A study into Motivation – why we *really* do the things we do…

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Inspiring organisations to succeed

Much research has been carried out into why some organisations enjoy higher levels of employee engagement, the benefits of which are well established. Comprehensive surveys conducted regularly by the Chartered Institute of Personnel & Development (CIPD) and the Institute of Leadership & Management (ILM) clearly demonstrate the value of having an engaged workforce: staff turnover is lower, motivation and performance is higher and business results (including financial) typically out-perform the market average.

One of the key responsibilities of leaders in a modern business is to ensure employee engagement. As far back as 2001 the UK Government sponsored a major piece of research into the state of leadership in the UK. The resulting report by the Council for Excellence in Management and Leadership (CEML) concluded that there was a "crisis in leadership in the UK". In the eleven years since that report was published not much appears to have changed…

Over the last four or five years, partly (but not exclusively) driven by the global economic crisis, evidence shows that employee engagement has suffered substantially. In fact, surveys conducted in Europe and North America suggest that engagement was at its lowest level in 2010 and whilst there appears to be a slight improvement towards the end of 2011 and beginning of 2012 much remains to be done. Unfortunately, the economic situation has led to a decrease in organisational spend on "non-essential" activities i.e. anything that is not directly focussed on delivering core business activities. As a consequence, 2012 has seen a decrease in training and development budgets; on average, spending in this area is down by 21% against 2011 figures (source: CIPD Learning and Talent Development Report, 2012). At the same time, 85% of organisations report a deficit in leadership skills at the line management and supervisory level (66% at senior management level) with most organisations reporting the biggest gaps in people management skills, performance management skills and skills to manage change. Against this backdrop, it's little wonder that employee engagement is suffering.

Employee Engagement is important to organisations because of the relationship between engagement and motivation; more often than not when an organisation talks about improving levels of engagement what they really mean is that they want staff to be more motivated. Motivated staff work more efficiently; work is done faster, with greater levels of collaboration, creativity and commitment all of which has a positive impact on the bottom line.

Fortunately, the relationship between engagement and motivation is a two way street; improve one and you also improve the other. So the key to understanding how to benefit from improved levels of engagement is firstly to understand what motivates us – why do we *really* do the things we do..?

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To understand what really motivates us we need to strip away all the factors which might merely *influence* us; in other words, we need to identify what lies at the very heart of our motivation to do something.

Our true motivation is only tested under two sets of circumstances; firstly when the going gets really tough and secondly when we personally risk something that's important to us. If something is easy to achieve and doesn't involve any personal risk then the motivation required to actually do it is usually low. The extent to which anything is tough and the value placed on something we risk losing is of course subjective, and it isn't necessarily linked to personal gain or opportunity. If someone asks us to do something that's easy and doesn't cost us anything (including time if we value that), then we're likely to do it. The more difficult the task becomes and the more we risk losing, the more motivation we'll require to see it through.

So to understand true motivation we need to view it through that lens; doing something when it's really tough and with the risk of personal loss. To test this, I needed to find a group of people who regularly have their motivation tested under these extreme conditions. It occurred to me (it being 2012), that one such group might be Olympic athletes; four years is a long time to push yourself to the limits and there's no question that they face great personal challenge and adversity on the journey to glory. I also considered the Police and the Fire Service who continue to put themselves at personal risk at a time when funding and benefits are being reduced. At the end of the day however I chose to conduct my research on soldiers; the men and women who risk everything on the turn of a political coin. There are two reasons why I believe soldiers provide the best example for motivation; firstly (although the British Army is made up entirely of volunteers) soldiers don't *choose* the war. It's generally not their fight and they don't choose to be there. Secondly, once in a combat zone soldiers might face that hostile environment for months on end without respite. Police and fireman go home at the end of each day to loved ones and even Olympic athletes can take a day off if they really need one – their motivation gets a break. But once a soldier arrives in a combat zone, they're usually there for months at a time, putting themselves in danger even when eating and sleeping. Their need for motivation is relentless.

