

# Review of self-determination theory and its application in coaching, instruction, and leadership

## Abstract

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) is a framework that explains intrinsic motivation and purposefully designing organizations to promote human flourishing.<sup>1</sup> Leaders who develop the basic psychological needs of autonomy, competency, and relatedness lay foundations for consistent performance.<sup>2</sup> Often unknown and underutilized, theoretical frameworks give coaches guidelines for informing their decisions, aligning the organization, and promoting well-being among their athletes. This article reviews SDT and its application in coaching, instruction, and leadership practice.

**Keywords:** self-determination, coaching, instruction, leadership

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## Introduction

Performance was once thought of as something instantaneously turned on and off. Athletes were expected to be at their best when engaged in training or competition. Away from sport, it was falsely believed that athletes automatically disconnect themselves from the psychological and physical pressures of achievement. Recent research has shown that humans, athletes especially, are a confluence of many different identities influencing their functioning as a person and performer.<sup>3</sup> Unsurprisingly, athletes stripped of their basic psychological needs as humans first might fail to reach their full potential. Coaches and leaders who understand motivation and intentionally construct organizations to espouse healthy innate psychological principles can increase individual and group performance and overall happiness.<sup>1,2,4</sup>

## Motivation

The internal drive to overcome challenges and obstacles is often the defining trait in successful individuals. Capacity to battle through adversity, demonstrate resiliency, and exhibit grit separates excellence from mediocrity. Many individuals desire achievement; however, not all have the internal motivation to finish tasks and accomplish goals. Naturally, humans are active, curious, and interested in learning new concepts, ideas, and skills.<sup>5</sup> Leaders who design fluid environments that promote autonomy, competence, and relatedness can facilitate the pursuit of goals while promoting human flourishing.<sup>1,2</sup>

Self-determination theory (SDT) posits that motivation can be divided into two spheres of influence intrinsic and extrinsic motivation.<sup>1,2</sup> Intrinsic motivation is described as the search for unique and challenging activities with the intention to explore and learn.<sup>6</sup> People who are intrinsically motivated energetically engage in tasks because they find the activity genuinely enjoyable and are unconcerned with incentives. Conversely, extrinsic motivations are external rewards dependent on outcomes sometimes out of the participant's control.<sup>6</sup> Motivators such as compensation, social status, and material goods usually effective in the short term can lead to burnout, stagnation, and quitting.<sup>7</sup> Benevolent organizations rooted in the inherent psychological needs of SDT autonomy, competence, and relatedness synchronizes meaningful experiences through constructing positive environments, enhancing sustainability, and increasing the performance of its members.<sup>8</sup>

## Autonomy

According to Di Domenico and Ryan,<sup>6</sup> intrinsically motivated humans experience interest and excitement in vastly different quantities than stress and monotony. The heightened state of inquiry encourages new experiences and continual advancement towards task completion and simultaneously impedes plateauing.<sup>6</sup> Limiting motivational barriers has been found to stimulate predispositions towards mastery and reduce anxiety when chasing passions.<sup>6</sup> Contrary to intrinsic motivation, extrinsic motivation has been found to thwart naturally occurring enthusiasm by solely focusing on external incentives.<sup>9</sup> Once the novelty of reward expires, interest, and effort depreciate significantly.<sup>10</sup> This phenomenon has been demonstrated in studies measuring improvement in healthy behaviors such as diet, physical activity, and weight management.<sup>10</sup>

Autonomy is the freedom and ability to make independent decisions. This is one of the critical components of SDT and intrinsic motivation. Human beings were once nomadic animals who moved about freely exercising the innate human desire for choice, independence, and sovereignty.<sup>3,11</sup> Absence of autonomy can affect a person's psyche through fear of losing identity.<sup>3</sup> Feelings of adulthood inefficacy debilitates functioning in multiple domains because losing personal agency jars childlike helplessness compounding unhappiness.<sup>3</sup>

Autonomy can be encouraged and fostered by helping athletes establish goals, hope, and optimism.<sup>12</sup> Facilitating the creation of a positive future engages the athlete in ownership and control over their life.<sup>3</sup> An environment emphasizing independence supports and develops the athlete's decision-making skills through dynamic experimentation.<sup>9</sup> A defining trait of intrinsic motivation is engaging in an activity because one genuinely finds it exciting and satisfying.<sup>6</sup> Empowering athletes to determine their destiny gives them greater joy in an activity and increases motivation because goals are self-determined.<sup>13</sup> Control over one's work increases enjoyment and engagement and provokes new ideas and creativity.<sup>14</sup>

