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ARTICLE
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Many leaders have crossed the first hurdles of moving their teams remote: ensuring colleagues have set up their tech tools, defined their processes, and permanently logged into their video conference accounts.

But this is just the first step towards creating an effective work environment for remote employees. The next critical question we must ask is: How do you motivate people who work from home?

This question is important now because, during crises such as Covid-19, people often tend to focus more on tactical work — answering the right number of tickets, or following the approved project plan — rather than adapting to solve the bigger, newer problems the business may be facing.

But some teams rise above the rest in times of turmoil, regardless of the challenges. They win market share. They earn life-long customer love. They keep their productivity high, or higher. In other words, they adapt. Though the academic research on remote productivity is mixed, with some saying it declines while others promise it increases, our research suggests that your success will depend on how you do it.

First, it's important to note that right now, working from home is likely to reduce motivation.

Between 2010 and 2015, we surveyed more than 20,000 workers around the world, analyzed more than 50 major companies, and conducted scores of experiments to figure out what motivates people, including how much working from home plays into the equation.

How to Measure Total Motivation

We survey employees of an organization, asking six questions–one for each motive. Each question determines how much of each motive a person feels in their work, on a scale between 1 (strongly disagree) and 7 (strongly agree). Then we use the following formula to calculate the individual's total motivation, which is then used in calculating that of the organization:

(10 x the score for play) + (5 x purpose) + (1 2/3 x potential) – (1 2/3 x emotional pressure) – (5 x economic pressure) – (10 x inertia)

We determined the weighting of each motive by conducting regressions between each motive and performance across industries, and then simplified to build a simple metric that ranges from -100 to 100. The weights demonstrate that the closer the motive is to the work itself, the more it drives performance.

You can measure your ToMo or your team's ToMo using a survey on our site.

When we measured the total motivation of people who worked from home versus the office, we found that working from home was less motivating. Even worse, when people had no *choice* in where they worked, the differences were enormous. Total motivation dropped 17 points, the equivalent of moving from one of the best to one of the most miserable cultures in their industries.

Employees Who Work Remotely Are Less Motivated

In measuring motivation, employees who worked remotely were less motivated, and those who had no choice about it were the least motivated of all.

Note: Total motivation is based on a survey of 9,700 U.S. workers. Respondents were asked six questions about their motives for work; their answers were assigned a value using a 1–7 scale. The results were synthesized on a scale of –100 to +100 points. Motives are weighted according to the impact they have on performance.
Source: *Primed to Perform*, by Lindsay McGregor and Neel Doshi

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We identified three negative motivators that often lead to reduced work performance. These have likely spiked in light of the coronavirus pandemic. *Emotional pressure* and *economic pressure* are soaring as people worry about losing their jobs, paying their rent, and protecting their health. The barrage of news, questions on how to safely get groceries, and fears for relatives are deeply distressing. *Inertia* for work is bound to increase as people wonder if there's a point in even trying.

We also identified three positive motivators that often lead to increased work performance. We believe these are in danger of disappearing in easy-to-miss ways during the current situation. *Play*, the motive that most boosts performance, could decrease if it continues to becomes harder for people to get things done from home. For example, people may miss the joy of problem-solving with a colleague, or the ease of making a decision when everyone is in one room. *Purpose* could also decline with team's decreasing visibility into their impact on clients or colleagues, especially if no one is there to remind them. Lastly, *potential* could decline if people can't gain access to colleagues that teach and develop them.

If business leaders don't move to change this, shifts in people's motivation will ultimately lead to a decline in adaptability, quality, and creativity just at the time when the post-cornavirus recovery will require productivity growth.

What Can Business Leaders Do?

When a colleague of ours was diagnosed with cancer, our first instinct was to reduce her work so she could focus on her illness. To be sure, there were times she needed 100% rest. But we quickly realized that we had taken away a major source of her play and purpose. Her work was a much needed break from the anxiety-inducing news she received each day.

