

**OPTIMAL MOTIVATION®**

# A Business Case for Optimal Motivation

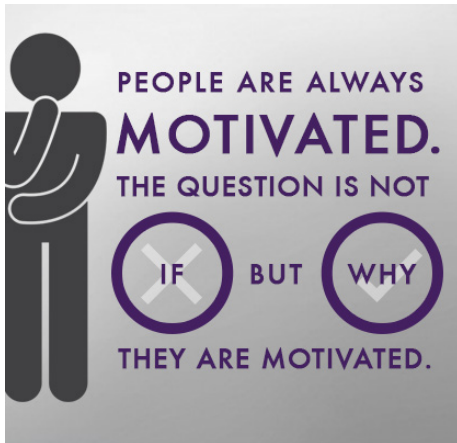
Motivation is widely regarded as a psychological state that compels an individual to act toward a desired goal and elicits, controls, and sustains certain goal-directed behaviors. It can be considered a catalytic force or the energy to act upon or toward a desired goal.

In fact, there are more than 100 definitions linked to the concept of motivation. But they share the same fatal flaw: They focus on the quantity of motivation a person has rather than the quality of motivation a person has.

Thinking of motivation simply as the energy to act fails to take into account the essential nature of human motivation: the reasons people act. Motivation isn't a reflection of how much action people take, but why they are, or are not, taking action. This misunderstanding—that motivation is the quantity of energy people have to pursue a goal rather than the quality of their energy—leads to motivational practices that undermine the type of energy required for people to achieve goals while thriving in their pursuit. For example, if a salesperson is not succeeding in selling a certain product and your belief is that he needs more motivation, the default solution is to incentivize him. But, if you understand the nature of motivation, you will ask, "Why is this salesperson selling or not selling this product?"

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Consider that

- The quality of motivation to sell a product that you believe makes a difference to the customer is different from the quality of motivation to sell a product to win the sales trip, or to give in to the pressure of making your numbers or the fear of losing your job.
- The quality of the motivation that stems from choosing to do something is different from the quality of motivation that stems from feeling you have to do it.
- The quality of motivation generated from acting out of deeply held values or a noble purpose is different from the quality of motivation generated from acting for the promise of tangible rewards or intangible rewards such as power, ego, or status.

The truth is, people are always motivated. The question that matters is not if, but why people are motivated. The quality of people's day-to-day motivation will determine the quality of their energy, vitality, and state of well-being. Over time, the quality of their energy, vitality, and well-being will determine whether they experience disengagement, engagement, or employee work passion.

Shifting how leaders look at motivation changes their approach to motivation. Ironically, when leaders shift their focus from getting results to creating a workplace where people thrive, they get the higher productivity, sustained performance, and results they seek. When people flourish, so does the organization.

## What Leaders and Individuals Need to Understand About Motivation—Why It Matters

The first scientists to explore the field of human motivation began with the study of animals. Notable Harvard psychology professor B.F. Skinner was filmed “motivating” a pigeon to execute a 360° turn by rewarding the behavior with food pellets. Behaviorists at the time reasoned that reward mechanisms would similarly motivate people in the workplace. The shared belief was that you could get people to do anything if you reward them and so rewarding people to do tasks they may not want to do became common practice. A burgeoning industry focuses on creating compensation systems, rewards, contests, and formal recognition programs to motivate people.

Without the knowledge or the skill to apply the science of motivation, leaders who are tasked with motivating people depend on these traditional techniques. When these techniques don't work, leaders often resort to applying pressure and coercion. The reality is that the carrot-and-stick techniques for attempting to motivate others are dated at best and detrimental at worst. Compelling empirical evidence has proven these approaches don't work as well as expected in the short term, let alone in the long term.

Alternatives to traditional motivation have tremendous implications for compensation, rewards and recognition, job design, and other organizational systems. Organizations can and should begin rectifying their outdated systems; however, they shouldn't delay in embracing compelling best practices that can make a difference now.

