**HOW TO MOTIVATE AND INSPIRE RESEARCH CANDIDATES**

**by Simon Moss**

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| **Introduction** |

Occasionally, even the most dedicated research candidates experience periods in which they do not feel motivated or inspired. And many of the techniques that candidates and supervisors utilize to increase motivation are either ineffective or effective initially but detrimental over time.

You might feel that you already know how to motivate candidates effectively. Nevertheless, to assess your knowledge, skim this table. Which of the following statements are true?

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| Which of these statements are true? |
| When people set a target range—like “I will lose 5 to 8 kg this year”—instead of a specific target—like “I will lose 6.5 kg this year”—they are more likely to achieve these goals (Scott & Nowlis, 2013) |
| After people consider their progress on some goal—such as the weight they have shed—they become even more committed to fulfil this goal (Minjung & Fishbach, 2008). |
| After individuals hear another person describe their strengths and talents, they are more likely to become resilient and persistent. This practice is more effective than merely asking people to describe their own strengths and talents. |
| After people are asked to reminisce, they experience greater optimism (Cheung et al. 2013). |
| If individuals perceive their future as vivid and certain, their emotions, wellbeing, optimism, and motivations tends to improve (McElwee & Haugh, 2010; Moss et al. in press). |
| People are more likely to pursue a vision or goal diligently if they first imagine how they would feel if this aspiration was achieved and then consider two obstacles that could impede this attempt (Kappes & Oettingen, 2014). |
| After people are asked to deliberate on how their duties could help them achieve their key aspirations, they are more likely to achieve these obligations (Unsworth & McNeill, 2016). |
| If people complete three challenging or unnatural tasks each morning, such as brush their teeth with the wrong hand, their capacity to maintain effort across the day improves (Converse & DeShon, 2009) |
| After people imagine the precise feelings and circumstances in which they would like to implement some behaviour, they are more likely to implement this behaviour later effortlessly (Achtziger et al. 2008)—especially if they do not feel obliged to please anyone else (Powers et al. 2005). |
| Individuals who engage in voluntary work during the evening are more likely to experience positive emotions the next day (Mojza & Sonnentag, 2010). |
| After individuals recall a time in their lives in which they were assigned a position of authority or power, they pursue their goals with greater initiative, persistence, and flexibility (Guinote, 2007) |
| Individuals are more likely to persist on tasks when they feel they are competing with an identifiable or specific rival—even if they do not know or see this person (Haran & Ritov, 2014). |
| When individuals set goals around the skills they want to learn or practices they want to apply—instead of the outcomes they want to achieve—they are more likely to sustain their motivation in response to challenges and obstacles (Winters & Latham, 1996) |
| After people deliberately read more rapidly than usual, their mood improves (Pronin, Jacobs, & Wegner, 2008). |
| When people are exposed to reminders of the horizon, they cannot withstand obstacles as well to achieve their goals (Natanzon & Ferguson, 2012). |

All these statements have been substantiated empirically, besides the last statement: Reminders of the horizon increase persistence in response to obstacles. The remainder of this document offers insights on how supervisors could utilize these discoveries as well as other findings to enhance the motivation of their candidates.

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| **Career planning** |

To motivate research candidates, supervisors should occasionally discuss the career prospects of candidates. If candidates cannot envisage their career, their resilience and persistence tends to decline. Therefore, during meetings, supervisors could say “We should discuss your career aspirations occasionally—partly to decide which skills you might want to learn now to benefit your future”. During these conversations, supervisors could then consider these principles:

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| Principles to consider | Examples |
| Encourage candidates to remember previous roles or settings in which they felt excited or empowered. When candidates feel empowered, they are motivated by both goals they can achieve soon and goals they cannot achieve for several months or years (Schmid, 2020). | “To help you clarify your career aspirations, you should think about times in which you felt most proud, important, and enthusiastic. Did you ever experience these feelings in a previous job or even in some other situation?” |
| Prompt candidates to record these moments somewhere, perhaps in a Word file. |  |
| Allude to some of the key strengths of these candidates | “I think you’d really thrive in a role that could utilize your excellent writing skills, your empathy, and your calm manner”. |
| But, also gossip about other candidates and staff—but mainly the favourable actions and attributes of these people | Favourable gossip about other people has been shown to enhance relationships between supervisors and their staff or candidates (Kuo, Wu, & Lin, 2018). |
| Encourage candidates to contemplate how their work and research could assist individuals or communities. They should also contemplate which individuals or communities they would like to help | After individuals are motivated to assist other people, animals, or communities, they feel especially motivated, especially when driven to improve their capabilities too (Levontin & Bardi, 2018) |
| Discuss positions or roles that might integrate their favourite activities with their strengths and skills | “We should list your favourite activities, strengths, skills, and resources. That information could help you clarify your career aspirations—that is, the most suitable position or role in several years. This information could also guide your thesis” |
| Together with the candidates, search relevant websites, such as www.seek.com.au or the government job sites, to uncover possible roles and positions in the future. |  |
| If possible, introduce candidates to potential employers. |  |
| Suggest some voluntary work or activities that could help candidates extend their experiences but also assist a community |  |