This was also true for the firms we worked with during the financial crisis. We found that analysts trying to shore up the markets had the highest motivation levels of their careers during 18-hour work days. Military veterans we interviewed talked about their highest-stakes days in the same way. For the same reasons today, you see that rather than sit at home, many citizens are organizing volunteer bike courier clubs. Fitness instructors are leading classes from their rooftops or streaming them for free online. Academics are running virtual classrooms and workshops with their students.

It's important for leaders to follow suit and remember that work can deliver a much needed boost to their teams, even when there's little choice involved in their work-from-home situation.

The key is resisting the temptation to make work tactical only through strict processes, rules, and procedures. While some degree of boundaries and guidelines help people move quickly, too many create a vicious spiral of demotivation. In such cases, people tend to stop problem-solving and thinking creatively, and instead, do the bare minimum.

If you want your teams to be engaged in their work, you have to make their work engaging.

The most powerful way to do this is to give people the opportunity to experiment and solve problems that really matter. These problems won't be the same for every team or organization. They may not even be easy to identify at first. Your employees will need your help to do this. Ask them: Where can we deliver amazing service to our customers? What's broken that our team can fix? What will drive growth even in a time of fear? Why are these problems critical, valuable, and interesting?

Today, we're collaborating with teams across the globe that are seizing this way of working. A pharmaceutical company's clinical trials team is experimenting with ways they can help hospitals prioritize trials and maintain safety during this crisis. Teams across the tech unicorn, Flexport, are generating ideas on how to ship critical goods around the world, keep their clients' supply chains running, and share tips to keep their suppliers in business. An insurance company is testing ways to prioritize their skyrocketing internal chat volumes and process claims in timely ways. In the teams we work with, we've seen productivity remain high, and in some cases, improve.
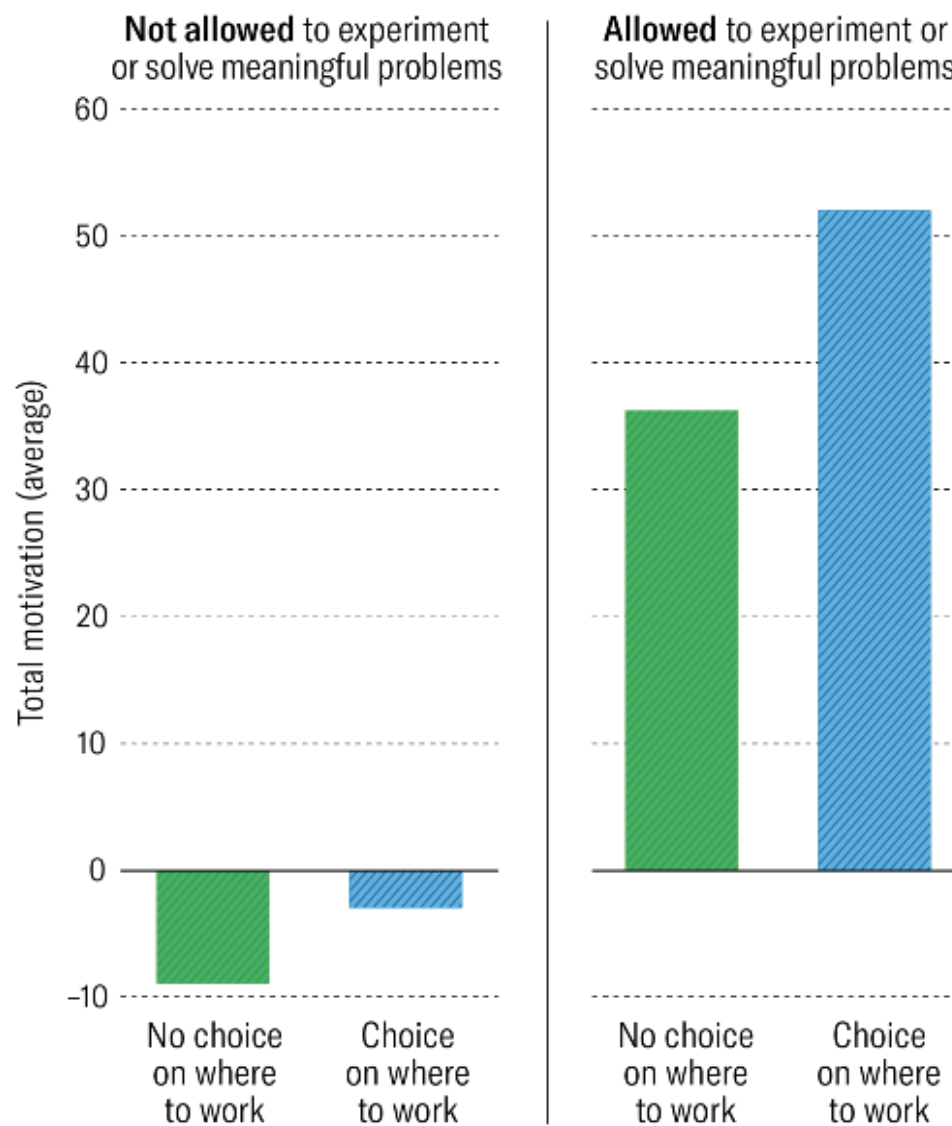
What has made them so successful is that they are not relying solely on giant new programs or approaches that need CEO approval. They are simply finding ways to make sure every single person on their teams feels like they have a challenge that they can help solve. In your own cases, this challenge can range from something as small as how to better greet customers or accommodate new schedules to something as big as moving your previously in-person business online.

