

Stanford research shows that working together boosts motivation

Stanford faculty member Gregory Walton found that when people are treated by others as partners working together on a task, their motivation increases – even if they worked on their own.

BY CLIFTON B. PARKER



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Psychologist Gregory Walton says that feeling like you're part of a team can spur you to take on challenges.

When people are treated as partners working together with others – even when physically apart – their motivation increases, according to new Stanford research.

As the study noted, people undertake many activities in life on their own but with others in mind – a researcher writes a paper on a new medical treatment and knows that others are working on the same problem. A student writes an essay for class and understands that other students are writing their own

essays. When people feel they and others are working together on a difficult problem, does this increase motivation?

"Working with others affords enormous social and personal benefits," Gregory Walton, an assistant professor of psychology at Stanford, wrote in an article in the *Journal of Experimental Psychology* with co-author Priyanka Carr, then a Stanford graduate student.

In an interview, Walton said, "Our research found that social cues that conveyed simply that other people treat you as though you are working together on a task – rather than that you are just as working on the same task but separately – can have striking effects on motivation."

Intrinsic motivation

In five experiments, Carr and Walton found that these "cues of working together" increased "intrinsic motivation" as people work on their own. Intrinsic motivation refers to behaviors people want to do – what they enjoy and find intrinsically rewarding – not what they force themselves to do.

First, participants met in small groups. Then, they went to separate rooms to work on their own on a challenging puzzle. People in the "psychologically together" category were told they would work on the puzzle "together" and that they would either write or receive a tip on the puzzle from another participant in the study. Later they received a tip ostensibly authored by another participant.

People in the "psychologically separate" category were simply told that each person would work on the puzzle – there was no mention of working "together." And the tip they would write or receive would come from the researchers – who, of course, were not solving puzzles. They received the same tip content as those in the "psychologically together" category – but it did not come from people engaged in the task.

While all the participants worked on their own on the puzzle, the key difference was that one group was treated by peers as though they were working "together." The rest thought they were working on the same thing as others but separately, or simply in parallel to them.

As Walton said, "In our studies, people never actually worked together – they always worked on their own on a challenging puzzle. What we were interested in was simply the effects of the perceived social context."

Their findings showed that when people were treated as though they were working together they:

- Persisted 48 to 64 percent longer on a challenging task
- Reported more interest in the task

- Became less tired by having to persist on the task – presumably because they enjoyed it
- Became more engrossed in the task and performed better on it

Finally, when people were encouraged to reflect on how their interest in the puzzle was relevant to their personal values and identity, people chose to do 53 percent more related tasks in a separate setting one to two weeks later.

"The results showed that simply feeling like you're part of a team of people working on a task makes people more motivated as they take on challenges," said Walton. Moreover, the results reflect an increase in motivation – not a sense of obligation, competition or pressure to join others in an activity.

Communication, collaboration

Walton pointed out that the research does not suggest that group work is always or necessarily better as a means to motivate children in school or employees at work.

"Sometimes group work can have negative effects," Walton said.

For example, if people feel obligated to work with others, if they feel their contributions will go unnoticed or if they don't have ownership over their work and contribution, then group work might not be productive.

"Our research shows that it is possible to create a spirit of teamwork as people take on challenging individual tasks – a feeling that we're all in this together, working on problems and tasks – and that this sense of working together can inspire motivation," he said.

Carr noted, "It is also striking that it does not take enormous effort and change to create this feeling of togetherness. Subtle cues that signal people are part of a team or larger effort ignited motivation and effort. Careful attention to the social context as people work and learn can help us unleash motivation."

Source; <http://news.stanford.edu/news/2014/september/motivation-walton-carr-091514.html>