Motivation is the act of producing a reason that causes us to take action. In the quote at the right, your colleague has underlined the twin tasks for nurse managers—motivation of self and others. Or, as airline hosts are fond of putting it: Please put on your own oxygen mask before helping others. In this column, we will explore five ways these two tasks are linked.

Motivation has always been part of the core curriculum of nursing school and you can probably describe Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, Skinner’s pigeons pecking for positive reinforcement and the difference between carrots and sticks with your eyes closed.

But there are some new motivation teachers in town and a new school of thinking about motivation as a kind of inner work. New school approaches suggest that external rewards, like money and prizes—though appropriate for short term routine tasks and team building—can trample creativity and undermine long term performance, persistence and engagement.

New school motivation is less about prizes and more about purpose; less about rewards and more about regard; less about answers and more about autonomy. In sum, the theory and practice of motivation is focused on inspiration rather than manipulation.

Listen to Doris E. trying to survive a difficult day, who passed a staff nurse with her knees bent—to establish eye contact with a pediatric patient. “Watching our nurse I realized: This is what we really do. At the end of the day, my work contributes to the person at the bedside providing patients with excellent care. We get so busy keeping the rocks off the road that we get misaligned. It was 4 years ago, but I can still see that nurse.”

Reflections: Take a moment to define your theory of motivation by completing these two sentences: “I think the main thing that motivates people is... When I am feeling disengaged and unmotivated I always...” Compare the two sentences. How do these beliefs inform your practice?

Consider five foundations of motivation as a leadership practice for self and others. As you read, continue to reflect on your experiences, compare your theories of motivation with the ones that follow. Identify your best practices and plan to experiment with some new actionable strategies.

#1 PURPOSE
Motivation begins and blossoms by asking why, says thought leader Simon Sinek. Managers know that keeping the staff focused on purpose is part of the job description. Yet the challenge lies in maintaining a clear...
line of sight to the shared mission while you sweat the details of multiple meetings, nagging emails, schedule snafus, team drama and surprise Joint Commission visits.

Like Doris E, who realized “this is what we do,” two wise managers offer strategies to ask and answer the why. Sharon J. explains, “I continue to drive with that force that it is [all about] the patient, the person in the bed.” And Nygen R. has created a mantra for her own motivation. “I bring my best to work every day and this is what inspires me. Every day I look at myself and say: whose life are you going to make better or easier today?”

The poet David Whyte defines the focus on purpose and big picture outcomes as “the discipline of memory.” Beverly L. uses this discipline during times of inner team warfare. “If I can stay focused on the bigger picture and the broader perspective of why I was in the role and why I wanted to continue, that helps me not to focus on the little petty things.” Beverly’s lesson: when you can steady your line of sight and stay focused on your purpose, you are ready to inspire team members suffering from memory loss.

Reflections: In musical composition, the word motif (based on motive) is used to describe underlying themes. Think of Beethoven’s famous 4-note opening of the Fifth Symphony that appears as a theme and variation throughout this universally adored piece. If you think of your purpose as a musical motif—what is the recurrent theme of why you do what you do?

Experiment: To discipline the memory of your team, nurse leader Eileen Magri urges you to think out loud: “Show them your thought bubble.” Remind them what motivates you and why; explain the bigger picture. When staff wonders about a new policy, describe the facts and feelings that influenced your decision.

Get out from behind your paperwork and talk about your purpose—what you find gratifying and satisfying about your work. Motivation is contagious, so be sure to share stories that move you and motivate you and talk about projects that excite you and the highpoint experiences that help you remember why you became a nurse.

Tap into the team and group identity to build meaning and motivation. Protect time in team meetings to tell patient stories or to create group statements of purpose. Have each member write a one-statement sentence of why on an index card. The statement can be specific (Why does this goal matter?) or general (What is the purpose of our unit?). Place cards in a brown bag and read them aloud. Guide discussion around shared themes of purpose.

#2 REGARD
Positive feedback can become the fast food of motivation. Amidst your shouts of “Bravo! Encore!” and “Let’s order pizza!” consider psychologist Robert Kegan’s suggestion that a more lasting motivator is communicating regard and what he calls “the value of being valued.” In this approach, pizza and praise have a place on the table. But the emphasis is on what Rachel M. describes as “knowing that each individual brings something to the department and working through those gifts or challenges with each person.”

Attunement to each individual requires language that is specific rather than global and linked to

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# 3 AUTONOMY

In Daniel Pink’s sacred cow-kicking book *Drive*, he offers an anatomy of autonomy as a motivator. He is a leadership educator who urges managers to fuel autonomy and enhance a team’s sense of control by empowering individuals and teams to make choices about tasks, timing, and approaches. The payoff, promises Pink, is increased staff engagement and accountability.

As a manager who empowers, honesty must be your policy. So beware of faux feedback. Don’t ask your staff “what would you do?” if you already know what you plan to do. Nothing flattens motivation more than to be asked and then told.

