

SPARK

THE MAGAZINE FOR CHANGE MANAGEMENT, LEARNING & TALENT DEVELOPMENT.



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THE BRAINS OF HIGH PERFORMANCE

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Numbers or people?

Establishing measurable objectives and key results (OKRs) is essential to defining and achieving high-performance. But we should not forget it is people that do the tasks required to reach OKRs, so organizational effectiveness requires people-leading effectiveness. Unlike numbers, people are emotional and quirky and usually unaware of their own motivations, so understanding why they expend emotional labor is essential. You could ask them, but this is often a fool's errand because commitment to excellence is an unconscious emotional response well-outside of people's awareness.

HOW CAN YOU MANAGE PEOPLE IF YOU CANNOT UNDERSTAND THEIR TRUE MOTIVATIONS?

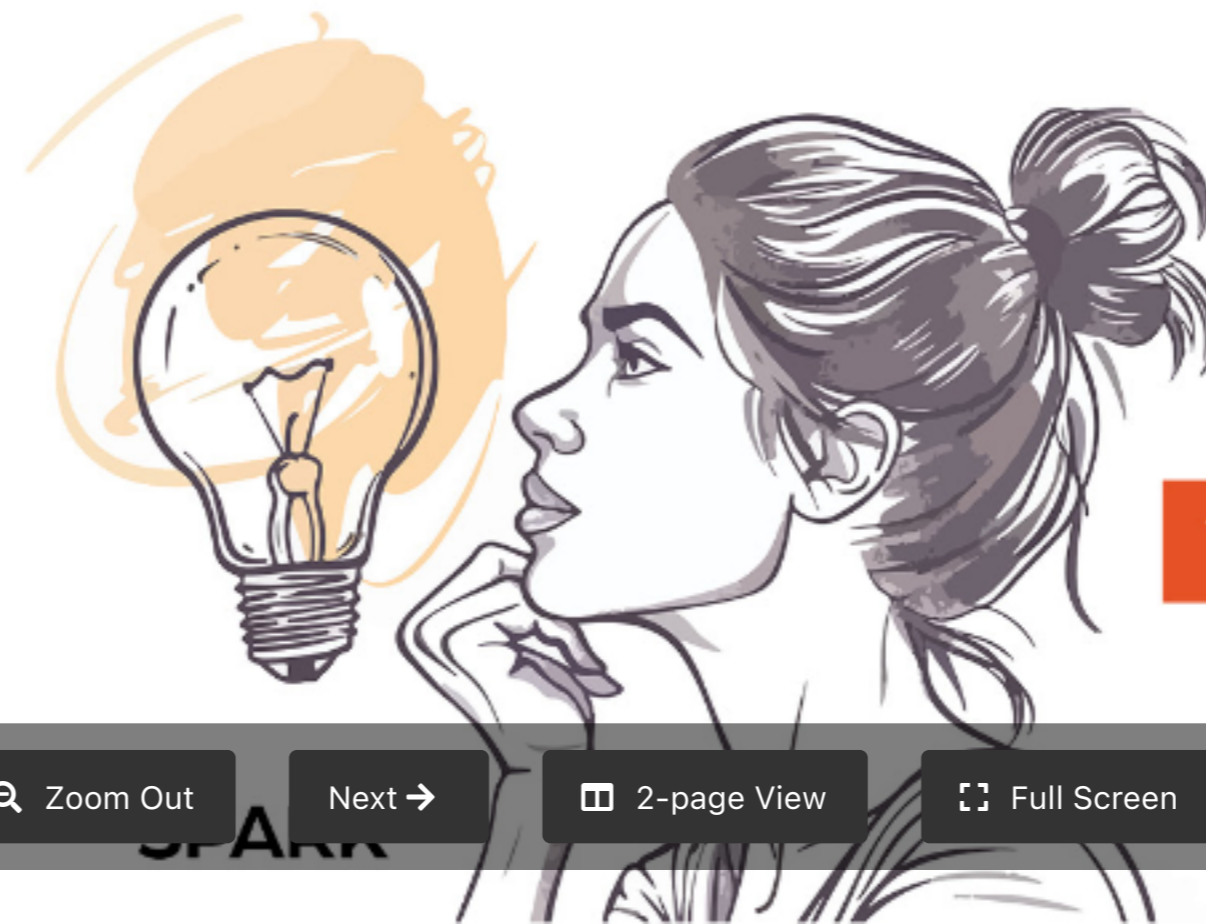
This leads to the fundamental question: How can you manage people if you cannot understand their true motivations?

Behavior change requires effort

Policies to improve performance ultimately must change employee behaviors. Behavior change is difficult because the brain must invest metabolic resources to establish new pathways that produce new behaviors. The brain is an energy-intensive organ and manages its high overhead cost by using energy-efficient activation of well-established networks. This default brain activation manifests as habits. Habit change only occurs when objectives are communicated and understood as important and needed new behaviors are repeated for several months. Yes, months are typically needed to override default activation in the brain.

What communications does the brain value highly?

The process of establishing new habits can be accelerated when the communication of new goals is highly valued by the brain. Measuring the value of experiences is one way the brain saves resources-the brain does not devote much processing power to communications that appear to have low value. Such missives do not fall on deaf ears, they fall on deaf neurons. Knowing that high value communications



influence behaviors is only useful if one can figure how to measure what the brain values.

LOW VALUE COMMUNICATIONS DO NOT FALL ON DEAF EARS, THEY FALL ON DEAF NEURONS

Research from my behavioral neuroscience laboratory over the past 15 years identified the network the brain uses to value social-emotional experiences, including communications. I named this network Immersion because peak Immersion experiences are enjoyed, remembered, and acted on as people are pulled into them. The foundational research that led to the discovery of Immersion was funded by the US Department of Defense. My group was under contract to identify combinations of brain signals that would accurately and consistently predict human behavior after a message or experience. We discovered that the brain does what the brain values. Immersion is a one-second frequency combination of neural signals optimized to predict what people do, not what they intend or feel. It is influencing doing that leads to greater organizational effectiveness.

The Immersion Network

I brought Immersion out of the lab and into the world by co-founding a software platform that enables anybody to measure what the brain values in real-time using distributed neuroscience. Distributed neuroscience is a recent business innovation that utilizes everyday wearable devices, such as smartwatches, along with algorithms in the cloud, to capture brain activity in real-time. After measuring over 50,000 brains, I was able to reverse-engineer how to craft

communications that result in more doing (for more details, see my book).

Influencing Behavior

This method has the acronym SIRTA so you can be certain that you'll influence behavior. The steps are:

- Staging: Ensure the targets of communication are psychologically safe so that they have the neural bandwidth to process shared information
- Immersion: Use a narrative arc which is the most effective way to sustain the metabolic investment in Immersion, focusing on human scale stories in which the characters experience authentic emotions.
- Relevance: Immersion is higher when the narrative is relevant to the audience; there is no one best story for everyone
- Target: Identify the superfans for your initiative and ask them to help you reinforce your message because they are so passionate they will work to help you
- Action: Have a clear call to action; this will have a greater impact if it occurs at a peak Immersion point in your narrative.

Humans are rare in that our social brains value working on projects with unrelated others. Value measurement is how the brain decides when to invest the metabolic resources to reach peak performance. The app my group developed, called SIX, enables anyone to measure what the brain values in real-time so users know for sure what people truly care about.