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## A High Flyer?

Last month TED (Technology, Entertainment & Design) posted a new series of talks, among which was a presentation given by Dan Pink on the science of motivation. Pink, who was formerly Al Gore's speech writer, and who unintentionally does a remarkably good imitation of Gore, uses research to suggest that companies routinely misuse rewards. He references a 2005 Federal Reserve study which finds, "Once a task called for 'even rudimentary cognitive skill' a larger reward 'led to poorer performance.'" Pink summarizes his take on motivation this way: "To my mind, a new operating system for our businesses revolves around three elements: Autonomy – the desire to direct our own lives [and actions]; Mastery – the desire to get better and better at something that matters; and Purpose – the yearning to do what we do in the service of something larger than ourselves."

## Our Take

Strictly speaking TED may not be classified as the business press, but it's hard to believe any successful leader *doesn't* watch these power-packed, 20-minute talks, so I'm giving it a bye. After presenting his triumvirate of motivators, Pink holds forth on Autonomy.\* However, I believe Purpose is the most powerful of his three factors.

Employees' desire for Purpose – the yearning to do what we do in the service of something larger than ourselves – corresponds nicely with findings emerging from my two years of research among roughly 70 CEOs. The very best, most consistently successful leaders utilize what I'll call for now the Kite Approach. Kite isn't an acronym or an allusion to a mostly-forgotten golfing great; rather, a kite is the rolled up bundle tangled in rotting string and cobwebs, stashed next to other neglected kids' toys in the garage. Unfurled, it shows how to design a Purpose which will motivate new levels of productivity and success.

**Constant Pull** - A high-flying kite soars above you, tugging you upward in its constant quest for greater heights. Your company's Purpose must have a similar draw, consistently pulling employees in the direction that produces

greater organizational and individual achievement.

**Uplifting** – That constant pull on the string is upwards, into cleaner, crisper air. The Purpose which will motivate your troops connects them in some way to a better place. They need to know that pursuing the Purpose leads to a world which is somehow better off for their efforts. Interestingly, the world can be as narrowly defined as “our team” and better off can be as pedestrian as “happier at work.” That said, the broader the “world” and the more noble the “better off” the more powerful the Purpose becomes, *as long as the tie between the employee and the purpose is clear.*

**Simple** – A great kite is simple. A five year-old can grasp the concept immediately and make a convincing drawing which her best friend understands. A great Purpose is as easily understood and communicated. Meandering, all-encompassing mission statements and visions may look good on paper, but they crumble into organizational obscurity and irrelevance. In contrast, a handful of words, a spare sketch or a 15-second story can be pervasive and persistent.

**Fun** – Other than Ben Franklin’s mythical electricity experiment, kites are flown for fun. Even my unsuccessful attempt to replicate Ben’s daring feat with 250 feet of string and my parents’ house key was a joyful exercise. Your Purpose needs an element of enjoyment in it. Granted, different people enjoy different things (how else to explain candidates for public office), but how you articulate and pursue your Purpose helps determine whether your employees can’t wait to get to work or can’t wait to leave.

**Easy to See** – It’s not difficult to tell whether your kite is dancing in the air or ignominiously planted nose-first in the ground. Can everyone throughout your organization instantly tell how well the company is achieving its Purpose? Is it obvious when to let out more string or run like hell to keep the darn thing in the air? Your Purpose is only as powerful as your commitment to constant communication and your employees’ ability to always know where you are and what, fundamentally, is needed to move the Purpose ahead.

**Uncontested** – Ever have a kite-flying party as a kid? Two words capture the scene: tangled mess. The desire to toss additional Purposes into the mix can be irresistible. Have we communicated our Vision? Our Goals? Our Values? Our Principles? What about our customer target or our quest for increased productivity or our commitment to training and development? Tangled mess. Trust in the power of one overarching, uncontested Purpose.

Whether you are leading a team, a division, a company or your staff of one, a well-designed Purpose delivers higher motivation and improved performance. To get your kite flying higher and stronger, get some help on the ground. Email or call me:

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