The Pathway to High Performance

An interview with author DANIEL PINK
Executive Summary

PDK INTERVIEWED AUTHOR DANIEL PINK about how the ideas in his book, *Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us*, affect teaching and learning. In *Drive*, Pink argues that the carrot-and-stick motivational system, which works well for simple, straightforward tasks, does not work well and often backfires when it comes to tasks that are conceptual, creative, and complex. Motivation for these types of tasks—which are what today’s students will be doing when they enter the workforce—requires autonomy, mastery, and purpose. Autonomy is our desire to direct our own lives and to have some agency and control over what we do. Mastery is our desire to get better and better at something, and purpose is our desire to do what we do in the service of something larger than ourselves.

In this interview, Pink discusses how autonomy, mastery, and purpose play a role in motivating teachers and students to improve education. He offers some possibilities for offering more autonomy, mastery, and purpose to students and teachers to improve teaching and learning. He discusses controversial issues, such as pay for performance and homework, as well as offering suggestions for motivating students who don’t want to do anything. He also discusses how intrinsic motivation and accountability might be reconciled.

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PDK: Since Drive is about motivation, could you start by telling us what motivated you to write about this topic?

DAN: The main motivator for me was curiosity and some readers’ questions. In the previous book, A Whole New Mind, I made the argument that in business we’re moving from a world of logical, linear, sequential, left brain skills to one of artistic, empathic, big picture, non-routine right brain skills. People started asking me how we get folks to do this sort of work and how we motivate people to do more right brain tasks, and I didn’t have a clue. I knew there was pretty extensive literature on human motivation, so I started looking at that and looking at what behavioral scientists had found out about motivation over the years, and I was surprised on two fronts. Number one, there was a treasure trove of research out there. And the second surprising thing is that what the research revealed ran counter to a lot of the things that I believed about human behavior and what makes us tick.

PDK: In Drive, you refer to Motivation 2.0. Could you explain what that is and why you say it’s not working anymore?

DAN: In this book, I use the metaphor of the computer operating system to help understand what’s going on in the world of organizations and work. A
computer operating system is essentially protocols, assumptions, suppositions, and instructions that run beneath the programs that we use every day. We don’t really think about it all that much.

I think society’s business cultures have operating systems as well, and a lot of the economic arrangements that we have sit atop a certain set of assumptions about human behavior. So let’s go to the first assumption about human behavior. All of us have a biological drive. We eat when we’re hungry, we drink when we’re thirsty, we have sex to satisfy our carnal urges. That biological drive is part of what it is to be human. It’s not all it is to be human, obviously. But in our early days, 50,000 years ago, that was essentially the societal operating system. It was about survival. So let’s call that Motivation 1.0.

Motivation 2.0 is an upgrade from that. Relying entirely on our biological drive, on that survival drive, has its limits. It’s not a very good way to organize economic transactions. If you’re doing business with people who aren’t in your family, your tribe, or your clan, you need another sort of mechanism for that, and that’s where our second drive comes in. Human beings respond very well in most cases to rewards and punishments in our environment. If you reward something, you get more of that behavior, and if you punish something, you typically get less of that behavior. So we had an economic operating system, Motivation 2.0, which was built on that presumption about human behavior. And it actually worked really well. It was a colossal success. It helped fuel the Industrial Revolution.

My argument is that a motivational operating system built almost entirely on that reward and punishment drive no longer works, and the reason for that goes back to the science. The science shows that motivating people with what you might think of as if/then rewards (if you do this, then you get that) can be very effective for simple, straightforward tasks where you march down a set of rules and de-
liver a right answer. However, the science is very clear that if you’re asking people to do work that isn’t that routine, that requires conceptual and creative thinking and has some degree of complexity, then if/then motivators don’t work very well and they often backfire.

What makes me irritated in a way is that when we see them demonstrably not work, our response isn’t to say, well, wait a second, maybe there’s something wrong with this technique. Instead, we say we’re not doing it enough, let’s up the reward, let’s stiffen the punishment, and people will respond. It’s really taking us down this path that I think is fundamentally misguided.

