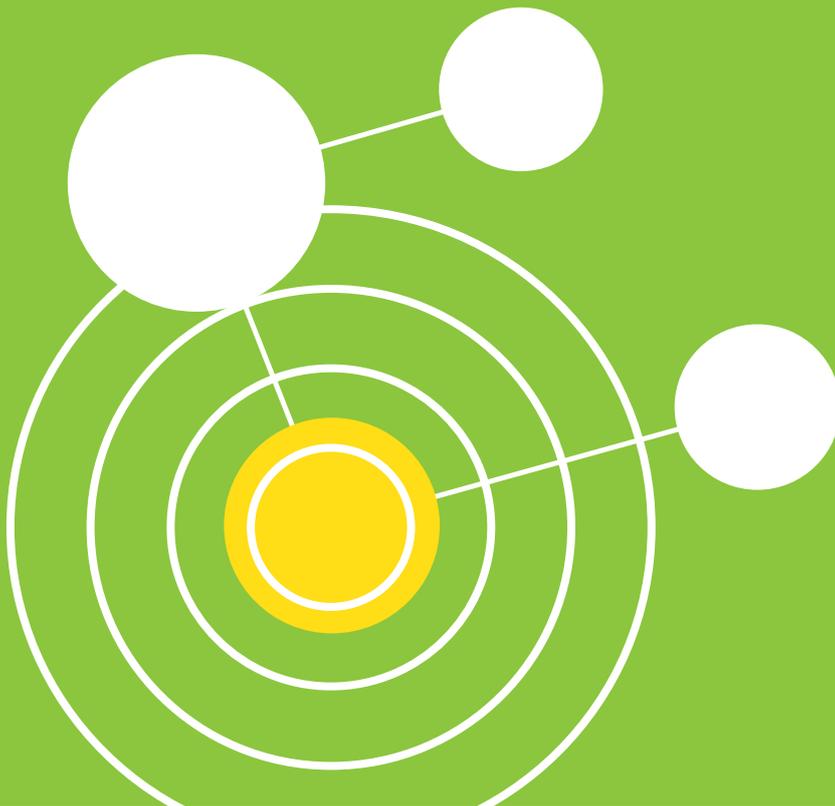


# One Link in a Chain Reaction

The transformative ripple effect of  
employee motivation



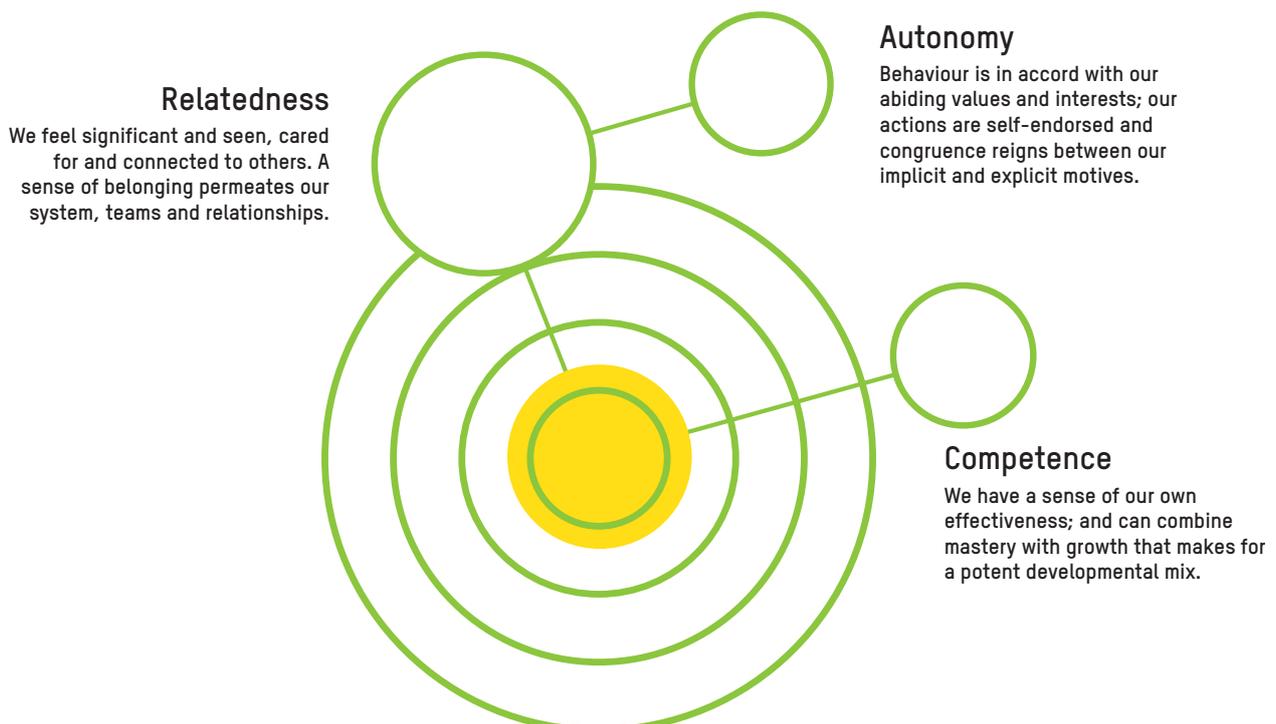
**Y**ou may have heard of the ripple effect of positive emotions, how experiencing positive emotions activates the cognitive expansion of our horizons, builds more constructive feelings, thoughts and behaviours impacting both ourselves and those around us [1].

