

A review of
Motivating Humans
by Martin E. Ford
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Rating: 9

(The Official Ayers Rating Scale goes from 1-10. Anything lower than 6 is thrown out. This produces a net five point scale from 6-10.)

I will conjecture that you have heard this phrase: the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. Martin Ford offers a contrarian view: sometimes the whole is *less* than the sum of the parts. How can that be? you might ask. What's the point of putting things together in order to get less than if we left them apart?

Ford writes "Organization exists when various components are combined in such a way that the whole is different than the sum of the parts." Not more, just *different*. In many cases we get *more* because of the hidden complementarity of the relationships. But in other cases we get *less* because of the hidden *penalty* of the relationships. Suppose that someone in your organization is locked into contributing in a certain way – a bright person finds herself limited to contributing in a narrowly confining or outgrown role. Ford calls that a *constraining conditionality*. In that case the person contributes less than she might, and the whole is *less* than the sum of the parts.

Now what should we do in such a case? Well, we could ask about her motivation to change things. After all, motivation becomes the critical factor, right? *Hmmm*, Ford might say, *Not exactly*. First we need to define *motivation*: "In Motivational Systems Theory (MST), motivation is defined as the organized patterning of three psychological functions that serve to direct, energize, and regulate goal-directed activity: personal goals, emotional arousal processes, and personal agency beliefs." That is, motivation results from the interplay of goals, emotions, and the person's sense of personal agency. More colloquially, we might translate that as, What do you want to do? How much do you care? and Do you think you can actually make it so?

With this operational definition of motivation, we can return to the earlier question of what we might do in the case of the miscast player. (Note: The Human Resources group at DisneyWorld does not actually carry the moniker *Human Resources*. They call it ... *Casting*. The paradigm involves hiring the right actors and casting them in the right roles. What a concept!) Ford believes that motivation, while important, serves as just one of four influences in human behavior. The others include: biological influences, environmental influences, and non-motivational psychological and behavioral influences." Furthermore, Ford suggest that, "In some circumstances motivation may be a dominating influence, and in other circumstances motivation may be the least salient of these influences." That is, even if you know what you want to do, and are passionate, and believe you can do it ... gosh ... you might just be too short, or operating in a hostile environment, or your past habits may prevent success.

Now wait, you say. If motivation is not the be-all and end-all, why do we keep seeing books about it? Why do so many people talk about it? Why is there so much

management attention to boosting it? Excellent questions! And Ford offers a simple answer: “One of the most important messages in this book is that motivation provides the psychological foundation for the development of human competence in everyday life.” Motivation, and a richer understanding of where it originates, becomes critical if you have the goal of increased competence. If you serve as a teacher, parent, mentor, coach, or boss, then the ideas in this book can offer some interesting insights. (Actually Ford only concerns himself with *human* competence, hence the name of the book. If you work in an organization of chimpanzees or sloths, these principles might not apply.)

Ford based this book on substantial research. He compares MST with a variety of other theories. (One of those is Skinner’s behaviorism. If you work in an organization of pigeons and rats – which appear to be the primary subject of Skinner’s research – then perhaps you should look to *him* concerning increasing competence!) Let me point out one of the research-based insights Ford offers: “supervisors were likely to attribute their own poor performance to an unsupportive environment, but tended to attribute poor performance by subordinates to a lack of effort or ability on the part of those employees.” If *I* can’t succeed, it’s because of the hostile environment. If *you* can’t succeed, it’s because you lack motivation; the hostility of the environment has nothing to do with it.

Ford suggests that the common tendency to focus on extrinsic and intrinsic goals poses problems because of the fluidity and generality of those terms. Instead he describes the Ford and Nichols Taxonomy of Human Goals. That scheme uses two broad categories: *within-person* goals and *person-environment* goals. Each of those contains three subcategories, and each of *those* contains the elementary goals. So we have *within-person / affective / tranquility* and *within-person / cognitive / intellectual creativity*. We have *person-environment / self-assertive social relationship / self-determination* and *person-environment / task / mastery*.

Ford goes on to comment on the critical importance of goals in terms of motivation: “Nearly 400 studies have shown that specific-and-difficult goals lead to better performance than specific-and-easy goals, or vague goals such as ‘do your best,’ or no goals.” If you know what you want to do and it poses a challenge, it’s more effective. But remember: “People must also *believe* that they have the capabilities and opportunities needed to achieve their goal.”

Bottom line? Set stretch goals for yourself and those whom you influence. Take into account the support or barriers afforded by the environment. Now what about the connection between job satisfaction and productivity?

“From the perspective of MST, job satisfaction reflects the successful attainment of the worker’s personal goals, whereas job productivity reflects the successful attainment of the organization’s goals. Thus, rather than simply dismissing this literature as a misguided effort to connect ‘naturally’ independent outcomes, it should be interpreted as a warning that there may be something seriously wrong with the way that many work environments are organized. Specifically, these findings suggest a pervasive lack of alignment between the personal goals of employees and their employers. If this interpretation is accurate, facilitating the degree of synergy between the goals of workers and organizations may be the key to a more motivated and more productive work force.” You heard it here first.