

Digest: Self-Determination Theory applied to Work & Organizations

An interview with Richard M. Ryan, co-developer of Self-Determination Theory



What is Self-Determination Theory? How does it benefit employees and organizations?

Self-Determination Theory is a macro theory linking personality, human motivation, and optimal functioning, that has been successfully applied in various domains including parenting, education, healthcare, sports, and virtual worlds, as well as in the fields of work motivation and management. When it comes to work and organizations, our argument is that when people feel confident in their own skills and abilities, when they feel like they belong and are valued in the workplace, and when they feel empowered and can experience a sense of choice and input in what they do, they are maximally motivated and put out their highest quality work. There has been abundant research in organizations comparing the motivation people get when they are focused on extrinsic rewards versus when they are working for an organization that satisfies their basic psychological needs (competence, autonomy, relatedness). The research has shown that engagement, affective commitment, effort, and even productivity outcomes are all higher when basic psychological needs are satisfied compared to when motivation relies solely on extrinsic rewards.

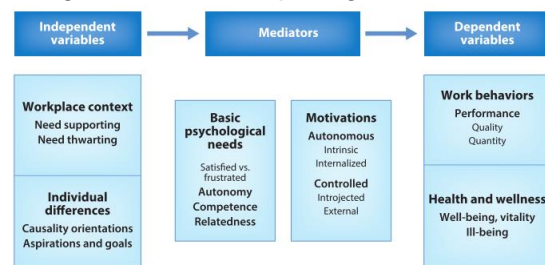


Figure 1
The basic self-determination theory model in the workplace.

How did Self Determination Theory originate? What has changed since then in organizations?

When Edward Deci and I started to work on Self Determination Theory in the 1970s, the dominant management paradigm at that time revolved around a “carrot-and-stick” approach to management, consisting in externally controlling people using rewards, sanctions, and compensations as a way to motivate employees. We took a radical shift from this approach by starting with the assumption that people want to be motivated, accomplish things, and contribute to their organizations. We therefore focused on uncovering the social conditions and management inputs that enable employees to embrace that kind of motivation. Since then, we have seen the SDT principles embraced more and more across the world, and I think it is because leaders have seen how effective it can be and how it is a win-win strategy. I remember back when I was doing my consulting work, people would look at me a little strange because they thought management is all about the rewards, and outcome-focused rewards, in particular. Today people don’t give me that same look. They are ready to hear our message.

In this COVID-19 period, what can managers do to ensure their team members can still satisfy their needs for competence, autonomy and relatedness?

Physical distancing doesn't have to lead to psychological distancing. Right now, we're having a conversation on the internet and it can be intimate, it can be listening, it can be accepting inputs, and it can be providing support and feedback. We can use the tools available to us to support competence, autonomy, and relatedness while working remotely. But that requires thinking about specific strategies and practices that fit the needs and challenges of our current context. Here are a few things I would recommend to managers:

✓ Be more frequently in touch

It's important to structure some time daily in which managers get to speak with their team members, either in teams or as individuals, so they can know what's going on for them. Knowing what's going on for them requires taking an autonomy-supportive approach, listening to them, and opening their ears to the obstacles, struggles, and anxieties that their employees may be facing.

✓ Allow flexibility and empowerment

We're all going to have to adapt to some changing circumstances in the workplace. For example, if I am working at home and my children are running about, it's going to change my work but it doesn't mean that I can't get as much work done. It just means that I will need to structure my time and myself differently to get things done over the day. I think managers' empathy with that and mutuality in problem solving is going to be especially important.

✓ Provide clarity and encouragement

Clarity of goals and priorities are essential right now. Also, during this challenging period, everyone wants to feel some security and positive feedback about how they are contributing and what they are doing. And even when things are not going swimmingly, the managers' role is to be sympathetic, empathic, and to help people struggle with and overcome the barriers that they are facing. One of the most important things that you can do in management is to make people feel that they belong.

What role should top management play? *(During this period and in general)*

Top management should model appropriate managerial styles by empowering their own managers and listening to the obstacles that they may face. They should provide clarity around what the organization's goals and priorities are; however, they should make sure their own managers have inputs and problem solve when it comes to carrying out these goals into concrete plans. This is what autonomy supportive means - you are attuned to the frame of reference of the people who you work with and you are helping them reach the goals that you, as a group, are trying to attain. It's also crucial to explain why a goal is important, and a big part of supporting autonomy is providing a meaningful rationale for why we're after a particular goal. Another important role consists of putting an important emphasis on the company purpose. When employees believe that the company isn't only about profits but actually cares for its people and all its stakeholders, it creates an atmosphere where everyone is more likely to get onboard and be engaged.

References

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About Richard M. Ryan

Richard M. Ryan, Ph.D., is a Professor at the Institute for Positive Psychology and Education at the Australian Catholic University and Professor Emeritus at the University of Rochester. He is a clinical psychologist and co-developer of Self-Determination Theory, an internationally recognized leading theory of human motivation as well as co-founder of motivationWorks Inc., a company that consults on fostering employee engagement. He lectures frequently around the world and has received many distinguished career awards. Ryan is among the most cited researchers in psychology and social sciences today and the author of over 450 papers and books in the areas of human motivation, personality, and psychological well-being, including *Self-Determination Theory: Basic psychological needs in motivation, development and wellness* (Ryan & Deci, 2017, Guilford).