## Competency

Sovereignty gives an athlete ownership and accountability to pursue competency in their beloved sport. Intrinsically motivated people are energized by interests and the mastery of skills, concepts, and ideas.<sup>6</sup> The quest for competency starts with accepting that expertise in any field is a process and comes with pitfalls, setbacks, and failures.<sup>15</sup> An athlete must learn to love developing their craft and

understand progress towards attainment will be anything but linear.<sup>15</sup> Despite the challenges of learning a new skill, people in relentless pursuit of competency move along the achievement continuum persisting through obstructions.<sup>2</sup>

Intrinsically motivated people see tasks differently than those who are extrinsically motivated. A study conducted by Moller et al.,<sup>10</sup> found groups who received performance contingent rewards consistently had lower levels of intrinsic motivation than those who were given no benefit at all. Findings also linked the distribution of external rewards to lower baseline levels of intrinsic motivation than prior to the experiment. In fact, once the financial compensation expired, the rewarded positive behaviors subsided quickly. The results postulated that extrinsic motivators infringed on free will, autonomy, and distracted participants from enjoying the activity.<sup>10</sup> Upholding the idea that perseverance wanes once joyous activities are incentivized, proficiency derails before attainment is possible. Keeping an athlete motivated daily, particularly through an entire season, is one of the most difficult challenges for a coach. Unpredictability and chaos during competition are bound to bring setbacks and failures. In an unyielding quest for competency, positive psychology practitioners adopt a growth mindset when undertaking arduous tasks.<sup>4</sup> According to Dr. Martin Seligman,<sup>16</sup> positive psychology develops safe learning conditions by emphasizing strengths, not weaknesses, builds on the good while repairing the worst, and makes living more fulfilling. Maintaining a positive outlook in conjunction with self-derived goals eases mental friction and improves concentration. Positive coaching focuses on the athlete's progress towards mastery instead of failures by changing cognition. Reframing challenges alleviates the athlete's outside pressure and allowing them to pursue goals in a supportive environment.<sup>12</sup> Changing the athlete's relationship to failure, an opportunity for learning and growth, decreases stress and anxiety significantly while increasing enjoyment.<sup>6</sup>

## Relatedness

Life is most enjoyable when chasing shared passions with people you love. In a study conducted by Trenshaw et al.,<sup>8</sup> the researchers redesigned the engineering curriculum to incorporate the psychological needs of SDT autonomy, competency, and relatedness. In post research interviews, the students overwhelmingly cited relatedness as the most salient need in fostering their motivation and enjoyment of the course.<sup>8</sup> Surprisingly enough, it was not group/teamwork that provided the graduate students with feelings of relatedness and connectivity. Students reported that shared vulnerability and the relationships built around common goals were what made them feel united.<sup>8</sup>

Building trust, shared vulnerability, and a culture of forgiveness is one of the most challenging tasks for any leader or coach. Developing an environment where players are free to pursue individual and team goals increases vulnerability and commitment.<sup>17</sup> Leaders devoted to psychological safety promote a culture of forgiveness when mistakes happen.<sup>16,17</sup> Celebrating mistakes encourages vulnerability and cohesion within teams while advocating for mastery.<sup>17</sup> When athletes understand they are safe, effort increases, and the fear of failure decreases, thus promoting mastery and autonomy.<sup>17</sup>

Relatedness and vulnerability unite groups and boost team morale.<sup>17</sup> Connected athletes are more likely to trust that teammates can make up for their weaknesses without feeling burdensome to the group. This confidence supports risk-taking, new ideas, and increased autonomy and lessens stress and anxiety related to performance.<sup>13</sup> When athletes are adequately supported, stimulated, and encouraged to make independent decisions to better their performance, intrinsic motivation is at its height, and limitations evaporate.

## Conclusion

Intrinsic motivation is an integral component of high-performance and overall well-being. Naturally, human beings are driven, inquisitive, and seek to learn new skills and concepts. Through the use of extrinsic motivational factors- money, notoriety, and accolades- performers are discouraged over time from giving their best effort. Following the lose framework of SDT with purposefully designed settings, coaches stimulate athletes' natural tendencies towards mastery and promote flourishing. Instituting procedures that encourage autonomy, competency, and relatedness, athletes can reach their full potential while concurrently enjoying the process of mastering their craft.

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## Conflicts of interest

The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest.

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