

Find Your Story: A Path for Professional Fulfillment and Inspiration

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ABSTRACT

Healthcare and medical treatment is something we all engage in. As such, we who work in pharmaceutical development have an extraordinary opportunity to connect to our work and its impact. Ironically, many leaders do not prioritize this bond, failing to help team members develop a meaningful relationship with their work. Instead we often hear about simple motivational encouragement. Leaders promote recognition, instant awards, advancement, and personalized approaches based on employee interests—even though they have minimal control over many of these incentives and all of them are barter systems. In losing sight of the impact of our work, any job can become rote. In contrast, by keeping the significance and impact of our work front and center, the task itself can become motivational. When team members are intrinsically motivated, they understand and are inspired by the impact of their contribution, no longer investing in their career simply because they are committed employees or looking for external rewards. This presentation will focus on how to help team members *find their story*—the means by which they connect with their role in a deep and meaningful way. The impact of job fulfillment naturally cascades to engagement, motivation, and retention.

INTRODUCTION

I have been fortunate to work with many skilled and committed colleagues over the years and it never ceases to amaze me how many of them fell into this industry by accident. Moreover, while many of them enjoy their work and seem to believe that we “help people,” their connection to the potential impact of their work remains largely lost in their daily routine. Given that we all utilize healthcare and medical treatment, we have a somewhat unique opportunity to connect with our work and understand the effect that we have on lives in ways that may not be available in other industries.

In making our work personal and understanding of the impact of our contribution, we can transform data and outputs into real lives with real stories, resulting in a more fulfilling and inspirational professional experience.

MOTIVATION

Without any formal education in social psychology, we all have a common understanding of the basic principles of motivation rooted in our childhood experiences of play-time and negotiation. Intrinsic Motivation, the 1975 seminal work by Edward Deci, introduces a common language on the topic and ascribes names and theories to that which we understand from the schoolyard. Of course, his work also delves further into theories about human behaviors and how social psychologists partition them based on motivation.

TYPES OF MOTIVATION

Extrinsic motivation refers to behaviors that are driven by external rewards—doing something because you are rewarded for it. Extrinsic motivation, and subsequently negotiation, is ingrained in us from a young age: If you eat your vegetables, you can have dessert; if you finish your homework, you can watch TV. We may not inherently enjoy the vegetables or homework, but we are motivated by the reward. This system of extrinsic motivation remains in place through adulthood and where the rewards include money, fame, praise, or opportunities.

In contrast, Deci presented ideas of intrinsic motivation, referring to behaviors that are driven by internal rewards, doing something simply because it's satisfying to the individual. We inherently understand intrinsic motivation from a young age simply because we feel good about our activity whether that be gaming, music, sports, dancing, or any other way we choose to spend our free time—often called *play*. Discussions of intrinsic motivation manifest in our observations of others and may be accompanied with a value judgment. It may be parents wishing their child enjoyed school more and video games less or

failing to understand the time invested in fantasy sports, daily journaling, drawing, music, or binge watching a favorite show.

MOTIVATION AND OTHERS

When completing tasks in isolation, we have the luxury of exploring intrinsic motivation. Sometimes we can exploit it, other times we may succumb to it depending on the circumstances. However, when working with others we often gravitate towards extrinsic motivation—it's easier to discuss and there is a natural familiarity with the negotiation process. All parties feel like they have input and some control over the stakes. Trying to use intrinsic motivation when working with others is obviously more difficult in that it requires influencing, if not changing, what someone else finds enjoyable and fulfilling.

Ideas around motivation are readily adopted in the professional environment and leaders are often expected to help motivate team members and colleagues. Given the attributes noted above, extrinsic motivation is the more common method in both practice and as found in leadership texts. Common external motivators include recognition, money, advancement, special opportunities, affiliation, and security.

External motivation can be a powerful tool and has an undeniable role in leadership and the professional environment. However, it's not without its flaws and challenges. In most cases, leaders have little or no means to negotiate those rewards. Budgets are tightly controlled, also impacting advancement. Special opportunities may be dependent on sponsors or executive decisions and are highly sought after. Affiliation will be determined by the peer group, not the leader, and security is often determined by the leaders higher up. Do not underestimate the importance of expressing gratitude towards your team members and sharing their success stories with others. However, beyond that, leaders may be limited in how much they can offer as an external motivator.

