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Article

Self-Determination Theory in Human Resource Development: New Directions and Practical Considerations

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Abstract

The Problem.

There has been a "Copernican turn" in approaches to motivation and management: The focus in human resource development (HRD) and management circles today is no longer on how companies can motivate or incentivize employees from the outside, but instead on how they can effectively foster and support the high-quality motivation that comes from within employees. Developing affective commitment and intrinsic motivation is highlighted as a key to organizational success and employee satisfaction.

The Solution.

In this article, we review our applications of self-determination theory (SDT; Ryan & Deci, 2017) concerning how organizations can both assess and build a culture of high-quality motivation. We review a continuum of types of motivation in the workplace that range from passive or controlled compliance to personal valuing of and intrinsic interest in one's work. We then discuss how support for employees' basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness leads to these higher quality types of motivation. Evidence shows that enhanced need satisfaction can come from managerial climate, job design, and well-crafted compensation strategies, as well as being influenced by the perceived mission of the company. A focus on basic needs provides a practical basis for leveraging positive change and achieving goals from talent retention to workplace wellness.

The Stakeholders.

This article was written to help both researchers and practitioners in HRD (i.e., organizational leaders, human resource professionals, managers) learn the basic

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principles and applications of SDT as a means of unlocking a more practical and actionable model for engagement and motivation. This review not only translates SDT into practice, opening opportunity for collaboration between researchers and practitioners, but also provides meaningful insight into sustained employee motivation and engagement, job satisfaction, and productivity.

Keywords
human resource development, employee engagement, motivation, employee experience, performance management, productivity, retention, self-determination theory

Over the last 15 years, there has been an unprecedented shift of power from institutions to individuals, both inside and outside the workplace. In media, we now decide when and where we will watch, read, and listen to content, unbounded by the scheduling decisions of television networks or radio stations. In retail, we no longer drive to big box stores but, instead, select purchases from our phones that arrive on our doorstep within hours. And in the workplace, people at all levels move more frequently and fluidly between jobs not simply based on compensation but with a focus on finding work that is fulfilling and fitting with their values and lifestyle. Many trends in employment reflect this new relationship between institutions and workers: Job mobility statistics show that the average worker entering the workforce today will change positions nearly twice as frequently in the first 5 years of working than new employees did 30 years ago (Berger, 2017).

We have come to call this phenomenon a "Copernican Turn": Whereas, once institutions set the rules for engagement, individuals are now more empowered as the center of their personal and professional lives, pulling experiences to them dynamically based on their individual needs and desires. For institutions—and notably for modern human resource development (HRD)—this has created a new set of dynamics, one that necessitates a deeper understanding of how to build engaging and motivating cultures that benefit both empowered workers and the organizations in which they work. Simply put, within organizations in which employees increasingly set the rules of their engagement with their work, new approaches to motivation and engagement are needed in HRD to attract and retain talent, and maximize productivity and wellness.

Certainly, not all organizations are adapting well. Gallup's well-known measurements of employee engagement and satisfaction suggest that only one third of employees feel engaged in their work (Harter, 2016), despite hundreds of millions of dollars being invested in employee engagement annually. Nor are issues of motivation in the workplace new. Benefits of empowering workers through more meaningful and satisfying work have been discussed for more than half a century (Argyris, 1957; McGregor, 1960). Back then, management guru Peter Drucker (1969) wrote, "We know nothing about motivation. All we can do is write books about it."

Happily, at least that has changed. Rigorous research over several decades has taught us much (Deci, Olafsen, & Ryan, 2017; Ryan & Deci, 2017). Now the challenges lie in carrying that knowledge forward into best practices within modern HRD. We contend that the failure of most employee engagement programs is that this knowledge has not been valued or applied.

The next generation of engagement programs can be improved by leveraging this knowledge in two critical areas. First, we need to have clear, evidence-based approaches to assess engagement and motivation that allow us to accurately understand and effectively "diagnose" what is happening within organizations. Evidence-based approaches, therefore, are those that deploy well-validated metrics of the motivational and emotional components that are proven to *drive* engagement, versus simply measuring the positive *outcomes* of engagement. Employee engagement has been variously defined as loyalty, work passion, organizational commitment, job involvement, and willingness to invest discretionary effort (Markos & Sridevi, 2010). But these positive descriptors primarily capture the finish line and not the journey: Existing measurement systems are too often a "lagging indicator" of good cultures that succeed in spotting engagement when they see it, proudly showing how these measurements predict positive outcomes. Yet this is not where the work of management and HRD lies: Having a measurement of engagement is a far cry from accurately measuring the core experiences that *build* or *detract* from engagement and optimal performance, and then using an effective framework to act.