The reason to do this is not to be soft-hearted about it or to be nicer about it. The reason to do it is because the science says that if you really want high performance, particularly on these 21st-century tasks, those old 19th-century motivators aren’t going to get you there. We need to fundamentally rethink things, not to be nicer and kinder, but to be more effective and more productive. I think this approach has the ancillary benefit of being more humane, but I think it also has a very hard-headed benefit of being much more effective, much more productive, and will actually lead us to the sort of accountability that many people, including myself, think is essential.

If you buy the argument that we’re moving to a world where people have to rely on a much broader suite of abilities, a much deeper sense of synthesis and boundary crossing, multi-disciplinariness, empathy, big picture thinking, and inventiveness, then you can’t use the same motivators because the science is crystal clear that the Motivation 2.0 techniques don’t work for this kind of task. What we really need is to get out of this reliance on this old motivational operating system and upgrade to what the science tells us is a more effective form, which is a motivational operating system built much more on autonomy, mastery, and purpose. That’s Motivation 3.0.
Could you tell us more about autonomy, mastery, and purpose and why they’re important?

Sure. The idea is that for simple, rule-based, routine tasks, carrot-and-stick motivators work fine. But for more complicated, complex tasks, they don’t work so well, and autonomy, mastery, and purpose work better. Autonomy is our desire to be self-directed, to direct our own lives and to have some agency and control over what we do. Mastery is our desire to get better and better at something, to make progress at something. And finally, purpose is our desire to do what we do in the service of something larger than ourselves. The science indicates that these three motivators are what really lead to enduring motivation for most tasks, but especially for the more complicated things that the folks in school today are going to be doing when they get into the workforce.

What do you think would help educators and parents really understand the ideas in *Drive* and make them want to make changes in how we educate our youth?

The big thing is getting beyond the folklore of what really motivates people into the science of what motivates people.

I also think people need to make assumptions about others that are similar to the assumptions they make about themselves. In business especially, there’s a belief among managers that people are fundamentally inert, that if they didn’t have a carrot dangling in front of them or a stick they’re being threatened with, they would just sit there and do nothing. And what’s curious about that is that no one ever believes that about himself or herself. They only believe it about other people. I don’t think that human beings are fundamentally passive and inert. I think that we’re fundamentally active and engaged. I’ve yet to see a two year old or a four year old who’s not actively engaged, who isn’t curious about the world. That is our default setting, to use another computer metaphor.
I think if we start with the assumption that human nature is to be active and engaged, that takes us to very different places, in our business and even in our schools. The other thing is I think we’ve gone overboard on trying to get compliance. But we don’t want kids who are compliant, we want kids who are engaged. Engagement comes from self-direction. And without encouraging the ethic of self-direction among our kids, we’re doing them a severe disservice.

**Motivation 3.0 for Teachers**

**PDK:** What you’ve told us so far seems to be contrary to the notion of pay for performance, and that’s another thing you discuss in your book. However, some people are advocating that maybe teachers should be compensated on a pay-for-performance model. Would you like to explain how it might backfire and propose a better solution?

**DAN:** Well, a few years ago I thought pay for performance was a good idea. I based that belief on the assumption that I had at that time that these kinds of incentives lead to better performance. And the evidence does not show that. The evidence, in some ways, contradicts that.

I think there are a few things you have to do with regard to pay. The first thing is that money is an important motivator. People have to be paid enough. If people aren’t being paid enough, if they feel like they’re being treated unfairly, and if they can’t support their families, you’re not going to have motivation. This talk about this third drive that we have, this drive to do things because they’re interesting, valuable, and make a contribution, doesn’t even get into the conversation, so you’ve got to pay people enough.