Even more problematic with the model of extrinsic motivation is that it continually reinforces the idea that the tasks, or work itself, is not rewarding and fulfilling on its own. After all, why would leaders need to discuss external motivators if the work itself were obviously gratifying?

I have not heard others discuss intrinsic motivation in the professional environment and have only seen it referenced a few times in leadership texts. Kouzes and Posner dedicate a few pages to intrinsic motivation in [The Leadership Challenge](#). They define, provide examples, and emphasize the benefits over traditional extrinsic motivation, but stop short of helping us understand how we can directly affect that change in our colleagues—helping them become more intrinsically motivated. Still, intrinsic motivation is more powerful than extrinsic and if leaders can help their team members find a meaningful and motivational connection to their daily tasks it will result in a higher level of team member engagement and fulfillment.

Motivation vs. Dedication

At first glance, motivation and dedication may appear synonymous. They aren't. As defined by Google:

- Motivation: the reason for your behaviors.
- Dedication: devotion to a task or purpose.

These ideas may be causally related in either direction, but do not assume that because you see dedicated behavior you are also witnessing intrinsic motivation or vice versa. Intrinsic motivation will often lead to dedication. Consider examples of endless hours of practice in sport, music, or video games. Similarly, dedication, as an independently developed characteristic, may be the reason for observed behaviors, without having intrinsic motivation in the activity itself.

Honestly, it may not matter if the actions are rooted in motivation versus dedication; the outcome, as observed by others, will be remarkably similar if not identical regardless of the source for those actions. As such, dedication can be an effective surrogate when discussing motivation. Developing a culture and establishing an expectation of dedication to the work may yield similar benefits without getting tangled in the psyche of individuals. However, there can be heightened risks when individuals perceive their collaborators to not be demonstrating the same level of dedication that they are exhibiting.

Moreover, to those performing the tasks, the difference between dedication and intrinsic motivation is palpable. It's the difference between being excited to start the work day versus setting the alarm so you are not late for the work day. It's the difference between putting your head on the pillow with a feeling of fulfillment versus putting your head on the pillow only to immediately double check that you armed the alarm.

The obvious question is how, as an individual, do we change our interests to become intrinsically motivated in activities that we may not have passion for. And how, as leaders, can we help our colleagues become more intrinsically motivated in their tasks.

I suggest that is not the correct question. Rather, we can become more intrinsically motivated not by changing our passions, but rather by discovering that our passions are already contained within the activities that we are doing. We need only to experiment with different filters of vision and perception to understand how those passions align with our activities. This is not a quick, well-defined process—it's highly individual and dependent on individual circumstances. However, once you have found your story, the means by which you have made that connection to your work through intrinsic motivation and understand the path that was required for you to arrive there, you will be better positioned to help others find their own path.

MY STORY

I've been blessed to share my story with several colleagues, friends, and family members. I'll not dedicate the full eight minutes of it's telling in the text here, but instead provide a brief summary.

I was involved in a study for a novel therapy that required a tremendous time commitment, consuming both evenings and weekends for several months. At the time, our daughter was eight-months old. Her primary caregiver at daycare had just returned from a leave of absence. One day at drop-off, I was lamenting to the caregiver that she got to see our daughter and witness her growth and milestones more than I did. In that conversation I learned that the caregiver was out on medical leave having recently been diagnosed with the very condition that was the cause of my overtime. During that same week, in reviewing a death listing, I noticed that we lost a man who was my father's age.

The woes associated with missing family dinner, tuck in, or weekend play time suddenly seemed paltry compared to the recognition that the little boy of our champion daycare giver could soon be motherless, or that there could be an eight-month old girl out there who will never know her grandfather.

While my underlying interests—the root of intrinsic motivation—did not change, the perspective with which I viewed my role in clinical development did. These events helped me connect those pre-existing passions to my workplace activities.

HELPING OTHERS FIND THEIR STORY

Before helping others find their story, it's important to find your own story first.

Unfortunately, there is no easy formula to discover “your story.” Much of it will be rooted in your passions and life experiences. However, we can deconstruct stories into basic elements to help demonstrate the types of situations that are likely candidates.