Entrenched in traditional motivational approaches, leaders are being held accountable every day for something they cannot do: motivate others. Remember, people are already motivated. They are always motivated. What leaders can do is use best practices that promote a higher-quality motivation that sustains people's positive energy, vitality, and well-being, or what is called optimal motivation.

## WHAT IS OPTIMAL MOTIVATION?

Optimal motivation is the experience of satisfying one's psychological need for autonomy, relatedness, and competence in the pursuit and achievement of meaningful goals that lead to positive and sustainable energy, vitality, and sense of well-being.

Based on the science of Self-Determination Theory, there are essential principles underlying optimal motivation:

- Humans have an innate tendency for growth, development, and integrated functioning, but this tendency often gets undermined by external forces
- There are clear and specific environmental and personal factors that either support or thwart this innate tendency to thrive and flourish
- The most critical element for psychological thriving is the satisfaction of three universal needs for Autonomy, Relatedness, and Competence, or ARC.

Empirical research supports the basic and fundamental human need for ARC. However, anecdotal data is apparent when we watch babies demonstrate their desire for autonomy as they grab a spoon to feed themselves. From birth, we seek the Autonomy to feel in control of our lives, goals, and desires. We demonstrate our need for Relatedness in our attempts to connect with others, using the technology of the time, but also through our attempts to seek meaning and deeper purpose in and through our work. Satisfying our need for Competence through continued growth and learning enables us to meet everyday challenges and cope with inevitable obstacles.

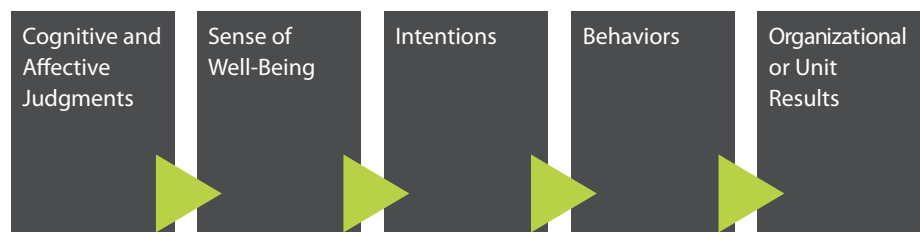
There is also empirical evidence demonstrating the negative consequences of having these needs thwarted. Since most people spend the majority of their time awake connected to work, when ARC is not fulfilled through their work, there is a good chance it is not being satisfied at all. If people don't thrive at work or in their personal lives, then they are not the only ones suffering; our organizations and communities pay the price in terms of lost productivity, absenteeism, turnover, burnout, mental and physical disabilities, higher insurance rates, lack of creativity and innovation, sabotage, and theft.

Of interest to any organization involved in improving employee engagement scores: The extent to which people are able to experience optimal motivation at work by satisfying their need for ARC determines the quality of their motivation at work and their level of engagement and work passion over time.

## THE VITAL ROLE OF MOTIVATION IN ENGAGEMENT AND EMPLOYEE WORK PASSION

Individuals are constantly making appraisals about their work environment. As meaning-oriented and meaning-creating beings, they constantly appraise their environment both cognitively and affectively (or emotionally) to form judgments that lead to conclusions about their state of well-being. Cognition and affect go hand in hand, happening almost simultaneously, over and over, as individuals make sense of a situation to reach their conclusions about what is happening, what it means to them, how it will affect them, how they feel about that, what they intend to do, and—finally—what they actually do, all filtered through the lens of who they are. Ironically, people’s appraisals are primarily affective, yet emotions or the demonstration, discussion, or exploration of them are discouraged or even taboo in most organizations.

### The Appraisal Process



This appraisal process is at the heart of Employee Work Passion, a higher-order form of engagement in which the individual performs above expectations, uses discretionary effort on behalf of the organization, endorses the organization as a great place to work, acts in ways that are altruistic toward stakeholders, and remains with the organization.

Blanchard® research on Employee Work Passion identifies twelve job, organizational, and relationship factors that must be present in the workplace in order for individuals to experience Employee Work Passion via their ongoing appraisals. (See Employee Work Passion Volume 3.)