Beyond that, there’s relatively little evidence that more money leads to better performance or greater satisfaction at work. I think it ends up being very complicated in the world of teaching. Let’s say that...
I think that a better approach, even though it’s not perfect, is to raise the base pay of teachers. We were able to tie teachers’ salaries to standardized test scores. I think that is a recipe for turning classrooms into test prep academies. I think teachers will rationally respond to that incentive and do everything that they can to make sure that kids do well on tests. But I don’t think there’s a perfect alignment, to put it mildly, between training kids to deliver the right answers on multiple choice tests and kids actually learning anything. So I think that’s not going to work. In some ways, I think the incentive would work: If you hinge teachers’ salaries to standardized test results, I think the standardized test results are going to go up. But I don’t think that kids are going to learn any more, and I think there are going to be all kinds of other collateral damage along the way.

The second way to do pay for performance for teachers would be to have the building principal decide. The teachers I talk to don’t like that because as enlightened as most building principals are, you still have politics, favoritism, and perceptions of unfairness, so I think that could open a pretty nasty can of worms.

There’s a third possibility. Let’s say that we develop a whole range of metrics for teachers. We base it on standardized test scores, continuing education, peer evaluations, and student evaluations. I don’t think that’s necessarily a terrible idea. I think it becomes much harder to game the system. What concerns me is that it puts schools—which are already overburdened with so many mandates from federal and state governments—in the business of monitoring and measuring teachers all the time.

I think that a better approach, even though it’s not perfect, is to raise the base pay of teachers. I don’t think teachers get paid enough. I think you raise the base pay of teachers and you make it easier to get rid of the bad teachers. I think by raising the base pay of teachers, you help take the issue of money off the table so that teachers aren’t economically insecure and they’re not thinking about money. I want teachers thinking about kids’ learning. I don’t want...
them thinking about a $500 bonus. And let’s say that some portion of teachers, like some portion of any profession, are complete duds. Make it easier to get rid of bad teachers, and I think you have a much greater fairness.

It’s a much simpler solution to raise the base pay of teachers and to make it easier to get rid of the bad teachers. I think that’s a pretty fair bargain that’s going to do a lot more for learning than some kind of elaborate metric system or turning classes into test prep academies. That’s not to say that we should end standardized tests. I don’t think that we should. I think standardized tests offer important feedback for how a school is doing, how a kid is doing, how a classroom is doing. But I think linking pay to that one singular measure or establishing these intricate, multiple measures for teachers diverts our attention from some real issues.

Autonomy for teachers

PDK: Could you describe what an autonomy audit is and how it might work in a school setting?

DAN: An autonomy audit is a technique that I have to measure how much autonomy people have in an organization. When I talk about autonomy in an organization, I talk about four dimensions of it: autonomy over time, autonomy over team, autonomy over task, and autonomy over technique. I think if you applied an autonomy audit to teachers, teachers would likely have less autonomy than almost any similarly situated white collar professional in America.

The way that I suggest doing an autonomy audit is to have employees respond to four questions on a 0 to 10 scale, with 0 meaning none and 10 meaning a lot. Teachers could ask themselves how much autonomy they have over their tasks at work—their main responsibilities and what they do in a given day—and how much autonomy they have over their time at work—when they arrive, when they leave, how they allocate their hours each day. I think there
you’re going to see very little autonomy on the part of teachers.

How much autonomy do they have over their team, that is, to what extent are they able to choose the people with whom they collaborate? Again, I think teachers will find less autonomy on that front.

And then how much autonomy do they have over their technique at work, how they actually perform the main responsibilities of their job? In some ways, you have a push toward even limiting that autonomy over technique in teaching.

I think that this autonomy audit could be very revealing. I think what it would show is that there’s a big autonomy deficit among teachers. What it shows to me is that the policy makers don’t trust teachers. They feel like teachers have to be controlled or they’ll go spinning wildly out of control, when in fact I actually start with a different presumption: that the vast majority of teachers want to do great work, that they entered the teaching profession in order to make a difference in the world, and if you simply give them the tools and get out of their way, the vast majority of them are going to do extraordinary things.