To start with, I conducted interviews with a cross-section of serving and ex-serving officers and soldiers from the British Army, all of whom had experienced combat at one time or another, the most recent experiences coming from the war in Afghanistan. The interviews helped me to compile a list of 20 factors all of which played some part in either influencing or motivating these men and women to risk their lives in combat. The list ranges from basic factors such as "*money*", "*running away from something*" or "*just following orders*" to higher order considerations such as "*Queen and Country*", "*comradeship*" and "*professionalism*". It also includes factors that we might typically associate with young people joining the armed services; "*adventure*", "*a chance for glory*" and "*to experience war*".

A survey based on this list was then sent out to several thousand soldiers to gain a broader understanding of which factors featured in their own personal experiences. The results were conclusive.

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Respondents were firstly asked to rate all twenty factors on a five point Likert scale, ranging from "Unimportant" to "Very Important". The top scoring factors are shown in Figure 1 below. What's clear from this is that whilst leadership is obviously important in its own right, it also plays a part in the other motivational factors; good leaders help to create a sense of pride and purpose, inspire trust and build camaraderie. We'll return to leadership later.

The Following factors have all been suggested as things that might contribute to a soldier's motivation for risking their life in conflict. Please rate each factor in terms of how important you personally believe to be:

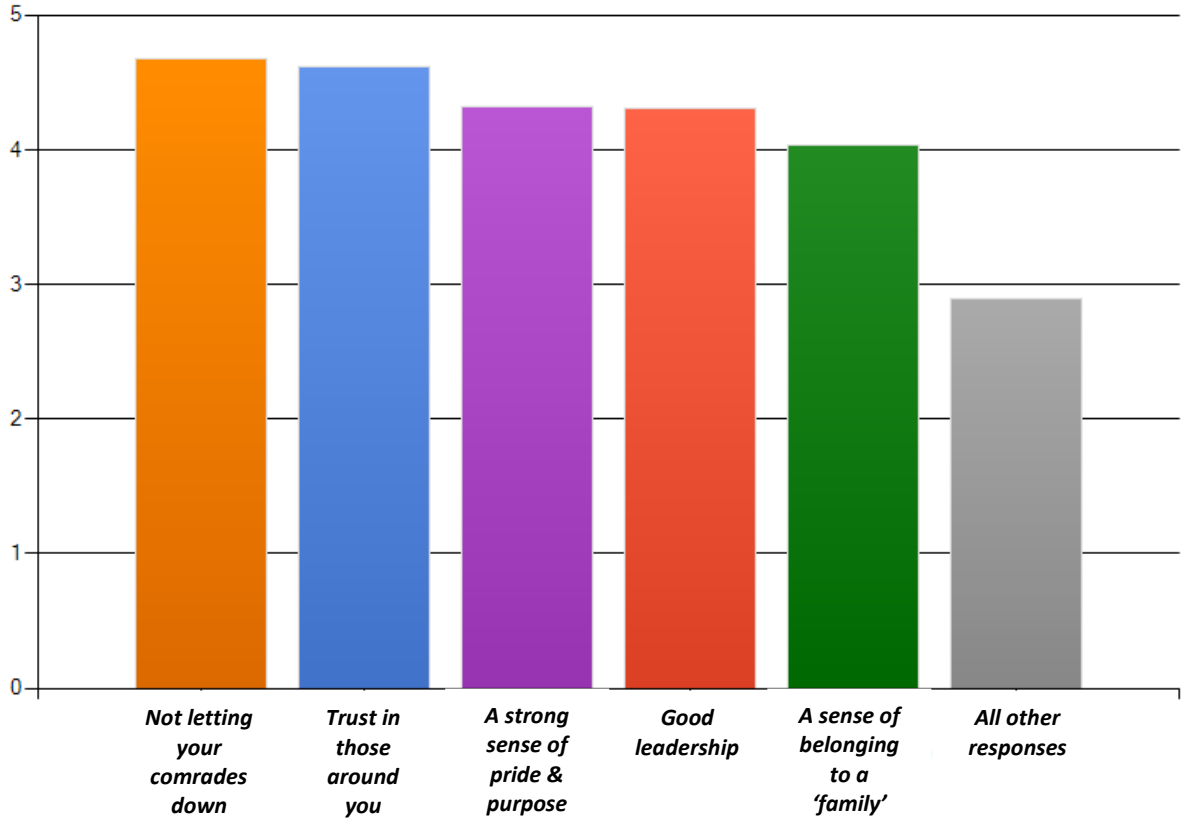

FIGURE 1

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From the same list respondents were then asked to select just the three single factors which they personally deemed to be most important in maintaining their motivation and commitment during combat, and to place them in order.