This leads us to the second problem area in current engagement programs: Postdiagnosis, they attempt to solve motivational problems through "Pre-Copernican" approaches. Such strategies rely on institutional levers such as external incentives and "command and control" systems that management can activate to drive desired behavior. Yet motivational strategies that rely on such models are not responsive to the greater individual empowerment within modern organizations.

Rather than assume that the organization is the empowered actor that "creates" motivation in the individual, it is the other way around: For HRD to succeed, tools are needed that tap into the worker's *internal* frame of reference. Specifically, how do workers interpret experiences in the workplace using their own internal compass of what is meaningful and valuable? It is that compass that most directly addresses engagement and motivation. How can we be helping that needle point to its true north?

Self-determination theory (SDT; Ryan & Deci, 2017) is a broad model of motivation, personal goals, and wellness, apt for addressing engagement and motivation in today's workplace (Gagné, Deci, & Ryan, 2017). SDT's fundamental frame of reference is the individual, and how circumstances such as management style and work context support or thwart the individual's motivation and well-being. In this regard, SDT is well aligned with the societal shift to individual empowerment, representing an evidence-based approach to motivation and engagement with the potential to disrupt traditional transactional thinking about motivation in the workplace.

SDT also carries with it a substantial evidence base in behavioral science, a knowledge base often lacking in the ad hoc quality of most modern employee engagement programs. Whereas the vast majority of employee engagement programs have no

evidence to support their approaches, hundreds of empirical studies over the last 40 years have demonstrated the validity of SDT principles. In fact, SDT has shown how its motivational "laws" predict important organizational outcomes such as financial performance (Deci et al., 2017), talent retention (Bock, 2015; Fowler, 2014), affective commitment (Becker, Kernan, Clark, & Klein, 2015; Olafsen, Niemiec, Halvari, Deci, & Williams, 2017), and well-being (Gagné & Deci, 2005; Vansteenkiste et al., 2007) among other critical performance indicators. Finally, SDT not only describes a clear framework for measurement, but it also prescribes a well-validated model for taking action to improve and sustain motivation and engagement (e.g., Deci, Connell, & Ryan, 1989; Hardré & Reeve, 2009).

Understanding High-Quality Motivation: An SDT Perspective

In shifting from a focus on external contingencies to internal experiences, SDT shifts the traditional paradigm of how motivation itself should be understood. Most approaches to measuring motivation simply assume someone has "more" or "less" of it, essentially treating motivation as a unidimensional resource. Instead, SDT describes multiple kinds of motivation based on the various "drivers" or motivational forces underlying a person's behaviors.

Some types of motivation are dependent on external or internal pressure—and largely disconnected from personal needs and interests. The person is thus not fully engaged, finding satisfactions not in the activity but rather in consequences, resulting in lower quality motivation. Other types of motivation are energized directly by the employees' needs, values, and interest, resulting in volitional, high-quality motivation. Here, employees are committed to doing work-related tasks well and, from this investment and effort, derive greater satisfaction, vitality, and wellness. This spectrum of *motivational quality* predicts important outcomes from employee engagement, to its byproducts of enhanced wellness, performance, and organizational citizenship.

Figure 1 displays the major categories of SDT's taxonomy of employee motivations, with terms used in organizational discussions. On the left-hand side is the category of *amotivation*. Motivational quality is lowest when the individual is *amotivated*, which is the result of finding either no value or interest in work (i.e., simply "going through the motions"), or of not feeling effective or capable at one's job. Not surprisingly, amotivational states are associated with poor well-being and performance on a variety of outcome variables (Vallerand, 1992).

A further low-quality form of motivation is that characterized by *external pressure*. External pressure in both negative (such as punishment) and positive (such as rewards) forms may be quite effective in motivating short-term behavior. However, such pressure inevitably backfires: Individuals who feel externally pressured perform more poorly, often taking the shortest route to any goal assigned to them. They also have lower well-being and are at greater risk of disengaging when rewards or punishments are not salient.

