

The problem with money – and the power of inspiration

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Inspiration is **more** than a good feeling. It's the spark that awakens purpose, possibility, and action.

When you ask your sales team or channel partners what reward they want when they achieve a goal, they are likely to answer, **"Cash. Show me the money."** But is that the right question? And should you even be asking if what they say may not be what actually motivates performance?

If you're driving to a business outcome, the question to consider could be,

Think about the last time you were inspired. What did it feel like?

Where were you? Can you remember any details? Inspiration creates a sense of urgency and excitement. It's a hopeful state of possibility about the future. It's emotional.

"What rewards drive the best results?"

Inspiration is more than a good feeling. It is the spark that awakens purpose, possibility, and action. Research shows that people who are inspired tend to be grittier, happier, more engaged and more optimistic.

They persist through obstacles, show greater resilience and are more open to new ideas. Inspiration is not a fixed trait. It is a state that can be created.¹

So what nudges inspiration? To answer this, we'll turn to behavioral economics, a way to explore human behavior and our non-rational approach to decision-making. We think we make decisions rationally.

We gather the facts, weigh the options, and move forward. In truth, we are social, adaptable humans who are often moved by emotion first and logic second.

When we think about how to motivate a sales rep, channel partner or distributor, we have to start with what will move them to action. This isn't about base pay or bonuses. This is about hitting a next-level goal. And this is where cash can work against the very motivation we are trying to create. Once money becomes the reward, people start calculating. How much is the extra effort worth? Is the payout enough? Does the reward justify the time, energy, and tradeoffs? Cash can quickly turn an inspirational goal into a transaction.

This leads into the justifiability effect. One myth is that cash is always better, or at least no worse, than other incentives. But cash often gets mentally absorbed into everyday spending. It is useful, but not memorable.

Non-cash rewards are different. A trip, experience, or carefully chosen merchandise award **gives people permission to choose something they might not otherwise buy for themselves.** It moves the reward out of the "needs" column and into the **"worth it"** column.²



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But when the goal is to inspire a higher level of effort, the better question is not, “What do they say they want?” It is, “What will create the emotional pull to do more?”

Another principle to consider is the **Say/Do gap**. This has a huge impact on sales motivation because what people say they want is not always what drives their behavior. A sales rep, channel partner, or distributor may say they want cash because it feels rational and easy to justify. But when the goal is to inspire a higher level of effort, the better question is not, “What do they say they want?” It is, “**What will create the emotional pull to do more?**” That is where non-cash rewards can create a stronger connection to the goal, because they move beyond calculation and into inspiration.

Finally, there is **consumption**. Anticipation is part of the reward. So is the experience itself. **So is every retelling.** A reward you can picture, share, and remember often has more motivational life than a reward that quietly lands in an account. **You only spend a fungible reward once. You spend a memory every time you need it.**

Let me share a personal story that I’m guessing many of you can relate to. I went to buy a used car. I was not in the market for a new vehicle and knew my spending limits. At the dealership, the salesperson asked if I simply wanted to look at the new model—just a look. You guessed it. That turned into sitting in the vehicle, then test-driving the car, then buying it.

The experience is a reminder that we often explain decisions rationally, but make them emotionally. Motivation works the same way. And yes, I do love that car.

The experience is a reminder that we often explain decisions rationally, but make them emotionally. Motivation works the same way.

The research is clear. If you inspire people, they are more likely to rise to the challenge.

Cash compensates. Inspiration motivates.

If you want people to stretch, don’t just ask what they want. Design a reward they can anticipate, experience, remember, and retell.

“the power of inspiration”

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Sources

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2. Jeffrey, S. (2009). “*Justifiability and the motivational power of tangible noncash incentives.*” Human Performance.