I think an autonomy audit is one way to surface that. If you start with the premise that teachers basically won’t do anything, they don’t want to hold their kids to high standards, they’re fundamentally inert, that they have to be incentivized in order to do any work, that’s going to take you down one path. But if you believe teachers inherently want to do great work, are committed to serving kids well, and actually want to be more creative than the system is allowing them to be, that takes you down a very different path. And what concerns me is that we’re only trying out that first path and essentially ignoring that second path, and I think that second path is where true education reform is.
**PDK:** How can teachers’ work be made more autonomous?

**DAN:** There’s an interesting technique that I write about in the book that comes from the private sector. Once a quarter, a software company in Australia says to its developers, “For the next 24 hours you can work on anything you want. You can work on it the way you want, and you can work on it with whomever you want. The only thing is you have to show the results to the rest of the company at the end of these 24 hours.” They call them FedEx Days because you have to deliver something overnight.

It turns out that this one day of intense autonomy has delivered this whole array of fixes for existing software and a whole array of ideas for new software that would have otherwise never emerged. Now, this is not pay for performance. This is simply providing undiluted autonomy and getting out of people’s way. And I think a FedEx Day for teachers would be amazing. Imagine a professional development day where instead of getting formal instruction, teachers could take the day and, as individuals or as teams, come up with an idea for reforming the school, come up with an idea for a new class, come up with an idea for a new pedagogical technique, and then present that idea to his or her colleagues at the end of those 24 hours. I think the teachers would do some amazing things with a FedEx Day.

As difficult as it is to change the school system and as much as it is like a big battleship, so that turning it one centimeter requires enormous amounts of energy and muscle, I think that these modest experiments—whether it’s a FedEx Day or other experiments in autonomy that I write about—can be imported into schools and at least given a try.

If we’re concerned about accountability, I think we’re going to get results. This idea, this move towards more intrinsic motivation and less carrots and
Motivation 3.0 for Students

PDK: Let’s talk about homework for a minute. How could teachers and parents have an impact on the type of homework that’s given, and what questions should they be asking?

DAN: In some ways, I like the idea of what some teachers have done by recasting homework altogether and calling it home learning. I think even that small step is a move in the right direction. We think of homework as drudgery, that if it doesn’t hurt then it’s not good for you. I think that in many ways, assigning homework gives parents and to some extent teachers this false sense that they’re being rigorous. I think that we need to scrutinize homework. When teachers assign homework, they need to ask themselves if they are offering students any autonomy over how and when they do this work, or if there is just one way to do it and they have to do it the teacher’s way. Does this assignment promote mastery? One way to promote mastery is to make the task a little bit novel and a little bit more engaging. If you’re doing the same thing that you’ve been doing and you already know how to do, it becomes a little bit numbing rather than engaging and mastery-oriented.

The other important thing is that students have to understand the purpose of the assignment and why they are doing it. Kids ask, “What’s the point of this homework and why are we doing this homework?” and adults don’t answer that question. They think of it as some kind of truculent, irritating question, when in fact it’s actually a pretty darn good question. If they can see how that extra work and that extra activity at home contributes to what they’re trying to learn, then I think they’ll be more engaged and more willing to do it. I think sticks, isn’t a deviation from accountability. It’s the pathway to it. The pathway to high performance is engagement, and the pathway to engagement is a much more autonomous, intrinsically motivated form of behavior. If we want people to be compliant drones, the best thing we can do is try to control them and offer this elaborate system of rewards and punishments. That will work if our objective is to get compliance. But I don’t think our objective is compliance. Our objective is engagement, and that is simply not the pathway to engagement.
what we really have to do is not say that homework is universally good or universally bad, but that homework has to promote autonomy, mastery, and purpose. It has to be built around autonomy, mastery, and purpose so that it becomes not a source of drudgery that our kids do because we had to do it and our parents had to do it, but something that is home learning rather than simply home drudgery.