Motivate by underlining areas where the staff can choose, if they can’t choose the what. For instance, if your organization is moving to online patient charting maybe nurses can choose the when (target date December or January) or the who (who might be a change champion) or the how (what kind of training or tutorials will work best).

The practice of generativity is another dimension of autonomy. Psychologists Erick Erickson and Dan McAdams have described the pleasure that leaders experience in passing on and “offering up” what they built by gifting the next generation with autonomy, power and respect. To lead with generativity means that you learn to motivate—and be motivated by—giving the kids the keys to the car, letting them drive with their ideas, or attend a conference in your place. It means applauding their autonomy and being excited that the unit ran smoothly during your vacation.

Beth B. describes autonomy and generativity as a form of mutual motivation. “Empower your team to find the solution(s) and then recognize them for a job well done. This will empower them to step up again and again. It is very rewarding as a leader to see your teams become more engaged. And in the end, it can mean less work for you.”

**Reflections:** Recall a time when you empowered your staff to generate ideas or choose a means to complete a project or improve a safety metric. Next describe an experience where you were a manager with the plan—and choice was not part of the conversation. What would you want to teach other managers about the difference in the outcomes?

**Experiments:** Explore your resistance. What is holding you back from empowering your staff? Memo to all micro managers: autonomy and generativity require that you delegate some of your authority and share accountability and control.
How itchy do you feel at the prospect that a staffer may not do it the way you would? What are tradeoffs for you in increasing his/her motivation while decreasing your control?

Capture and consider moments of your generativity. Look back over the past two weeks and savor the times that you felt joy about a team member’s achievement, invited someone to become more visible or saw how smoothly your staff functioned when you were home with the flu.

**# 4 MASTERY**

Behavioral researchers like Bernard Weiner suggest that if motivation were a game of poker, mastery would trump reward. Mastery resides in the sense that you are the author of your accomplishments. Weiner describes the process of attribution and suggests that the way we explain outcomes influences our beliefs and feelings about our achievements—and determines our motivation and persistence in the future.

As a practical matter, this means insisting that your staff explain positive outcomes as a result of their ability and/or effortful struggle. Those who attribute their accomplishments or failures to a matter of luck or circumstance may feel less pride in their success and less inclined to learn from their mistakes. Calculate the mastery quotient of saying, “You showed so much self-control—you never took the bait when Mr. Wallace starting yelling,” versus “You sure dodged the bullet on that one.”

Toni C. calls attention to increasing mastery with the practice of appreciative inquiry, an approach created by management psychologist David Cooperrider. As Toni explains, “I search for the best and the good around us. I tend to focus on our positive quality outcomes, and share daily with the staff and this seems to motivate staff more towards better outcomes. If we focus on what we are not doing right, then staff become disengaged [they feel a sense of failure] and this suffocates innovation and creativity.”

**Reflections.** Answer two questions in quick succession. What is my team doing wrong? What is my team doing right? Compare your motivation to meet challenges and work with your team after each answer.

**Experiments:** Guide your staff to claim their accomplishments by describing successes in terms of effort difficulty and ability. (Examples: “Our fall initiative was a success because you wouldn’t give up and it really paid off,” or, “It was a tall order and you filled it.” “You have developed the kind of empathy that makes our patients feel less alone.”)

Fine tune mastery by rewriting complaints into statements of intention. Use appreciative inquiry. Instead of asking “What’s wrong?” you can ask: “What do we want more of?” Instead of allowing the team huddle to devolve into a coffee kvetch, you can inquire, “What is working?”

**# 5 THE PLEASURE OF PLAY**

The last words on motivation come from two managers, Morgan T. and Corrin S. who remind us of the fizzy power of fun to motivate your team to connect to each other and their patients. Morgan focuses on fun with dinners out, family BBQs, a newsletter that is 75 percent vacation photos and brag book about kids and grandkids. She has discovered that “happy employees are more engaged with hospital initiatives and expectations.”

Corrin asks: “Could you imagine the change in outcomes if a group of nurses or an interdisciplinary team wrote a rap to a special patient and then performed it for the patient? What would that do for the patient? What would that do for team spirit and camaraderie on a nursing unit?”

In the wise words of these managers, the pleasure of the team that plays together provides a surprisingly solid fifth foundation for building a motivated community of practice.

Barbara L. Mackoff, EdD, is a consulting psychologist, author and educator and a recognized authority on nursing management and leadership. She is currently AONE senior faculty and a Fulbright specialist. She designed and facilitated a leadership laboratory for nurse managers at New York University Langone Medical Center, New York City, and has been a visiting professor at Adelphi University, Garden City, New York, as well as the Molloy School of Nursing’s PhD Program in Rockville Centre, New York. Mackoff was principal investigator of a national research study of nurse manager engagement funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. She is the author of six books including Nurse Manager Engagement: Strategies for Excellence and Commitment. Her nursing research has been published in The Journal of Nursing Administration and Nurse Leader. She can be reached at bmackoff_tmp@aha.org.