Taking This Back to Your Teams

This all may sound great in theory, but if you're wondering how to start, you're not alone. Few organizations have been taught how to identify when and where it is OK to experiment with new ways of working — despite the fact that experimentation results in a 45-point increase in employee motivation.

Employees Who Are Empowered to Experiment Are More Motivated

Giving workers the freedom to experiment and solve meaningful problems in their roles leads to higher motivation, regardless of where they do the work itself.

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Given today's challenges with Covid-19, there's a simple set of recommendations we give to teams who are working remotely.

First, what you measure is the single strongest signal to your people of what you care about. If you want to show them that you care about their motivation, you can measure it using our online tool or using your own preferred survey tool. Then, have a discussion with them about what might be driving their motivation up or down, and what would be helpful to maximize their motivation and experimentation in the weeks to come.

You might ask questions like: How is the current situation affecting you at the moment? What tips do people have for how to motivate yourself and find play and purpose in the current environment? This is your time to listen and create a safe environment in which everyone can talk.

Second, make sure your weekly routines are not focused only on the tactical work – the concrete plans you need to execute, like the tickets you need to answer, or boxes you need to check. Half of your week should also be focused on adaptive performance, where there is no plan to follow, but instead, experimentation and problem solving.

Generally, we recommend a simple rhythm for remote teams.

Monday: Hold a performance cycle meeting for the team that covers the following.

1. What impact did we have last week and what did we learn?
2. What commitments do we have this week? Who is on point for each?
3. How can we help each other with this week's commitments?
4. What are the areas where we should experiment to improve performance this week?
5. What experiments will we run, and who is on point for each?

Tuesday-Thursday: Have at least one individual meeting with each of your team members. To help motivate your employees, focus on helping them tackle challenges that are a slight stretch. You can also coordinate small group meetings in which employees can collaborate on the week's experiments and tackle problems together.

Friday: Focus on reflection. Showcase and gather input on the experiments of the week. This might include presentations from project groups during which team members share metrics and insights. It's also important to check in on each other's motivation and progress. As the leader, set the example by asking people how they are feeling: Where did they struggle with their motivation, and where did they thrive?

We know that this approach works because we used it during the financial crisis. When most financial services teams were doubling down on rules and processes, we helped thousands of people working in mortgage and home equity shops identify the problems they could solve, innovate, and adapt.

Their motivation skyrocketed, and they outperformed the status quo by 200%, finding creative win-win solutions for the financial institutions they worked at and the customers who were in danger of losing their homes.

As we saw in the 2008, it is possible for teams to experiment and adapt. We also saw that it is possible for teams to freeze under pressure and recede. Make it your mission to achieve the former and achieve greater levels of growth and productivity as a remote team than as an in-person team. This is a challenge that can keep you energized and experimenting long after this crisis is behind us.

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