Organizations can build work environments that positively support individuals’ appraisal process so that they are more likely to experience employee work passion over time. Unfortunately, the approach many organizations take to improve employee work passion is to attempt directly convincing, cajoling, or “motivating” individuals to act in a desired way rather than creating job, organizational, or relationship conditions that foster employees’ psychological needs for Autonomy, Relatedness, and Competence.

Systemic changes are proven to develop and support optimal motivation and employee work passion, but they also require time, money, and focus. More importantly, the self-skill of understanding and shaping one's reasons for action on a daily basis is the most pragmatic solution for individuals' long-term psychic health and effectiveness over time. When individuals understand their appraisal process, they can manage it. When leaders understand the appraisal process, they can facilitate their people to manage it more effectively. The means for managing one's appraisal process is through the skill of motivation—a skill with the potential to revolutionize the way organizations approach their employee engagement initiatives.

## MOTIVATION IS A SKILL

The key to engagement is day-to-day motivation. Suboptimal motivation fuels disengagement. Optimal motivation fuels employee work passion.

The skill of activating optimal motivation can be learned, developed, and nurtured in oneself, taught to others, and facilitated by leaders. The Spectrum of Motivation model, illustrates that the skill of Optimal Motivation lies in shifting from a suboptimal to optimal Motivational Outlook.

The model is both descriptive and prescriptive. Building on scientific evidence, the model depicts six motivational possibilities called Motivational Outlooks that provide a more pragmatic understanding of motivation than the simple duality of extrinsic and intrinsic motivation. The model also prescribes action: As individuals use high-quality self-regulation strategies to shift to a more optimal Motivation Outlook for a task, goal, activity, or situation, they satisfy their psychological need for ARC, promoting positive energy, vitality, and well-being.

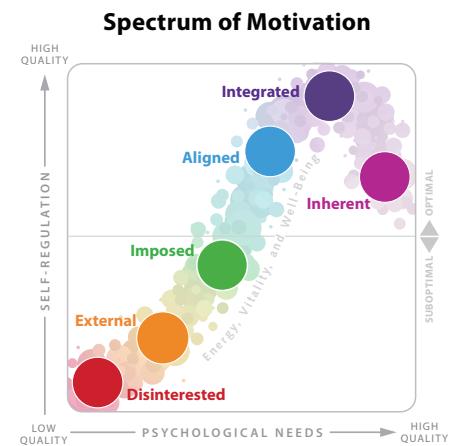
## The Spectrum of Motivation— The Six Motivational Outlooks

### SUBOPTIMAL MOTIVATIONAL OUTLOOKS

**Disinterested** – The individual simply does not find value in the project or task and may feel overwhelmed by it or that the task is a waste of time.

**External** – The project or task may provide the individual with an opportunity to exert his or her position or power or to take advantage of a promise for more money or an enhanced status in the eyes of others.

**Imposed** – The individual is participating in the project or task because they feel pressured to do so due to the assumption that everyone else is participating and expects the same of them. They may also participate to avoid feelings of guilt or shame, or a fear of not participating.





## OPTIMAL MOTIVATIONAL OUTLOOKS

**Aligned** – The individual is participating in the project or task because they are able to link participating to a significant value such as learning from others or having others learn from them.

**Integrated** – The individual is participating in the project or task because they are able to link their participation to a life or work purpose such as giving voice to an important issue.

**Inherent** – The individual is participating in the project or task because they simply enjoy the activity and regard it as fun.

The suboptimal Motivational Outlooks—Disinterested, External, and Imposed—reflect the intersection of low-quality Psychological Needs and low-quality Self-Regulation. These suboptimal Motivational Outlooks are considered the junk food of motivation because they don't feed an individual's ongoing need for ARC. Junk food motivation is enticing and appealing, but often does more harm than good. When people act from a suboptimal motivation, they can rarely sustain their effort over time. Research indicates that even if they achieve a goal, they pay a price in terms of physical or mental health and are less likely to engage in the goal or activity in the future.