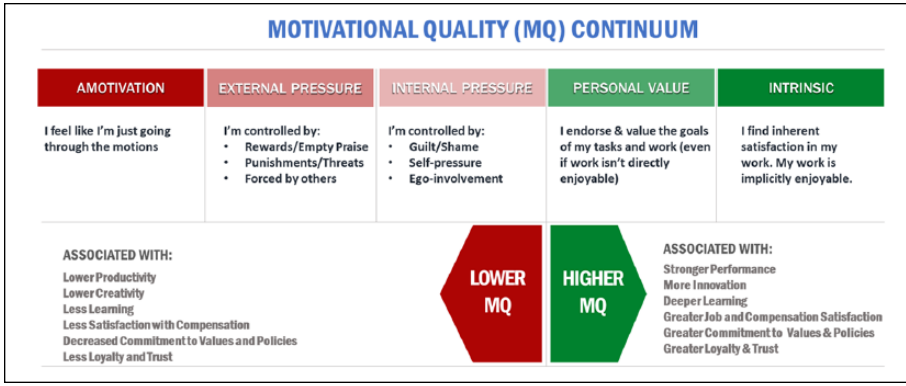

Figure 1. Motivational quality continuum.
Note. From Immersyve, Inc.© 2017 by Immersyve, Inc. Reprinted with permission. MQ = motivational quality.

These negative impacts to motivational quality attach even if the external pressure has a positive shape. Indeed, if you wearily climb on to the treadmill each morning to lose weight primarily because your company is incentivizing you to do so, it does not matter if that incentive takes the form of a punishment (e.g., increased health insurance premium) or a reward (e.g., health insurance rebate)—It still will not lead to persistence over time (e.g., Moller, Buscemi, McFadden, Hedeker, & Spring, 2014). The key characteristic of *external pressure* is that the perceived reason for acting is the external contingency—not one's own investment in the activity.

Another form of low-quality motivation involves *internal pressure* that employees can put on themselves. Internal pressures are characterized by concerns with approval, image management, and self-esteem maintenance: The person "must" do well to feel okay and secure. You get on the treadmill each morning with a sigh, driven by concern that you are looking unfit rather than really appreciating the positive health benefits or improved vitality that might come with exercise. At work, you put in long hours out of fear that you will be passed over for promotion or undertake a task to improve your political capital (rather than for the work itself). Such forms of defensive self-regulation represent low-quality forms of motivation; like external pressure, these internal pressures lead one to focus on appearance and credit, rather than valuing one's work for its own sake or embracing company goals.

In contrast, high-quality motivation is evident when one pursues goals and values that are *personally meaningful*. Here, the goals of the organization and of the individual converge: One has identified with and willingly embraces one's work. You put in your morning run on the treadmill knowing firsthand how it increases your energy throughout the day and supports your overall health. Regardless of whether it is enjoyable, when an activity is understood as important and authentically valued, one is more fully aligned and "on board" with what must be done.

A final yet important type of high-quality motivation is represented by *intrinsic motivation*: When the activity itself is its own reward (Ryan & Deci, 2017). You enjoy your morning treadmill run simply because of the positive experience you have while running. At work, tasks are intrinsically motivating when interesting and engaging. When work affords opportunities for learning and growth, intrinsic motivation is especially salient.

In most jobs, people have all of these various motives in play but to different degrees in different situations. Sometimes, low quality pressures dominate, other times interest or value in a job well done rise to the top, and often a mix of motivational forces is at play. Thus, to assess motivational quality, we identify the *motivational profile* of what is generally driving motivation, and specific areas where it can be enhanced.

This spectrum of motivational quality provides a different lens for assessing employee engagement. Higher motivational quality has been associated with greater learning (Vansteenkiste, Soenens, Verstuyf, & Lens, 2009), persistence (Vallerand, 1992), creativity (Amabile, Hennessey, & Grossman, 1986), and performance (Baard, Deci, & Ryan, 2004), among other positive outcomes. In fact, our treadmill examples above are not merely motivational metaphors: When motivated by high-quality motivation of value and interest, people are much more likely to persist in exercise routines and physical activity (Standage, Sebire, & Loney, 2008). Such evidence demonstrates that motivational quality is predictive of a broad range of positive performance outcomes.

Yet just having a strong predictive measure of quality engagement is not sufficient to effect meaningful change within organizational culture. Equally important is a framework for action—one that outlines the drivers of motivational quality alongside proven best practices to optimize those drivers.

Building High-Quality Motivation Through Basic Need Fulfillment

SDT provides a strong framework for building motivational quality. The theory specifically argues that there are three basic psychological needs that underlie high-quality motivation, needs that apply across all cultures and all types of workplaces. When these needs are satisfied, employees show both their highest quality efforts and their highest well-being (Ryan, Bernstein, & Brown, 2010). In fact, it is precisely when employees are most empowered and engaged that they experience the most wellness and satisfaction with work.