### But what about the impact of motivation on others?

A few weeks ago, colleague Dr Martin Challis and I attended a lecture by eminent professor and psychologist, Richard Ryan on Self Determination Theory (SDT) hosted by the University of Sydney Coaching and Mentoring Association (USCMA). Jointly developed by Ryan and his colleague Professor Edward L. Deci, SDT provides a practical framework for understanding the factors that promote motivation and healthy psychological functioning. It is one of the most cited theories in psychology and has a broad evidence-base across industries and a diversity of applications including education, health care, well-being, sport, goal setting, organisational development and coaching [2].

According to SDT, there are three psychological needs common to all human beings: **autonomy**, **relatedness** and **competence**.

Thwarting these three needs has negative results across many measures. But when these needs are met, the positive effects are profound. Perhaps most significantly, **research has found that meeting these three needs considerably increases motivation** [2].



From a leadership perspective, the ability to facilitate an increase in intrinsic motivation is highly desirable as studies have shown this drives employee well-being, satisfaction, achievement and excellence. Interestingly, recent studies by Doshi and McGregor [3] have also uncovered a ripple effect: **High autonomy in employees is often linked with high levels of customer satisfaction.**

### The Ripple Effect of Motivation

In a recent study of the US airline and grocery industries, McGregor and Doshi [4] demonstrated that companies with more highly motivated employees also created better outcomes for their customers.

The researchers developed a measure they call **Total Motivation**, which measures six aspects of motivation: the presence of play, purpose and potential, and the absence of emotional pressure, economic pressure and inertia. The study estimated the total motivation score of the employees of four major airlines – United, American, Delta and Southwest – and compared it with the relevant airlines' outcomes on the American Customer Satisfaction Index [5]. What they found was that the level of total employee motivation predicted the level of customer satisfaction: Southwest Airlines scored highest on total motivation (positive score of 40), and on customer satisfaction (a score of 78/100). United Airlines scored lowest both on total motivation (22) and on customer satisfaction (58/100). The researchers noted that the culture of Southwest Airlines inspired a higher sense of play, purpose and potential than its competitors. In addition, in 2014, the year of the survey, Southwest recorded its 42nd consecutive year of profitability.

In relation to grocery chains a similar result was found. Whole Foods scored highest in total motivation (22) and in customer satisfaction (81/100) compared to the lowest grocery business with a motivation score of 4 and a customer satisfaction of 74. Not only are employees motivated, the company treats them like individuals, and this approach has a flow on effect: employees have the capacity to treat customers individually too. In 2015, Whole Foods was Fortune magazine's most admired company and has been on its list of "100 Best Companies to Work For" for 20 years in a row [6].

So how does Whole Foods achieve these results? The company builds direct motivation into the workplace through increasing levels of play in its self-managed teams. Team members get to exercise autonomy through involvement in decentralised decision-making about key matters that affect them such as recruitment, and items to stock and sell.

In relation to the purpose motive, Whole Foods co-CEO John Mackey has enunciated a strong mission statement. Mackey wrote:

*"Business has a much broader positive impact on the world when it is based on a higher purpose that goes beyond only generating profits and creating shareholder value. Purpose is the reason a company exists. A compelling sense of higher purpose creates an extraordinary degree of engagement among all stakeholders and catalyzes creativity, innovation, and organizational commitment." [7]*

This purpose is infectious and rebounds into positive connections, building on the factor of relatedness. Employees are team

members according to the CEO, and in the study on total motivation, one team member commented:

*"I love the company I work for. I can get behind their mission statement, attitude, work ethic, and events. My co-workers are like family to me and the company has gone out of their way to provide for and accommodate me" [3].*

These exemplary results are not confined to airlines and grocery chains; Doshi & McGregor [3] found this link between customer satisfaction and total motivation throughout a number of other industries including banking, retail and subscription television. These results demonstrate the practical potential economic benefit that can be attained through the support of our psychological needs of autonomy, relatedness and competence – or in the terminology of Total Motivation – by decreasing emotional pressure, economic pressure and inertia, and increasing play, purpose and potential.

### Leading to unleash the Ripple Effect of Employee Motivation

As leaders, we can support the integrity, growth and well-being of our teams and unleash the ripple effect of motivation by taking deliberate action to support the three key psychological needs. Over the past 20 years, Ryan and Deci and their colleagues have proven the efficacy of the following behaviours:

#### Autonomy

- Provide a choice of goal or strategy
- Facilitate ownership of task and outcome
- Support rather than create an environment of pressure
- Encourage task interest and involvement.

#### Competence

- Provide optimal levels of challenge
- Set tasks that are appropriately scaffolded and structured
- Give feedback that is constructive and has the other person's best interest and development at heart.

#### Relatedness

- Display empathy, warmth and acknowledge emotion
- Build and value authentic relationships
- Provide the opportunity for others to connect.

**By creating the conditions for autonomy, competence and relatedness, as leaders we too become a vital link in the chain reaction: through great leadership we can unleash employee motivation, and in turn, improve customer satisfaction, business performance and sustainability.**

## References

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