The optimal Motivational Outlooks—Aligned, Integrated, and Inherent—reflect the intersection of high-quality Psychological Needs and high-quality Self-Regulation. These optimal Motivational Outlooks are considered the health food of motivation because they nourish an individual's needs for ARC on an ongoing basis; in addition, the energy and quality of effort derived from an optimal Motivational Outlook is sustainable.

## Activating Optimal Motivation—Making the Shift

The purpose of shifting to an optimal Motivational Outlook is to satisfy one's Psychological Needs. The means for shifting is Self-Regulation.

An important part of the model is the left axis labeled Quality of Self-Regulation. Self-regulation is an individual's ability to proactively manage their thoughts, feelings, attitudes, and behaviors to sustain positive effort over time through mindfulness (noticing, awareness, and judgment) about the development of values and the understanding of purpose in the moment. Self-regulation is a mechanism for countering the emotional triggers that undermine our psychological needs. There are three powerful techniques that support high-quality self-regulation: Mindfulness, Values, and Purpose, referred to as the MVPs of self-regulation.

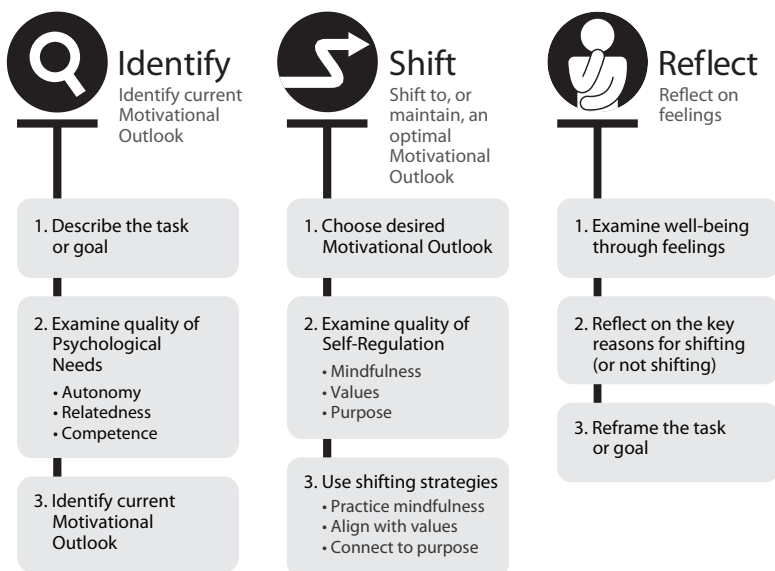
Mindfulness is being aware of and attuned to what is happening in the present moment, without judgment or automatic reaction. Mindfulness is a state of being but also a skill that requires development. When people are not mindful of or in

control of their reactions, it leads to low-quality self-regulation and the individual shifts to one of the sub optimally motivated outlooks (Disinterested, External, or Imposed). Research indicates a direct connection between a mindful state and the experience of ARC.

Values are enduring beliefs a person has chosen to accept as guidelines for how he or she works and lives their life by. They are premeditated cognitive standards of what a person considers good or bad, worse, better, best, and so on. Values are at the heart of self-regulation but often individuals fail to explore and choose values for their professional life. Just like organizations, individuals must identify, develop, clarify, declare, and operationalize their work-related values and purpose and then determine how they align with the organization's values. Individuals with clarified values are more likely to experience high-quality self-regulation despite challenges and demands at work.

Purpose is a deep and meaningful reason for doing something and acting with noble intention. When individuals have a purpose, their actions are infused with social significance. Peak performers are value-based individuals inspired by a noble purpose.

Shifting one's Motivational Outlook and sustaining the optimal outlook requires three skills. First, identify the current Motivational Outlook by recognizing and understanding how one's psychological needs for ARC are being satisfied. Second, use self-regulation MVP-shifting strategies. Third, reflect on the shift, noticing the difference between having a suboptimal and an optimal Motivational Outlook.



## A LEADER'S ROLE IN ACTIVATING OPTIMAL MOTIVATION WITH OTHERS

To take full advantage of the science of motivation, leaders need to understand: Leaders cannot motivate anyone. What they can do is shape a workplace where people are more likely to experience optimal motivation at work.

