



Motivational Interviewing

By Jason Bader

I was recently listening to a podcast interview with one of my favorite thought leaders, Daniel Pink. Pink has this amazing ability to make sense of very complex behavioral issues. He rolls them out in a way that allows those of us who took to the more social side of university life to understand and apply motivational techniques. If you have not seen any of his work, I would highly suggest a quick search on “the science behind motivation dan pink”. The animated YouTube video is absolutely brilliant, and I often incorporated it into leadership training. All that man-crush aside, this interview touched briefly on the concept of “motivational interviewing” as a method of persuasion. As often happens to me when I listen to smart people, this was another one of those 2 x 4 to the back of the head moments.

The concept is fairly simple but touches on some complex motivational theories. The example he gave in this interview was talking about persuading a teenager to study for an upcoming test. As those of you with children know, this can lead to some of those moments where you are not going to win “parent of the year”. When asking the teenager when they are going to study, he receives the standard response of “I dunno” or “later” and the child continues to surf YouTube or play Xbox. Many of us would start to list all the reasons why the teenager should study for the test. Good grades lead to a good school. A good school leads to a good job. A good job leads to a good income. A good income will get you off my payroll, etc. Unfortunately, this logic falls on deaf ears and we tend to escalate our rationale. Perhaps I am projecting here, but this often leads to such ineffective motivational tools as a “lifetime ban on electronics” or “grounding for life”. Ultimately, the failure occurs because our reasons for studying for the test are just that – ours. They are not the reasons of the teenage mind. Motivation comes from personal reasons for completing the task at hand.

So how do we tease out this personal motivation? Pink introduces the idea of asking two seemingly irrational questions. First, he needs to set a baseline. After the first failure of the “When are you going to study for the test?”, he switches gears. The question might sound something like this, “Ok, on a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 being highly motivated and 1 being not motivated at all, where would you say you are on being motivated to study for this test?” Let’s say that the teenager comes back with a response of 3. Now most of us parents would lose our marbles and fall into the previous behavior of volume-based motivation where we list all the above-mentioned reasons to study for the test and the results would be the same. On the other hand, Pink suggests that the next question should be geared toward assessing their own personal motivation. It might go something like this: “Ok, so you are a 3, why didn’t you choose a lower number?” Insert exploding head emoji.

By asking the second question in this manner, you are inviting the teenager to explore their own motivations for studying for the test. As they start to rattle off a few reasons, we need to recognize that these are the things that are most important to them. If the person can articulate these reasons for doing the desired behavior, you are steering them toward the desired outcome because people believe their own reasons more strongly than the reasons of others.

I was so fascinated by this theory, I listened to this section of the interview a few times to let it sink in. Sometimes these cool theories fall flat in the real world. A couple of weeks ago, I was having lunch with a friend of mine and I shared this concept. He was also taken with the simple brilliance of the strategy. Being a career sales professional in the pharmaceutical industry, and used to dealing with egotistical

physicians, he decided to give it a shot. He was trying to persuade a doctor to switch to one of his drugs and was receiving a lukewarm reception. Rather than reiterating the clinical research and how this drug was saving lives all over the world, he decided to break out the old “Jedi mind trick” on this doc. If I recall correctly, the doctor responded to the first question, “How likely are to switch over to this new drug” with a 5. He modified the follow up question a bit and asked, “So you are a 5, why aren’t you a 2 or 3”? Just as Pink suggested, this doctor starts giving reasons why he should probably switch and how he was disappointed in the drug he is currently using. As you can imagine, fireworks are going off in my friend’s head and he is doing everything he can not to grin like the Cheshire Cat. Let’s suffice to say that he closed the deal and is a convert to this method of persuasion.

This concept seems to be a surefire tool in the sales arsenal, but where else can it be applied? I can envision a branch manager working with an inside salesperson on adding lines to an order. Why is it important for the branch to increase their lines per order average? If there is a team goal in place, what is their personal motivation for hitting that goal? That is what we are trying to tease out. I could see using this concept to improve organization in a warehouse or cleanliness of delivery vehicles. If deployed properly, this could boost the level of self-direction in the workplace.

As you can see, I was taken aback by the simplicity of this motivational technique. Tapping into the subject’s personal motivations will allow you to steer the conversation. Too often, we assume that we know why a person should make a certain decision, but that is the height of arrogance. As a cautionary note, use this technique sparingly. You don’t want to overplay your hand here and be known as the “one to ten guy”. Just put it in your bag of motivational tricks. I urge you to do a little more research on Dan Pink and his theories on motivation. So many gems out there. On a final note, although this technique worked famously on the doctor, my friend reported that it was an utter failure on his teenage daughter. Apparently, this strategy is no match for iTunes and set of earbuds. Good luck.

About the Author:

Jason Bader is the principal of The Distribution Team. He is a holistic distribution advisor who is passionate about helping business owners solve challenges, generate wealth and achieve personal goals. He can be found speaking at several industry events throughout the year, providing executive coaching services to private clients and letting his thoughts be known in an industry publication or two. He recently launched his podcast, Distribution Talk, which can be found at www.distributiontalk.com. He can be reached at (503) 282-2333 or via email at jason@distributionteam.com. You can find additional resources on his website: www.thedistributionteam.com