Almost 90% of respondents rated *"Not letting your comrades down"* as one of the most important three factors with "A *strong sense of pride and purpose"* in second place with 68% and "*Trust in those around you"* a close third on 64%. "*Good leadership*" comes in 4th place with 46% of respondents placing it in their top three factors.

This isn't to suggest that other factors aren't important but what's clear from the interviews and the results of the survey is that when it comes right down to it, when things get really tough and you've got a lot personally at stake, then influences such as money and adventure become much less important; they may have contributed to getting you there in the first place but in the heat of battle it's the people around you and a strong sense of purpose and pride which keep you there.

From the same list, please select only the THREE factors which you personally consider to be the MOST important to motivating and sustaining a soldier's commitment, placing them in order with the most important first:

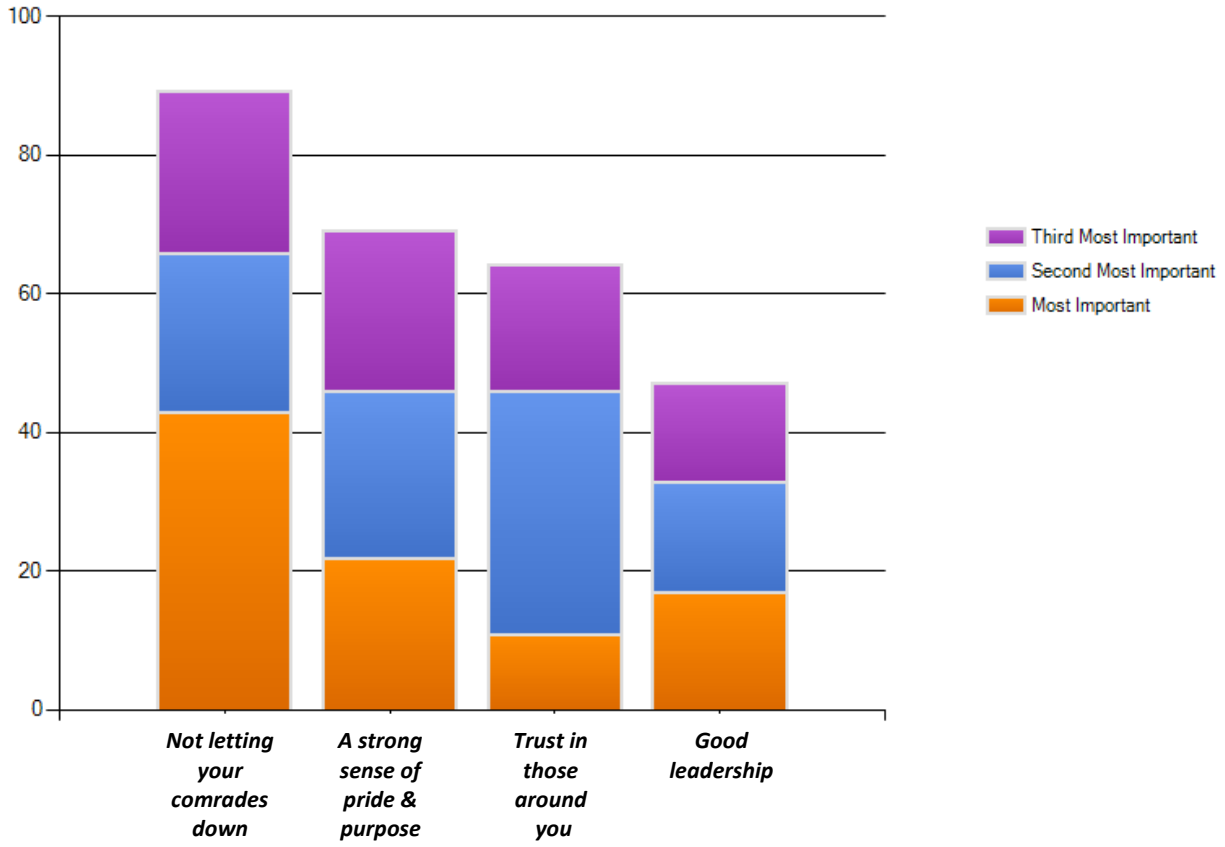

FIGURE 2

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So what does this all mean for leaders and managers who have to motivate people every day to do normal jobs rather than face the extreme conditions of combat? Could there be any correlation between what motivates soldiers in the harsh conditions of battle with what motivates employees to perform to their very best in the relative safety and comfort of an office building..? Fortunately, I didn't have to do that research entirely on my own.

The organisation Great Place to Work® which now has over 25 years' worth of research covering more than 5,000 organisations and 10 million employees defines a great place to work as one in which employees ***TRUST*** the people they work for, have ***PRIDE*** in what they do and ***ENJOY*** the people they work with. They argue that great workplaces (and therefore high levels of engagement) are built through the day-to-day relationships that employees experience and ***NOT*** through a checklist of programs and benefits. These are fundamentally the same three factors we identified as being important to soldiers risking their lives in combat. It seems that regardless of whether you're up to your neck in mud and bullets, or buried under a pile of processes and paperclips, the factors that keep you going when things get tough are pretty much the same.

Simply put, when people are required to perform at their very best, collaborate effectively, follow instructions but still show initiative and stick with it no matter how hard it gets, it all comes down to three simple factors:

1) *Having trust in those around them;*

2) *How they feel about the job they do; having a strong sense of pride and purpose;*

3) *How they feel about the people they work with.*

