

## **You're Inspired Working - Article**

### **Shifting Context = Shifting Motivation**

As you probably already know, I'm fascinated by communication and the limitations of language. No matter how clear we try to be, there will always be people who seem to get the wrong end of the stick, especially at work (and in intimate relationships!).

A lot of misunderstanding can occur if we are not being clear about the context of our communication, this is because a shift in context can often mean a shift in what really motivates us. For example, just imagine that you happen to like fruit . . . and you were offered a big bowl of fruit salad . . . it would probably be very appetising for you and it may even make you salivate a bit as you anticipate tasting the juicy, perfectly ripe and freshly cut fruit. However, what happens to your appetite if you were to discover that the bowl containing the fruit is a toilet bowl. The fruit hasn't changed but the context that the fruit is in has changed dramatically. This will probably change your motivation and your appetite.

### **Contextual Awareness**

Let's say that you have £1,000 in your bank account. Both your feelings about the money and what you do with it will be determined by whether you contextualise the amount as "lots of money" or "being almost broke".

We can define a context by answering the questions, where? when? and with whom? It is important to recognise the context that you yourself are in when you are speaking to others and how it may differ from the context that they are in. If you are misreading the context of your audience (even if it is only one person) you may not get the response you expect. A city trader may think that having £1,000 in the bank at the end of the month is "almost destitute" while a kitchen porter on minimum wage may well be delighted with that amount.

### **How a different context can change behaviour**

What motivates someone in one context may not motivate them in another. My wife Pam is a Chartered Statistician and therefore needs to be very specific and detailed in her approach to work. I have a tendency towards seeking the overview and the big picture because I need to listen carefully for the key issues that are preventing my clients from getting the results they want. Pam's natural motivation towards detail can often spill over into many other contexts like shopping and keeping the house clean and tidy.

But I'm still surprised how she can shift from needing lots of detail to wanting a general overview when visiting museums and looking at holiday snaps. In these two particular contexts I also shift my normal motivational pattern and

become very detailed and specific. That means that when on holiday I love to pause to read plaques or information boards and take lots of photos, usually from a number of different angles, and in museums I can spend ages on a few rooms getting right into all details of each display case, whereas Pam enjoys getting the cultural overview and feel for the place. It's funny how afterwards she'll mention interesting cultural stuff I never even got to see and I'll share some of the fascinating details I discovered. I also need to make sure I show Pam the edited version of the holiday snaps rather than every single one I took!

### **Avoiding Assumptions**

At work you need to be careful about assuming that you know what motivates your people, especially with the new context of uncertainty in the economic climate. This has created a massive shift in context for many people. It's not only the reckless caution of the banks and people taking longer to make investment decisions; many business people are beginning to talk about contingency plans and even just surviving the downturn over the next 9 to 18 months.

While some people may be worried about their job security others may actually have a false sense of security and complacency because they have never experienced a downturn. There is currently a whole generation of people at work, who have never experienced a full blown recession like the one in the early 90s. It is an unfamiliar context for them, and it may shift their motivation in unexpected ways.

### **Don't neglect the basics**

A number of my clients are holding more regular meetings to keep all staff updated on the current performance of the company. They are clarifying where to focus resources and how to ensure that all customers and clients are given the best possible levels of service. In these sorts of meetings you need to have a careful balance between raising awareness of the potential threats and maintaining confidence in the Senior Management Team. You want to help people focus on maintaining high levels of performance without making them unduly concerned about their job security. However if cuts need to be made, ensure you are explaining the full reasons and allow people to have a say. They may have some good alternative suggestions like job sharing or going part-time.

### **Getting beneath the surface**

We have now seen how the recent shift in the economic context has dramatically changed the motivation of the banks, and there may well be a number of changes going on with the people in your team. The trouble with most motivational patterns and traits is that they are below conscious awareness. You need to make some conscious effort in order to find out what they are.

Some of the key questions you need to be asking your people are:

"What is most important to you about work?"  
"What has to be there?"  
"What really matters to you in your job?"

All managers need to start thinking about what is motivating their people, so they can ensure they are pressing the right buttons to maintain high levels of performance.

As well as checking the above managers need to be asking themselves:

"Have there been any recent changes in their motivation?"  
"What am I going to do to maintain their motivation?"

These questions may seem very simplistic, but the key is knowing how to apply them. When you know what to do with the information you gather, you can build and maintain a strong team that will work together through thick and thin to ensure that your organisation survives and even thrives over the next 9 to 18 months.

If you are in a senior position and managing managers, these questions become even more critical. You need to consider what you are doing to maintain the motivation of your managers. If they aren't able to be effective role models, you can quickly get into deep trouble.

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[David.Klaasen@InspiredWorking.com](mailto:David.Klaasen@InspiredWorking.com)  
[www.InspiredWorking.com](http://www.InspiredWorking.com)