PDK: How can teachers make students’ work more autonomous at school?

DAN: I think there are a number of ways. I think having some independent projects so that everybody is not marching in lock step and the teacher can work with children individually to help that kid navigate the particular project is great. It’s very hard to do, though, when you have 27 kids in the class and you’re measured only on standardized tests. It’s almost antithetical to that, and I think teachers would much prefer that independent project and coaching method. I think it’s very difficult in underfunded schools that are laboring under some pretty stiff and rigid regulations.

PDK: How might teachers redesign their classroom experiences for students to promote greater engagement and mastery?

DAN: I think there has to be some measure of accountability in some ways of monitoring students’ progress. I think it has to be much more supple than a traditional multiple choice test given once a year where there is a single right answer. I think what teachers could do is give kids a lot more autonomy over what they study and how they learn it. I think that kids will respond to the challenge. I think in some ways that some of these mandates that are on teachers actually are not rigorous or high enough for what kids can do and want to do. I think allowing kids in a second or third grade class a little greater discretion over what they read and what sort of assignment they do in response to that reading, as well
as giving kids some autonomy over what sorts of projects they do and linking those projects to something that’s happening in the real world, making them about something that’s going on in the school or in the community, will lead to a far greater level of engagement.

There are a number of other things. For instance, I think our whole notion of evaluation of students needs to change a little bit. I’m not saying that we eliminate report cards, but I think there is something to be said for letting kids participate in that. You can imagine supplementing the teacher’s marks and evaluations with a student self-evaluation, so that at the beginning of a semester a student might set out his or her goals for that semester and then at the end of the semester do a self-assessment and see how close he or she came to meeting those goals, where more work is needed, and where mastery of things has been achieved. I talked to a teacher just about three weeks ago who did this in his classroom and he said that his big surprise was that kids were actually harder on themselves than teachers were. That, I think, shows the yearning for mastery.

In some ways, we know how to do this. We would never prepare an athlete or a musician by giving that athlete or musician one standardized test at the end of the year. We would provide that athlete or musician with the opportunity for intense practice. We would give that person huge amounts of feedback. We would tailor the approach to that particular individual. And we would put that person in collaborative situations in the way that musicians and athletes inevitably are. I think that we do know how to do this. We have to get rid of the old 1850s approach of educating our kids and bring it up to, say, the 1950s, or maybe even better, 2010.

PDK: We asked our members to submit some questions for you, and we received one from a middle school art teacher. She said, “I honestly have a few students who will just sit and not participate all
day long. Of course, at the middle school level, they are just promoted anyway so there are no immediate consequences. How do you get a student to intrinsically care about working and learning? Is it a personality trait? Is it learned?"

**DAN:** That’s a good question, and I don’t think there’s an easy answer. I think it’s going to vary from student to student. My hunch is that those students who seem passive and inert in the classroom are probably active engaged in some other realm of their life, and I think that’s where the hints are. If they’re working, volunteering at their church group, playing a sport, or participating in orchestra, I think we need to look at those activities and see if there are ways to reach that kid.

I think that teachers and administrators need to work harder. I think that they’re already working hard, but what I think they need to do is take each kid and try not to apply a set of universal set of rules or prescriptions but instead to focus on that particular kid and find out what makes that kid tick. Now, that’s very hard to do, particularly in a world of standardization and high-stakes standardized testing, but I think that is the approach. To be fair to teachers, if a kid is passive and inert at age 12, it’s not only the teacher’s responsibility to help him unlearn that, it’s also the responsibility of that kid’s parents and other people in that kid’s social ecosystem. I think a lot of times we foist these problems that no one else wants to deal with onto teachers and onto schools because they’re hard problems. We just pass them off and then blame schools when they don’t solve the problem.

**Motivation 3.0 for Schools**

**PDK:** One of the questions in the discussion guide at the end of Drive asks how we can reconfigure schools and classrooms to put more emphasis on intrinsic motivation rather than extrinsic rewards.

