

Self-determination and social identity: Modeling team motivation

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What are the underlying dynamics of group motivation in a team or organization? How does it take shape? And how does it influence a team's functioning and effectiveness?

A recent article in [*Applied Psychology*](#) attempts to answer these questions. Authors Simon Grenier, a professor of psychology at Université de Montréal, Curtin University professor Marylène Gagné, and University of Calgary prof Thomas O'Neill propose a model that combines self-determination theory with [social identity](#), with practical implications for team management.

Filling in the gaps

After reviewing the literature, Grenier realized that team motivation has generally been measured by members' commitment to team goals or how collective strategies for regulating members' actions influence the attainment of the goals. A key ingredient was missing: the drivers of team motivation which, like individual motivation, can affect the functioning of the group.

Grenier's study aims to address these gaps by drawing on both self-determination theory and social identity theory to describe how universal psychological needs and team identification affect the emergence of team motivation, positively or negatively.

Both theories conceptualize motivation as a process of internalization in which a person's identity influences the reasons and goals that underpin their behavior, Grenier explained.

"Self-determination theory links motivation to a person's identification with an external figure, such as a coach, a parent, or a boss," he said.

"Whether that figure supports the person's basic needs or uses psychological control will affect the degree to which behaviors are autonomously internalized and the depth of the person's motivation.

"Social identity theory explains how a person's social identity shifts from 'I' to 'we' and the extent to which they adopt the group's norms and

objectives when the team stimulates a desire to belong to the group or to distance oneself from it."

The proposed model posits four types of motivation for [team members](#) to carry out the team's activities or pursue its objectives. Individuals may make efforts in order to obtain a team reward (extrinsic motivation), to maintain the team's high-performance status, as in the case of a sports team (introjected regulation), because the team's goals are important to them (identified regulation) or because they enjoy working towards and achieving shared goals (intrinsic motivation). Each form of motivation affects the team's functioning in different ways.

Understanding the emergence of team-level motivation

In their model, Grenier and his co-authors postulate that reciprocal patterns of needs support/needs thwarting behavior among team members lead to the satisfaction or frustration of individual psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness.

"The model describes a set of individuals who belong to a group, each with their own motivations with respect to the team's goals," he explained. "These individual motivations give rise to patterns of interaction that form an interpersonal feedback loop, which can cause the motivations of the group's members to tend towards convergence or divergence."

For example, when team members interact through comments, criticism or encouragement, this produces positive or negative feedback loops that support or frustrate psychological needs and generate forms of team motivation that fall into the categories outlined above. These in turn positively or negatively affect team processes such as communication

and coordinated action.

Building team identity

In this way, the convergence of motivation and team identity-building creates the conditions for team-level motivation to emerge, according to Grenier.

"Other team processes can also influence individual needs satisfaction, which can reinforce team motivation by satisfying or frustrating members' psychological needs, which in turn can affect other team processes that influence a team's effectiveness," he said.

Grenier illustrates his point with the example of a team whose members are critical of each other, have weak interpersonal bonds and restrict the choices and agency of other members.

"You can expect members of this team to try to avoid criticism, withhold information, cover up mistakes, and avoid revealing too much or coordinating with others in order to guard their control over their actions and decisions," he said. "This can reduce the team's performance and effectiveness."

Theoretical and practical applications

From a theoretical standpoint, this approach makes it possible to distinguish between types of team motivation and understand the reasons that motivate team members to carry out the group's activities.

"In many organizations, team bonuses are used to boost performance," Grenier noted. "We believe this type of motivation may end up impairing the team's activities and ultimately undermine its

effectiveness. Other sources of motivation, such as emphasizing the significance of the team's work, may do more to positively influence its functioning and effectiveness."

From a practical standpoint, the proposed model offers organizations approaches to creating and managing positive motivation for teams. "Effective team processes can be enhanced by educating team members to meet each other's psychological needs," Grenier said.

As well, "redesigning the team's work to make it more motivating, such as providing variety, complexity, direct contact with beneficiaries, rich feedback, and compatible role structures can foster more intrinsic team [motivation](#)," the article concludes.

More information: Simon Grenier et al, Self-determination theory and its implications for team motivation, *Applied Psychology* (2024). [DOI: 10.1111/apps.12526](https://doi.org/10.1111/apps.12526)

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