SDT's Basic Psychological Needs: Autonomy, Relatedness, and Competence

Autonomy is the basic need to be the author of one's life—to have a sense of choice and self-endorsement of one's actions. People want to feel "ownership" and volition in

their work. Far from being alienated or "burned out," autonomous workers greatly value doing work well. Supervisors and job design support this need for autonomy when they help everyday work tasks feel meaningful and important.

Of course, work life often does not always provide us with options and choices: Often there are specific tasks and goals that must be accomplished, and mandates given to us by managers (who themselves may be following the mandates of *their* managers). Yet one can have autonomy even for tasks that are required or in circumstances that are constrained, when the reasons for acting are made clear and accepted. If we have a rationale and sense of purpose in what we are doing, autonomy needs can be fulfilled, even when tasks are not enjoyable. Autonomy is, in this way, not the same as "freedom" or "independence"—we can feel volitional if we understand and endorse the value of our work, even if that work is mandatory or prescribed by others.

Relatedness is our basic need to feel we belong and "matter" to others. Each of us needs to feel connected in meaningful ways—to feel supported while experiencing that others need and value our support as well. Conversely, when we feel isolated and irrelevant to those around us, relatedness needs are left unmet. In the workplace, relatedness needs are fulfilled when employees feel respected, valued, and included at all levels of the company, including among direct managers, coworkers, and leadership.

Competence (or *Mastery*) is our basic need to feel effective, to be successful, and to grow. Within organizations, mastery needs express themselves constantly. People want to feel they have what they need to succeed at their daily tasks, including the resources, skills, and expertise. Alongside this, people want to continually stretch their abilities in manageable ways that give them a feeling of growth toward career goals. To deeply engage employees, it is not enough to ensure they can master their current workflow—They would like to envision a path that includes new challenges and responsibilities, and allows them to anticipate growth in their work.

The fulfillment of each of these needs directly relates to positive outcomes valued by organizations and individuals alike. Strong basic need satisfaction directly predicts trust in the corporation, perceived quality of manager feedback, the belief that there are opportunities to contribute your perspective, the recognition of advancement opportunities, feelings of security, satisfaction with pay and benefits, overall job satisfaction (Deci et al., 1989; Ryan et al., 2010), and a positive passion for work (Spehar, Forest, & Stenseng, 2016; Vallerand, 2015).

Not surprisingly, when employees perceive that their managers and the organizational culture support their need fulfillment, there is a similar pattern of benefits. In a culture of need support, workers are more satisfied in their work and compensation, have greater trust and loyalty for the organization, and show greater creativity and performance (Guntert, 2015). In addition to these direct positive benefits, such need supports also inoculate against physical illness and absenteeism (Williams et al., 2014), and increase organizational commitment (Collie, Shapka, Perry, & Martin, 2016) and customer loyalty (Doshi & McGregor, 2015), bringing further direct benefits to organizations.

The Importance of Managerial Supports for Basic Needs

Perhaps the most influential factor in engagement and motivation is how one experiences one's direct manager. Indeed, each year, organizations invest US$14 billion in managerial and leadership training to improve this critical input to motivation (Loew & O'Leonard, 2012). The SDT framework of motivational quality, fueled by basic need fulfillment, provides specific guidance on best practices to support these needs to optimize motivation. In addition, it serves as an evidence-based model for training, coaching, and education: Research shows that managerial training focusing on basic need support improves motivational quality and contributes to stronger employee engagement (see Ryan & Deci, 2017). In addition, this research has illuminated many common managerial pitfalls—such as the use of external incentives and rewards—that while appearing to be a positive motivator can paradoxically thwart or frustrate basic needs, leading to low motivational quality and disengagement.