To be fair to teachers, if a kid is passive and inert at age 12, it’s not only the teacher’s responsibility to help him unlearn that, it’s also the responsibility of that kid’s parents and other people in that kid’s social ecosystem.
However, the push in education today is for accountability. Is there an elegant way to reconcile intrinsic motivation and accountability?

**DAN:** It’s a hard question, and I don’t think there’s an easy answer. In *Drive*, I’ve written mostly about business, and I think there are some lessons from business in that regard. Businesses still have to be measured and still have to be accountable. They have to stay alive. They have to make their numbers. There’s not only one pathway to do that. I think a way to reconfigure schools is to give teachers greater autonomy and to give students greater autonomy. I think that will take us part of the way to education reform, because I do think that deep down teachers want to teach and students want to learn. I think that in many ways we put both of those parties in a context where actual learning is very difficult. What you have then is a set of rigid rules and policies so that the “good kids” are compliant and the “bad kids” are defiant, and no one is really engaged. I think that autonomy is an answer to that.

I think it’s important for schools to tear down the boundaries between the school and the outside world. I think one reason that kids are disengaged is that the problems that they’re dealing with are often made-up problems and not real problems with consequences. I think they’d be far more engaged if the problems that they were dealing with were problems in their community or things that they were tackling at school. Too often, the problems that we give kids in schools are hermetically-sealed problems that are perfectly defined and have one right answer and are in the habit of single discipline, when in fact in the real world, problems are messier than that. They’re multi-disciplinary, they are poorly defined, and they have multiple answers, none of which are perfect. I think that we’ve also got to give kids greater power to self-evaluate so that they’re not simply outsourcing the evaluation and feedback to teachers but are beginning to establish the habits of evaluation and moving towards
mastery on their own. That’s what Olympians do. They have coaches but they’re not relying only on the coaches to get feedback. They’re setting their own goals. They’re marshaling their own feedback. And that’s how people get better and better at things.

There are examples of schools that are doing this sort of stuff. Maria Montessori figured this out years ago. If you put kids in a context where they can explore their own interests and adults are there as guides and facilitators rather than commanders, then kids will learn more. There are examples of some charter schools and many other public schools that are doing this sort of thing. I’m involved with Big Picture Learning, and the Big Picture schools around the country are showing very good results on test scores with at-risk kids by teaching the kids the basics but also having them use those basics to work in the community and to explore their own interests.

The key theme of the book is that there’s a mismatch between what science knows and what business does. And what the science knows is if you want people to perform at a high level, especially for complicated things, they have to be self-directed, they have to be able to move towards mastery, and they have to have a purpose for what they’re doing. And I don’t think that’s any less true for schools. There’s no single perfect way to move in this direction, but what I do think we need is a national conversation about whether we are fighting the last war, whether we are preparing kids for their future rather than my past, and whether these motivational techniques that we use, that we dress up sometimes in the realm of standards, in the garb of standards and accountability and other kind of hard-headed language, are actually taking us in the wrong direction.

**PDK:** Maybe this will start the conversation towards change. As you mentioned, it’s like trying to steer a battleship.

**And what the science knows is if you want people to perform at a high level, especially for complicated things, they have to be self-directed, they have to be able to move towards mastery, and they have to have a purpose for what they’re doing.**
Dan: Well, I hope so. I really believe very deeply that the world doesn’t change from policies from federal capitals or state capitals. That’s not how the world changes. The world changes in a much simpler, slower, more organic way. Conversations are what change the world. I don’t look at the books that I write as providing the final word on things at all. My hope with the books that I write is that they trigger these conversations, particularly among, in this case, people who are in education, who are among the most smart, most dedicated, most devoted, public-spirited people in this country. And if those folks start having conversations, I think over time those conversations change the world. If the book can be a catalyst for those conversations, then I think in a very small way it helps us do right by our kids.
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