When leaders treat employee motivation as a strategic issue, they create a distinctive advantage not easily matched by competitors. This strategic approach results in higher-quality individual performance on everyday goals and projects, more out-of-the-box thinking, faster innovation, greater acceptance of change, and greater "idea velocity." Sustaining high-quality motivation as a strategic capability also creates a magnet for talent. By asking themselves "What do I want for my people?" rather than "What do I want from them?" leaders can create a dynamic culture shift.

## THINGS LEADERS MUST START DOING TO HELP INDIVIDUALS ACTIVATE OPTIMAL MOTIVATION

Despite a job description that may hold them accountable for motivating their people, leaders must recognize that individuals are already motivated; they are always motivated. The leader's role is to help individuals explore why they are motivated, uncover the reasons for their current Motivational Outlook, and then use best practices to help facilitate people's shift to a more optimal Motivational Outlook.

The worst and best practices presented in the figure below are proven techniques formulated from research in organizational, nonprofit, and educational settings as well as Blanchard's work with organizations worldwide.

What Doesn't Work	What Works	How to Do It
<b>1</b> Apply pressure; demand accountability	<b>Encourage autonomy</b>	Invite choice; illuminate boundaries; explore options within boundaries Present goals and timelines as valuable information necessary for achieving agreed-upon outcomes Help reframe goals as relevant
<b>2</b> Ignore feelings	<b>Deepen relatedness</b>	Show empathy and caring; acknowledge and validate people's emotions Offer pure and informational feedback rather than personal or evaluative praising Share information about yourself and the organization; discuss your intentions openly
<b>3</b> Discount learning	<b>Develop competence</b>	Emphasize learning goals, not just performance goals Ask, "What did you learn today?" Provide training and appropriate leadership style for the person's level of development
<b>4</b> Enable sabotaging behaviors	<b>Promote mindfulness</b>	Encourage self-reflection Ask open-ended questions that illuminate options Facilitate the generating of options and alternative implementation strategies
<b>5</b> Rely on power	<b>Align with values</b>	Help individuals align goal to their work-related value(s) Explore natural interest in and enthusiasm for the goal Recognize mistakes as part of learning and growth
<b>6</b> Focus on metrics without meaning	<b>Connect to purpose</b>	Help individuals connect the goal to their work-related or life purpose Frame actions in terms of the welfare of the whole; focus on contribution to the greater good Provide rationale and big picture



## FIVE WORKPLACE BELIEFS THAT ERODE WORKPLACE MOTIVATION

Motivation is one of the most vital and misunderstood aspects of leadership because leaders are either confused or misdirected about what does and doesn't work, so they engage in counterproductive behavior, believing they are doing the right thing. Through our research, five workplace beliefs that actually erode motivation have emerged.

**It's Not Personal; It's Just Business** – Individuals spend more time at the office than they do at home. Yet managers often take the stance that their actions aren't personal. How information, feedback, or news is delivered affects an individual's work, mood, health, and well-being either positively or negatively, which to them feels personal. The problem is, leaders have been conditioned to believe that feelings don't belong in the workplace—an assumption that must be challenged. All emotions are acceptable, but not all behavior is acceptable. If leaders could notice, acknowledge, and deal with the emotions of their people by asking mindful questions to help individuals decipher their own emotions without judgment and then choose the most appropriate behavioral response given the situation, they would do a better job of meeting people's needs. Additionally, individuals must learn to practice self-regulation and acknowledge the crucial role their feelings play in their decision making, conclusions, perceptions, behavioral responses, and communication with others.

Shifting the leader's mindset from "It's not personal it's just business" to "If it's business, it is personal" helps people embrace the notion that emotions and feelings are acceptable. Best practices that support people's psychological needs for autonomy, relatedness, and competence include

- Acknowledging and validating people's feelings and emotions
- Offering pure descriptive feedback rather than evaluative feedback or personalized praising
- Promoting mindfulness by asking open-ended questions and facilitating a discussion about options

**The Purpose of Business Is to Make Money** – Holding the belief that making money is the primary purpose of business is likely to shift the focus to dashboard metrics and profits rather than on the people responsible who support the business. A business must make a profit to survive, but a focus solely on profit doesn't serve the individuals within the organization or its customers. On the flip side, if the purpose of business was to serve both its customers and its people, everyone wins. There is definitive evidence that organizational vitality measured by ROI, earnings by share, access to venture capital, stock price, debt load, and other financial indicators is dependent on two factors: employee work passion and customer devotion. It does not work the other way around—organizational vitality does not determine customer devotion or employee work passion.