Managerial Support for Basic Needs

Managers play a crucial role in supporting and facilitating basic need satisfaction, and subsequently, higher quality motivation and performance. When employees experience their managers as supportive of basic needs (autonomy, relatedness, and mastery), they report higher motivational quality, organizational loyalty, and engagement. In one study, researchers trained managers at a major U.S. corporation to be more autonomy supportive. This included an emphasis on acknowledging the perspectives of subordinates, offering informational versus controlling feedback, and encouraging "self-initiation" rather than pressuring employees toward goals. Results, collected by the company's HRD division, showed this training was associated with greater loyalty, job satisfaction, and more positive work attitudes among employees (Deci et al., 1989). In another *Fortune 500* company, employees of managers trained in need support developed significantly higher levels of engagement and motivational quality than those of managers in the control group (Hardré & Reeve, 2009). Even in the financial industry, where one might assume that financial rewards would trump need support in predicting employee motivation, manager need support was strongly predictive of performance and well-being (i.e., less depression, anxiety, somatic symptoms, and social dysfunction; Baard et al., 2004). Research further demonstrates that high levels of managerial support, need fulfillment, and motivational quality also have significantly higher levels of customer satisfaction and profitability (Fleming, Coffman, & Harter, 2005; Preenen, Oeij, Dhondt, Kraan, & Jansen, 2016). Given that most organizations rally around the goal of "putting the customer first," these findings put a spotlight on the importance of motivation and culture.

A focus on need support gives organizations a pathway to improving engagement and building stronger performance by making high-quality motivation a specific training target. Furthermore, the evidence challenges traditional command and control approaches to driving motivation and performance, showing instead that autonomy-supportive management styles are more beneficial to engagement, well-being, and performance.

Why, then, do more controlling approaches to management continue to persist in organizational culture? For the simple reason that they work—quite powerfully in fact, particularly when one focuses on only short-term behavior. If we wished to get everyone reading this to jump out of their chairs right now, the most effective means to do so would likely be to throw a hundred-dollar bill on the ground, or put some electricity through the chair seat. Both the reward and the punishment approach would do the trick. But at what cost? And with what longer-term motivational impact?

The hyperbole is warranted given that organizations are constantly under siege by competitive pressures and market forces focused on short-term results. Deadlines get advanced by clients or VIPs, sending a ripple of fire drills through the organization to accomplish tasks with unreasonable pressure. Across U.S. markets, every publicly traded company is primarily evaluated, judged, and economically valued by what they have done in the 90 days since their last quarterly report. Is it any wonder that, so often, managers and leaders resort to pressure to meet these realities of organizational life?

The difficult motivational truth is that long-term goals, strong cultures, and even financial performance are sacrificed when short-term tactics are used. Such tactics destroyed *Enron*, at one time the sixth largest company in America. More recently, the pressure *Wells Fargo* put on thousands of its employees to hit performance goals resulted in scandal and billions of dollars in lost value and reputation.

In contrast, need-supportive approaches not only benefit employees' motivational quality and well-being, but they can also bring tangible financial benefits to the organization. When managers work to support needs, they are making an investment in the organization and its culture that can yield higher customer satisfaction (Fleming et al., 2005), better talent retention (Vansteenkiste et al., 2007), enhanced organizational citizenship (Roche & Haar, 2013), and reduced risk for noncompliant and unethical behaviors (Yam, Klotz, He, & Reynolds, 2017). In other words, SDT-based models for motivation and engagement are predictive of key performance indicators not only for HRD functions but also for the financial performance indicators prized by executive leadership.

Compensation Systems: An SDT Perspective

Compensation systems remain a central motivational tool within organizations. Yet at the most fundamental level, the transactional nature of giving money in exchange for work does not address employee's basic psychological needs or necessarily relate to motivational quality. In fact, on its face, it describes exactly the kinds of external reward systems that are associated with low quality motivation. Indeed, when pay is used as a primary mechanism for motivating and controlling workers, it brings exactly the detriments to engagement SDT would predict. When the most salient motivator for work is the amount of compensation one receives, motivational quality tends to be lower, along with loyalty, performance, and well-being in the workplace (Kuvaas, Dysvik, & Buch, 2014). Research consistently affirms that pay—and specifically the amount one is paid—is simply not as strong a predictor of the quality of one's work life compared with the need satisfaction we have described (Mottaz, 1985).

Yet the key concept to be drawn from SDT with respect to compensation is not that it is invariably bad: Compensation is an important part of work and can contribute to motivational quality. Instead, SDT highlights that compensation carries with it a message for the recipient—a *functional significance*—and it is this message that tends to determine the motivational consequences (Olafsen, Halvari, Forest, & Deci, 2015; Ryan & Deci, 2017). For example, in a study of workers at a laundromat company, management tried to encourage stronger work motivation in tardy employees by financially "rewarding" on-time behavior. While this incentive had a short-term impact on those being rewarded, the effect was short-lived, and the program backfired: Not only did it decrease the motivational quality of those who were compensated, but it also lowered motivational quality across the company, creating negative motivational "spillover" (Gubler, Larkin, & Pierce, 2016). Similar effects can be seen in systems that emphasize pay for performance as a primary driver of motivation: In such systems, the overall quality of motivation—as well as the work performed—suffers (Kuvaas, Buch, Gagné, Dysvik, & Forest, 2016).