Everything we experience, whether at work or in our personal life, gives rise to emotions which we then interpret (make sense of) and give meaning to. The interpretations we make are based on a number of considerations; our own beliefs, values and attitudes as well as the organisational context. It appears that for the vast majority of us the three factors listed above give rise to the strongest emotions and perceptions and that's why they play such an important part in keeping us motivated and performing at our best. There's plenty of other contemporary research which explains why this should be the case.

We all have a basic human need to trust and when it exists great things can happen. In his book "The Speed of Trust" Stephen MR Covey demonstrates that in organisations with high levels of trust, things can happen up to 60% faster than in low trust organisations. This trust "dividend" means that in business, when trust increases speed also increases and costs fall. Conversely, lower levels of trust incur a "tax" of decreased speed and increased costs.

Confucius told his disciple Tzu-Kung that three things are required for government; weapons, food and trust. If a leader cannot hold on to all three he should give up the weapons first

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and the food next. Trust should be guarded to the end; without trust we cannot stand. 2,500 years after his death, leaders today are struggling more than ever to live up to Confucius' maxim; the Index of Leadership Trust for 2011 (Institute of Leadership and Management) shows that in large organisations (those with more than 1,000 employees) levels of trust between frontline staff and managers is at an all-time low and continuing to fall. The situation is even worse in the public sector where senior leaders lag 7 points behind their private sector equivalents and a full 10 points behind leaders of similar sized organisations in the third sector. Trust isn't a "nice to have"; it drives engagement and motivation, fundamentally affecting the way employees feels about their workplace, and is critical in enabling higher levels of organisational performance.

Research conducted by Teresa Amabile and Steven Kramer published in 2011 demonstrates the undeniable link between how staff feel about the work they do and their respective levels of motivation. There may be nothing new in the basic principle here; it's more than 20 years since Edward Deci demonstrated the impact of the work we do on self-motivation, however the clever research methods employed by Amabile and Kramer show the clear confluence of emotions, perceptions and motivation arising from events occurring at work. Their research reveals that the extent to which we believe our work has value and purpose and the degree of progress we feel we're making in our work has a huge impact on levels of self and team motivation.