The nature of human motivation is not in making money. It is in making meaning. Challenge the belief that the purpose of business is to make money and consider an optimal motivation belief: The purpose of business is to serve ... people and customers. Profit is a by-product of doing both of these well. When organizations believe that the purpose of business is to serve, leaders lead differently.

Consider these best practices:

- Help individuals align to work-related values and a sense of purpose.
- Provide an honest assessment of skills and training needs.
- Clear time for inherently motivating projects.

**Leaders Are in a Position of Power**—There are many forms of power, some more effective in regard to influencing than others. Used inappropriately, any form of power has the ability to undermine an individual's psychological needs. And it isn't just the use of power that can be to blame; it is also the individual's perception that a leader has power and could use it to control the situation. Leaders must be incredibly mindful and clear about the types of power they have and use. Most leaders would be surprised by the potentially negative emotional impact that results from having and using their power, in almost all its forms. Interestingly, leaders' power can undermine people's psychological needs, but their power cannot satisfy people's psychological needs. Leaders cannot force people to experience ARC—the very attempt has just the opposite effect of undermining ARC.

Leaders must shift from the notion of using their power to influence to using their positions of power to empowering others by

- Inviting choice and exploring options within boundaries
- Exploring an individual's natural interest in and enthusiasm for the goal
- Providing a rationale and sharing information

**The Only Thing That Really Matters Is Results** – Ask most leaders what's most important in the world of work and their answers will most likely be something related to results. Challenging this traditional results-focus is daunting, but leaders should be encouraged to try the alternatives. The constant pressure of driving for results undermines people's psychological needs, putting results at risk. Instead, helping individuals align desired results to values and connect them to a higher purpose facilitates individuals who are responsible for the results to create meaning for themselves. Consider two alternatives to the traditional results focus.

- **Redefine and reframe results**—Clarify the underlying values and purpose behind the organization's dashboard metrics.
- **Set high-quality content goals**—Research shows that leaders need to help their people avoid potentially external goals relating to status and success and instead set goals with more potential for optimal motivation focused on meaning, personal growth, and community.

**If You Can't Measure It, It Doesn't Matter**—Most leaders are familiar with the acronym SMART associated with setting goals where the M stands for measurable, but changing the term “measurable” to “motivating” can mean a world of difference for the individual contributor. Why? Because while setting measurable goals is important, people are more likely to sustain their pursuit of goals that are optimally motivating to them. Ironically, in the workplace as in life, the most meaningful experiences are those things that are not easily measured.

- Explore individuals’ natural interest in and enthusiasm for the goal.
- Emphasize learning goals, not just performance goals.
- Encourage self-reflection and growth. Legitimize mistakes as part of the learning process.

## COMPELLING DATA LINKS OPTIMAL MOTIVATION AND EMPLOYEE WORK PASSION

### Motivation and Work Intentions.

A study conducted by The Ken Blanchard Companies® in 2010 with more than 950 individuals found compelling correlations between motivation and the work intentions that lead to employee work passion:

- There is a positive and significant correlation between individuals with optimal Motivational Outlooks and the five work intentions. These people are far more likely to have higher discretionary effort at work and higher intention to perform at peak levels, are more likely to endorse the organization as a great place to work, and are more likely to remain with the organization and behave as good corporate citizens.
- There is no correlation between individuals with suboptimal Motivational Outlooks and the five work intentions.
- There is a negative correlation between individuals with suboptimal Disinterested Motivational Outlooks.

As you can see from the table below, the correlations for those with optimal Motivational Outlooks are highly significant. (For reference, the closer to 1.00, the stronger the correlations between the outlook and the intention. Any correlation under .20 is usually not significant.)

