a better way
to motivate achievement

Many of our low income, minority schools are within 100 points of closing the achievement gap, a prize worth working for no matter how uncomfortable, inconvenient or risky.

This summer I read Daniel Pink's book, "Drive: The Surprising Truth about what Motivates us" (2009). It made clear to me that things often operate below our everyday level of consciousness, especially in the area of why we do or don't do what we do. This is very important in my field, as my job is to motivate educators to try new things that will accelerate student learning.

Pink reveals two sets of conditions that motivate people. Both are research-based and date back to the 1950s, but most institutions and experts have largely ignored one, described below. The other – carrots and sticks – seems to have won the publicity battle for the past 60 years. Unfortunately, it promotes extrinsic motivation and works only in a limited set of circumstances, if at all. Yet its long history, popularity and common-sense foundation remain firmly established. Indeed, most corporations and government institutions unflinchingly rely on it daily – and that, unfortunately, includes schools.

Pink's book outlines an alternative set of three elements or conditions that do a much better job of motivating us intrinsically to try hard, do our best, be successful at whatever we undertake, and do so willingly. They are autonomy, mastery and purpose. They underpin the success stories of many organizations, musicians, athletes, politicians, and various and sundry geniuses.

1. Autonomy means that we have to be able to do a task without being micromanaged and guided every step of the way. We get a healthy dose of operating on our own. In short, we have some voice and choice in how we accomplish the task, how we solve problems, and how we make the journey to success.

2. Mastery means we engage in trying to get really good at something. It is based on the belief that growth and effort trump innate talent. It takes time, deliberate practice, guidance, even good instruction, but it's worth it. And the journey becomes as important as the outcome.

By Dennis Parker

3. Purpose means that the task is really important to us; it's a cause bigger and more enduring than we are, worthy of the best that we have to give, a higher-order goal.

Obviously, these three conditions produce the best results when they are interrelated and mutually reinforcing.

What struck me most about all this is that over the past decade, in the hundreds of low-performing schools in which I've worked, we have been the most successful when these three conditions have been effectively cultivated. This approach has provoked high levels of encouragement, inspiration, hope, hard work, positive relationships and new solutions to old problems in some of the most struggling schools in the state.

Bad cop, good cop

At end of last school year I began toying with a typology of contrasting motivators. One set characterizes the old school of "carrots and sticks," while the other lines up more with the newer school of "autonomy, mastery and purpose" (see chart at right).

Now, I'm not saying that I haven't engaged in activities and language related to column one. It's almost impossible for any of us not to do so, given the context within which we work. In fact, sometimes I think it helps to let "the system" play bad cop (left column) while the rest of us play good cop (right column). For sure, threat is an attention-getter! But, unmitigated, it limits the degree to which we can tap into our own and our colleagues' most powerful motivations and competencies. And that means slower progress for our students or, in the most painful cases, none at all.

This brings me to the main theme of this article: keeping our eyes on the prize. By "prize" I mean our current goals and focus areas. For example, I routinely push for "ambitious" targets beyond what the state and federal governments require. We shoot for 30-50 points API growth in my schools, not the state's 5 percent. We shoot for 40 percent to 60 percent of our ELL students to score Early Advanced or Advanced on the CELDT and at least 15 percent or more legitimate reclassifications each year, not for the state's lower AMAOs.

Although clear, ambitious, public targets cause higher performance, there's a new, higher-order prize now available that would better address one of Pink's three main motivators, purpose. That is, many of the low-income, minority schools I now work with are within 100 points or fewer of closing the achievement gap for Hispanic and black students with white students in California. If we can pull it off, this would be the first time in history that so many minority schools actually close the achievement gap for this generation of children. Lower-order goals such as scoring 800 or getting out of Program Improvement, although significant, pale in comparison.

And, lest we trivialize this target in light of the upcoming Common Core Standards, note that the quality of California's current accountability system is the highest in the nation. There are three reasons for this claim:

1. Our standards have been given an "A" rating twice in the last decade by the Fordham Foundation (Finn *et. al.*, 2006). My "sources" tell me that the new Common

A typology of contrasting motivators:
Carrots and sticks vs. autonomy, mastery and purpose

Old school	New school
Threat; pressure; fear	Help & support; offering new know-how; insights; pats on the back; encouragement; hope
Punishment; sanctions	Teaching; learning; reflection
Change	Growth
Reduced choice and autonomy in spending, hiring, decision-making	Judgment; voice; choice; engagement
Competition	Cooperation; collaboration
Accountability	Data analysis; reflection with a 'no-blame' ethic; transparency; two ways to win (score high or make gains); set new targets
Constructive criticism; a deficit model guiding change; a focus on weaknesses (the glass half empty)	Descriptive feedback; a recognition of strengths; next best steps for growth (the glass half full)
Compliance/fidelity	Some voice, choice & latitude; creativity; judgment; guidance & leadership; focus on getting better; mastery
Mandatory targets (API, AYP, AMAO)	Ambitious public goals, locally developed, connected to higher-order purposes supported by data (closing the achievement gap; proportionate equity between minorities and majorities; higher scores leading to better choices in life)

Core Standards are built in large part on California's current standards.

2. The California Standards Test was developed by Educational Testing Service, one of the premier testing organizations in the country and author of the SAT, GRE and the NAEP, to name a few. Although multiple-choice, the items are written at various levels of cognitive demand, requiring a high degree of higher-order thinking skills to reason out "the best answer."

3. Finally, our cut-points for "proficient" are in the top 10 percent of all other states (Durant *et. al.*, 2011).

Yes, the Common Core and its assessments promise to be more enlightened, but what we have now cannot be easily dismissed. Indeed, barring cheating, it does seem that the kids who score the highest on the CST are the ones who seem to know the most.

Back to our "eyes on the prize"

Including 2011-12, we have three more school years with the current accountability system in California. That means with an average of 25-35 API point-gains per year, many heretofore low-performing, minority schools can close the achievement gap for their students by 2014. Who wouldn't like to give that to their students sometime before they retire? Isn't that a higher-order "purpose" worth working for, however inconvenient, uncomfortable or risky?

My caution is to my colleagues who want to get too deeply involved in work on the Common Core Standards now. Remember, we may not even have textbooks or tests by the time these standards come online in 2014-15. There is precious little time each year for educators to spend outside of the classroom in professional development. If that time begins to distract teachers from their journey toward mastery of teaching the state's existing standards and assessments, then the "prize" of closing the achievement gap will certainly be compromised.

If we can find a healthy balance between focusing on being successful with what we have now and our preparations for the future, we can make a transition to the new system at the top of our game. And that will mean unprecedented success for our most vulnerable children, too! ■

References

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