What do you find emotionally overpowering? Are there songs that make you cry, how about your team losing the World Series, or perhaps Hallmark commercials? Knowing and understanding the root of your emotional triggers is essential.

On a professional side, understanding the indication(s) you are working on is equally important. This goes beyond the data, analysis, and reporting. Do you know people who are suffering with the conditions that you are working on? If so, talk to them. Read blogs. Get a glimpse of what they are living through and learn how that diagnosis has forever changed their life.

The overlap between your emotional triggers and how the patients' lives are impacted is where the potential for a story exists. Note that while these hallmarks will exist for all stories, their mere presence does not guarantee that you will find your story. In what may well be the most disappointing words for an analytical audience, when you find your story, you will know it—you'll *feel* it. The connection between

your work and the patients, which were formerly ID numbers, will come to life in a visceral and palpable way—it's a gut punch, a slap to the face, and it's amazing!

Consider some examples:

- A team member who loved dancing worked on an osteo arthritis study. In speaking with the clinical-operations team, we learned of a patient who used enjoy ballroom dancing with their spouse but was forced to give it up. With this new experimental treatment, they were able to resume dancing again.
- Another team member is passionate about basketball. In learning about the challenges of living with chronic pain, and limitations on those patients, the team member was able to better understand the impact of the work we do.
- A third example is centered around a parent working on a pediatric allergy / asthma study. Kids at liberty to play outside is something we often take for granted. After learning about children with uncontrolled allergies and asthma, she felt not only blessed that her own children were not counted among them, but she also felt a renewed vigor to do everything she could to help them.

Once you have a story, share it. Demonstrate the passion and connection that you feel to your team members. It will provide them with an example of what they can look forward to. It will also further engender you to your colleagues and help build trust and relationships. We rarely discuss vulnerability in the professional setting and sharing a personal story, albeit professional in nature, will undoubtedly be uncomfortable. Part of being an effective leader is taking risks and putting yourself into uncomfortable situations. As a side note, sharing a sincere, heartfelt, professional story is not a risk—most colleagues will thank you and it opens the door for more free and honest communication.

PITFALLS

The purpose of finding a story is simply to develop a deep and meaningful connection to the work we do. Most in our industry recognize that we impact and help others, but for many it remains academic. Developing a stronger relationship with the industry helps us migrate from mere dedication to intrinsic motivation.

This is not for everyone. If you don't buy in, don't try to facilitate it for others. A lack of sincerity is transparent to most colleagues. If you are missing your own story, it will be more difficult to help others find theirs. Feel free to share ideas and explore for stories together. Be open and honest—you may share a story that others find inspiring even if it isn't your story.

For example, I have often shared a story about sitting next to a stranger on a plane. Through the course of conversation, I learned that he was a user of a compound that I had helped get to market. It was an undeniably memorable experience and a feel good moment in my career, but it is not my story. Nonetheless, some colleagues have found this to be not only a fun anecdote, but an invitation to be more open about what they do in the hopes that they will encounter strangers who have benefited from their labor.

Helping team members find their story is a long, slow process of conversing and helping identify connections. Since this is rooted in individual life experiences, there cannot be an expected timeline and identifying a story is ultimately up to the individual.

RESULTS

I have been blessed to work with many dedicated team members through my career. As noted earlier, the metrics and operational success based on dedicated versus motivated team members may be indistinguishable. However, the individual conversations are remarkably different when team members successfully recognize how their passions are already joined with the work they are doing.

Where conversations were previously rooted in timelines and status updates, colleagues with a story now have a heightened engagement in the full process and an increased awareness and visualization of what the patients are going through on the study. For many team members the volume of overtime didn't

change much, but it was no longer a topic for discussion and we also had a long period of retention that was higher than our historical averages.

CONCLUSION

I hope that everyone finds their story someday. Making colleagues aware of the connection and helping them find their own story is a gift that leaders can give freely without detrimental impact to any key metrics. While the purpose must remain firmly rooted in helping our colleagues make a meaningful connection to their daily activities, the impact is directly visible in their fulfillment, engagement, commitment, and retention.

REFERENCES

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