Correlations between motivational outlooks and work intentions.

	Discretionary Effort	Intent to Perform	Intent to Endorse	Intent to Remain	Organizational Citizenship
Optimal Motivational Outlooks	<b>.47<sup>***</sup></b>	<b>.57<sup>**</sup></b>	<b>.47<sup>**</sup></b>	<b>.36<sup>***</sup></b>	<b>.52<sup>***</sup></b>
Suboptimal Motivational Outlooks	<b>.02</b>	<b>.10</b>	<b>.03</b>	<b>.01</b>	<b>-.06</b>
Disinterested Motivational Outlooks	<b>-.05</b>	<b>.03</b>	<b>-.02</b>	<b>-.08</b>	<b>-.05</b>

\*\*\* significant at the .001 level

### **Psychological Needs, Engagement, Work Passion, and Work Intentions.**

Collaborative research conducted by The Ken Blanchard Companies, the University of Denver, and the University of Louisville, published in the European Journal of Training and Development in 2015, investigated several hypotheses on the connections between psychological needs, engagement, work passion, and work intentions. Findings with 1,586 individuals participating in the study concluded that when an individual's psychological needs are met, the higher their work passion and work intentions.

Because the concept of engagement or work passion has diverse schools of thought, multiple measures of engagement and work passion were used. The study presented evidence that when employees' basic psychological needs for Autonomy, Relatedness, and Competence are met, they expressed higher engagement and passion scores. They also demonstrated stronger intentions and desires to perform, use discretionary effort, endorse their organizations and leaders, contribute to the welfare of the organization, and remain with the organization.

Both of these studies contribute to the latest science of motivation. We have a solid, research-based understanding of motivation in the workplace. Organizations and leaders alike can use that understanding to help their people enjoy a higher-quality motivational work experience.

### **CONCLUSION**

Activating optimal motivation is far more than a feel-good proposition for individuals and organizations. It provides a pragmatic and skill-based framework, course of action, and solution to helping shift a workforce that costs organizations an estimated \$350 billion annually in lost productivity. Organizations will spend \$750,000 to \$1 billion to fix a problem whose source many of them do not understand.

Beyond the numbers, the promise of Optimal Motivation requires organizations to shift their paradigm from a business-is-everything mindset to one that values people and their well-being because it is the right thing to do. This requires a shift from "business is here to make a pro fit" to "business is here to serve." This requires acknowledging that people come to work as human beings, not robots who leave their hearts and minds at home. In the end, what matters as much as results is how people achieve those results.

**For more information visit [www.kenblanchard.com/optimalmotivation](http://www.kenblanchard.com/optimalmotivation)**

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Susan Fowler is widely known as one of the foremost experts on personal empowerment and motivation. She is the coauthor of more than seven books, including *Situational Self Leadership* and *the One Minute Manager* with Ken Blanchard and Laurie Hawkins, *Achieve Leadership Genius* with Drea Zigarmi and Dick Lyles, *Leading at a Higher Level* with Ken Blanchard and most recently the best-seller *Why Motivating People Doesn't Work...and What Does*.

Dr. Drea Zigarmi is coauthor of *Achieve Leadership Genius* (2007) and *The Leader Within* (2005), and codeveloper of a number of The Ken Blanchard Companies' products, including *Situational Leadership® II* and the widely used *Leader Behavior Analysis II®* instruments. In addition, he is a professor at University of San Diego.

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## About The Ken Blanchard Companies®

The Ken Blanchard Companies is one of the world's leading training and development experts. We create lasting behavioral change that has measurable impact on the organizations we work with. We provide training that makes a difference.

Our programs are based on behavioral models that add a situational context to the training experience, so individuals learn to be more productive in real-world scenarios and make the shift from learning to doing more quickly and effectively.

As the innovator of the most widely used leadership development system in the world, Situational Leadership® II, we provide groundbreaking thinking and a memorable learner experience. We begin with a collaborative diagnostic process identifying your unique needs and business issues, then develop an appropriate leadership strategy.

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