So we know that feeling proud of what we do and what we achieve is a tremendous source of motivation and we also know that motivated employees are engaged employees; the one leads to the other. This is further validated by the CIPD's recent Employee Outlook report (Spring 2012) which shows that whilst only 38% of staff across all organisations are engaged (59% neutral and 3% disengaged) only 7% of those engaged staff are actively looking for a new job (against 26% of neutral staff and 71% of disengaged staff who are looking for a new job).

But enjoying our work and having a sense of pride in what we achieve isn't enough to deliver the very highest levels of motivation and engagement; there's an old adage that we join a company for the job and leave for the people. Relationships then are the glue that binds us together and see us through the toughest of challenges; in the face of adversity, ambiguity and uncertainty it's the strength of our relationships and the breadth of our personal network that keeps us steady.

A study of over 350 employees in 60 business units at a financial services company found that the greatest predictor of a team's achievement was how the members felt about one another (Dutton, J 2003). Interviewing thousands of employees from "good-to-great" companies Jim Collins found that people loved what they did largely because they loved who they did it with. And at IBM, when MIT researchers spent a year following over 2,600 staff observing their social ties, interactions and connections they found that the more socially connected an employee was, the better they performed. Again, this doesn't really come as any great surprise. We also know that one of the greatest sources of tension and conflict in the workplace results from "personality clashes". But very few organisations actually do very

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much to proactively encourage stronger relationships at work. Google is perhaps the most famous example of a company that truly understands the importance of social connections and they reflect this understanding in their practices. Other companies benefiting from strong social connections include UPS, Southwest Airlines and Domino's Pizza all of which invest heavily in creating an environment which actively encourages social interaction, and also in helping people to understand the very foundations of the relationships they have with others.

And that brings us neatly back to the role of leaders. In my own research with soldiers (perhaps not unexpectedly) the importance of good leadership is clear. In the survey results Leadership features close to the top of the list of things that soldiers consider to be most important in maintaining their motivation and commitment. It's well ahead of "*professionalism"* and *"a chance to prove oneself"* and is even placed higher on the list than considerations of family back home. Why might that be? Perhaps more than anything else it's about the circumstances people find themselves in. When things are easy and life is comfortable it's easy to ignore weak leadership; mediocrity can be tolerated because the impact weak leaders have on those around them is less obvious. I've witnessed this myself in organisations of all shapes and sizes when (perhaps because of strong market conditions) things are going well; leaders being largely ignored by the people they're supposed to lead, and even worse the leaders *know* they're being ignored and don't really care. Everyone just keeps their heads down, quietly gets on with things and ignores the problem. But the problem comes rushing to the surface the moment there's a crisis.

When things are tough, as they are in combat and as they undoubtedly are for organisations all around the world at present, strong leadership is required. The actions and behaviour of leaders is seen through a magnifying glass which highlights every small imperfection and their impact on those around them becomes immediately apparent.

Regardless of organisational intent, it is the leaders who either create an environment where people can build strong relationships based on trust and take pride in what they do or who will constrain potential and performance through their own actions and behaviour. In his book The New Leaders, Daniel Goleman describes "resonant" leaders as being attuned to people's feelings, able to channel their own positive energy into the rest of their team. Most of us are extremely receptive to the emotions of others; this is because our brain's emotional system is an open loop, designed specifically to pick up, and reflect, the emotions of those around us.

In the workplace we constantly watch our leaders and managers for emotional cues and we reflect these emotions and copy their behaviour often at a subconscious level. Leaders who recognise this and create positive resonance achieve high levels of motivation, performance and engagement. Daniel Goleman calls these leaders "**High Impact Leaders**".

High Impact Leaders are highly self-aware and recognise the impact their actions and interactions have on others. This knowledge enables them to inspire trust and build strong relationships ensuring that the people they work with understand the value and purpose of

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their work, instilling a sense of pride in what they do. This more than anything achieves engagement and creates a positive environment where people want to achieve their best, and are able to do so.

A "great place to work" then isn't about the building you go to each day for work, the office you sit in or the benefits you receive; it's simply loving what you do and who you do it with. And that's something that with the right leadership, everyone can enjoy.

With grateful thanks to the hundreds of soldiers and officers who contributed to this work, and to those who risk their lives for us on a daily basis. The survey remains open at http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/6JLPJXG.

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