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Leadership & Motivation: Lessons from Prison – Part IV Achievement Motivation

By: Frank Petrock, Ph.D.

The first article in this series on understanding motivation established that the four intrinsic motivational goals of affiliation, power, achievement and security energize and direct our behavior in all the things we do at home and at work. Subsequent articles explored in more depth the motivational goals of Affiliation & Power.

In this edition of the Insight Newsletter we'll examine Achievement Motivation and how it energizes our behavior. Click here to read [Part One — Motivation](#) or here to read [Part Two — Affiliation Motivation](#) or here to read [Part Three — Power Motivation](#).

As I mentioned in the previous articles, I was at one time a warden of a maximum-security prison Readjustment Unit in the early days of my career. Our job was to take those inmates from the main prison that were difficult to manage and return them back to the prison's main population better adjusted — so-to-speak. It was a rare opportunity to learn some fundamental lessons about human motivation and changing organizations to bring the best out of people.

It is sometime hard to believe that a good number of inmates I worked with in the Readjustment Unit had high levels of Achievement Motivation. This is hard to believe because we usually associate Achievement Motivation with people who do good things with their lives. These inmates, like all people high in achievement motivation, had great aspirations of being the best at their chosen fields of specialization, be it assault, breaking and entering, burglary, robbery, armed robbery, dealing drugs, running scams on people, to name a few of their many criminal activities. Unfortunately, or maybe fortunately, what they lacked was expertise and the ability to fulfill their achievement-oriented goals. They also lacked the capacity to learn from their successes and failures and maybe, at times, the intelligence to think things through before proceeding.

For example, this is what played out one day when a new inmate was being escorted by the guards as a new admission to our Readjustment Unit. As the big steel door to the Unit opened to let them in, I asked the guards who was this inmate? Why was he being sent to the Readjustment Unit?

Before they could utter a reply, the inmate looked at me with a snarl on his face, glared at me and said with a hint of condescension in his voice, "I'll tell you who I am. I am the best breaking and entering guy in Newark, that's who the hell I am."

Within a heartbeat I responded, "Bullshit! I think the best breaking and entering guy in Newark is still out there. Look where you are. You can't be that good!"

I guess he, like most of the inmates I worked with over the years, was more delusional rather than being a true high achiever. I tried many times to tell the inmates there was a systems approach to getting things right — Inputs, Process and Outputs. The proper sequence was PLAN, STEAL and GET AWAY. They seemed to always come up short on the front and back end of the process.

Achievement Motivational Goals

Achievement motivation is in many ways the pursuit of perfection. It causes people to perceive excellence as an end in itself and to pay meticulous attention to detail. Consequently, achieving exceptional performance, being the best, and continuously finding new ways to accomplish tasks are never ending quests for high achievement oriented people. Because achievement-oriented people like to

see progress, then plans, timetables, and measures are essential.

High achievers are always in competition with high standards of excellence they set by themselves or those set by others. They can anticipate the obstacles that might block them from meeting these high goals and, when blocked, they'll persist in trying many alternative paths to achieve the goal. It is difficult for them to give up.

High achievement goals are expressed through the following behaviors:

- Setting challenging, but achievable goals
- Taking moderate risks
- Desiring frequent and specific feedback on performance
- Choosing coworkers who are competent over those who are friendly
- Having a strong career orientation
- Desiring personal responsibility
- Liking challenging problems or tasks
- Being patient and persistent
- Arguing over facts and ideas, but not about emotional issues
- Remaining diplomatic in expressing opinions and when disagreeing with others
- Keeping their emotions in check
- Thinking things out before speaking

If achievement is the dominant goal, you can bring out this person's best efforts by:

- Collaboratively setting goals that are measurable, time-specific, challenging and realistic, and moderately risky
- Delegating tasks for which the person has complete responsibility and accountability
- Giving frequent, specific, and descriptive feedback aimed at helping the person to improve performance
- Clearly define the person's job and responsibilities
- Progressively enriching the job with additional responsibility and challenge as they show greater levels of competence
- Provide access to experts, information and resources
- Provide opportunities to learn more
- Provide jobs that require analytical skills
- Give them time to think before asking them to respond
- Being prepared when you meet with them to discuss and issue
- When disagreeing with them stick to the facts

One thing we need to be careful about is thinking that people with high levels of achievement motivation are more effective than people motivated by power or affiliation.

The Negative Side of Achievement Motivation:

It is often difficult to contemplate any thing negative about Achievement Motivation because it has such positive connotations in our culture. After all, most everyone would like to be known as a high achiever. Our parents wanted all of us to be high achievers. We want our children and grandchildren to be high achievers. And, if we have an opportunity to hire people or select people with whom we want on our team, we'll surely want people known as high achievers.

We think this way because we associate the word achievement with accomplishment. Therefore, we conclude that people who are high in Achievement Motivation get things done. Not only do they get things done they get them done better than other people.

This is where you need to be careful. People motivated by affiliation and power also get things done. For example, you could have a team of three people doing

the same job for you — one motivated by power, one by affiliation and the third being achievement motivated. Given that all three are equal in skill, ability and experience, they'll probably do the same high quality job for you. But, they'll do it for different reasons. The power person's reason might be the belief that good performance will result in more freedom, independence or authority. The affiliation-oriented person might perform well to ensure continued high levels of appreciation and liking. Finally, the achievement-oriented person could be driven by his or her desire for perfection, or to surpass the performance of others.

Therefore, do not automatically conclude that achievement oriented people are better than other people. They might be better for certain types of jobs that require high levels of meticulous concentration over long periods of time and perseverance in the face of numerous failures, like my former clients at Bell Labs.

Now, in regard to the negative aspects of achievement-oriented people, one is that they are overly concerned about achievement. They, however, may be so overly concerned with their own personal achievement that they may not be willing to share success with others. Unfortunately, they may cover up their mistakes and be motivated at times to take credit for the work of others.

When people with high levels of achievement motivation become managers, they have a strong tendency to micro-manage the work of their staff, want to know everything that is going on and be overly critical of things other's consider trivial. As managers they may also become so engrossed in the details that they lose sight of the overall objective, do the work themselves, not delegate and neglect their managerial responsibilities.

High achievement oriented people also may be unwilling to take risks and try new things for fear it might jeopardize their track record of success. They might become so fearful of failure that they shy away from accepting challenging assignments and may engage in lengthy arguments about the unrealistic nature of the goals, wanting more time, money and/or staff to get the job done.

Finally, to their detriment, achievement-oriented people may see relationships and emotions in work settings as unimportant. Therefore, they may neglect relationship building, the politics of the organization and be insensitive to the feelings of others because they are highly oriented towards facts, data and logic. Along with this and their high need for personal success, they may have difficulty working in teams, often preferring to work alone. After all, have you ever seen a picture of Albert Einstein in a team?

In summary, the goal of achievement, like affiliation and power, can motivate both desired and undesired behavior. The desire for achievement and perfection can ultimately propel humans to the far reaches of our galaxy, conquer debilitating diseases and invent technologies that transform the quality of life for everyone. Above all, achievement motivation can encourage us to dream the impossible dream.

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Click any link here to read [Part One — Motivation](#) , [Part Two — Affiliation Motivation](#) or [Part Three — Power Motivation](#).