However, compensation can also have a functional significance that facilitates and supports basic psychological need satisfaction and higher motivational quality. For instance, compensation can be delivered so as to signal mastery and efficacy when given in recognition of a job well done. In addition, compensation systems that feel fair and equitable communicate respect for all employees, supporting autonomy and relatedness needs. A recent study by *Harvard Business Review* supports this point: Researchers tracked Major League Baseball player salaries and team win percentages over a decade. They found that higher team win percentages were associated with whether player salaries matched their individual performance, rather than the equal dispersion of pay among players or higher absolute salaries (Hill, 2017).

The key finding is that it is not the dollar amount of compensation that is ultimately the most important motivator. It is what compensation signals regarding supports for or frustrations of basic psychological needs that ultimately determines its motivational impact (Houlfort, Koestner, Joussemet, & Lekes, 2002; Murayama, Matsumoto, Izuma, & Matsumoto, 2010). With this critical concept in mind, it is possible to construct compensation programs to meet an organization's specific goals while supporting employees' psychological needs.

Summary and Future Directions

Enhancing employee engagement is consistently ranked as a top priority by company executives, yet it is a goal that remains elusive and largely underserved by current programs and approaches. Recent advances in technology and tools have allowed HR practitioners to collect more and more data on employees to track and influence engagement, with many recent programs attempting to coax engagement through digital enticements such as "gamification" and social networking features. But in the absence of an evidence-based framework that informs engagement efforts, these digital tools are largely rudderless and ineffective. In fact, while this digital activity and data tracking have the appearance of progress, its lack of a foundational grounding in

basic psychological needs and motivational quality has arguably contributed to a continued failure to meaningfully raise employee engagement levels.

Evidence-based frameworks such as SDT can breathe new energy into the hunt for employee engagement programs that work. Through collaboration between behavioral scientists, technologists, and practitioners, programs can be built on a fundamental understanding of what matters to truly effect change and build highly engaged and motivated cultures. This evidence base ensures such approaches are informed by valid measurement and proven intervention strategies.

Engagement metrics and measurement illustrate the value of this guidance. Many current approaches simply cast a hopeful net on the water, collecting data on everything that *might* affect engagement via ponderous annual employee surveys. Instead, SDT outlines a clear map of the variables that matter, including motivational quality, basic needs satisfactions, and the cultural conditions that support or thwart engagement experiences. Measurement of such components affords a clear and actionable picture of the specific issues within the culture that require intervention. An SDT approach also enables the organization to track aspects of motivation that sometimes behave paradoxically, particularly with respect to rewards and compensation (Deci, Koestner, & Ryan, 1999). This helps ensure compensation programs hit their intended motivational goals.

Similarly, the strong evidence base of SDT empowers more effective training and intervention through core principles that managers and supervisors can understand, learn, and put to work. While most existing employee engagement approaches compensate for a lack of a guiding theory by describing dozens of "needs" and employee "types," SDT's focus on the three fundamental needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness is accessible, digestible, and intuitive. This focus facilitates the adoption of a common motivational language in the organization, empowering managers to support each other in their efforts to build a strong, motivated culture.

SDT brings additional value to cultural development as well. In this age of the Copernican turn, employees seek out companies where they can experience their work as meaningful. They not only want to do well, but they also want to feel they are doing good. This means they are more likely to show higher quality motivation when they are working for a firm whose values they can endorse, values such as diversity, inclusion, the environment, and human rights. As argued by Grant (2008) and evidenced in our own measures of company pride within worker profiles, we see great autonomy and engagement when workers feel the company cares about the broader community, and all stakeholders—not just company owners.

Finally, it is worth noting that SDT also informs how to build more effective tools and technology in the service of motivation and engagement. Regardless of the specific approach, most employee engagement processes involve technology platforms to conduct surveys and collect data, and dashboards and online training tools and seminars to bring about successful change. Each of these elements involves an interaction employees will experience as either need frustrating ("Here's that survey I have to do") or need supportive ("my chance to have an impact"), as a function of how they are constructed and introduced. By applying principles of SDT-based motivational

design (Rigby, 2014), the next generation of tools for motivational assessment and training will, themselves, be built in a way that recognizes the Copernican Turn. Specifically, these tools will invite each employee to be part of the process of assessing.

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