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| **Setting goals at the end of meetings** |

At the end of each meeting, supervisors might casually prompt their candidates to set goals they could achieve before the next meeting. They might express words like “So, what are your aims for this week?” or “Do you want to discuss how you should proceed this week”. As research shows, when people share their goals to someone who is high in status, such as a supervisor, they are more likely to achieve these goals (Klein et al., 2019). During this brief conversation, supervisors could then consider these principles:

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| Principles to consider | Examples |
| Inspire candidates to develop a routine around their studies. Interestingly, these routines tend to instil a sense of meaning and purpose (Heintzelman & King, 2019) | Each day, in the first few months, candidates could   * skim 5 abstracts rapidly * read one article about methods * read one article about theory * write 500 words roughly * optimise 50 words |
| Encourage candidates to consider what activities they will undertake rather than what outcomes they will achieve | “OK, so you want to read articles around GIS and then summarize the key recommendations” |
| To assist candidates, you can offer several choices they can pursue. But, whenever possible, offer genuine choices rather than impose your preference. A sense of genuine choice encourages curiosity in candidates (Schutte & Malouff, 2019) | “Here are three possible approaches you could apply to learn about this topic. Choose whichever you prefer” |
| After candidates identify all the activities they will undertake, they should, if possible, specify the precise circumstances in which they are most likely to initiate these activities. These plans tend to foster persistence in response to frustrations (Schmitt, Gielnik, & Seibel, 2019) | * In which order would you like you complete these tasks? * In which circumstances are you most likely to complete these tasks? For example, you might read about GIS when bored on the weekend” |
| Prompt candidates to specify a range of targets they will attempt to achieve. | “How many articles do you think you could read” and then “OK, so perhaps set the goal to read 8 to 12 articles on this topic this week” |
| Initially, set targets that are simpler to achieve. Later, set more challenging targets. If people experience failures too early, they tend to withdraw motivation prematurely (Sjåstad et al., 2020) |  |
| Relate this goal or target to aspirations the candidates have expressed before | “This skill could help you in policy positions at the Department of Business and Industry” |
| Invite candidates to imagine how they will feel if they achieve this goal—but then to identify two obstacles that could impede their progress | “I think you’ll feel more confident after you read these articles. Do you think anything could prevent you from reading these articles?” |
| If candidates are not sure which goals to pursue, encourage these individuals to initiate three distinct but challenging tasks each morning. | “I heard that people can sustain their motivation better if they complete three different but hard tasks each morning”  “You could read few pages as quickly as possible, memorizing some list, or even walking faster than usual”. |
| Encourage candidates to conceptualize some of their tasks as multi-tasking. When people feel they are completing two tasks concurrently, their motivation and performance improves (Srna, Schrift, & Zauberman, 2019) | “When you read an article, also write down phrases you like—so you are completing two tasks at once: learning about the material and improving your writing” |

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| **Responses to doubts** |

During meetings, candidates will often express doubts about themselves, their research, or their future. They might seem disillusioned or deflated. In these instances, supervisors might consider these principles:

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| Principles to consider | Examples |
| Indicate these concerns are normal and can be distressing—but that you are feeling hopeful about their research and future | “I do think these feelings, although hard, are quite natural. But, I’m genuinely confident that just a few minor changes and achievements can transform the whole situation” |
| Highlight the progress the candidate has already forged | “My sense is that you might have progressed so much more than you realize. Rejecting these ideas is actually progress—even if it doesn’t look like that”.  “The insights you have gained will help you work so much more efficiently in the future” |
| Highlight the strengths of candidates | Comments like “I notice you’re very perceptive” have been shown to enhance the positive emotions and engagement of candidates (Quinlan, Vella-Brodrick, Gray, & Swain, 2019) |
| Prompt candidates to contemplate an event or activity that could happen in the future that would evoke a sense of pride. When individuals experience a sense of pride, they are more likely to sacrifice their pleasure now to benefit their life in the future (Shimoni, Berger, & Eyal, 2019). | “What could you do that would make you feel proud. For example…” |
| Prompt the candidates to construct a list of confined tasks they could attempt whenever they feel unmotivated or disillusioned | They could read a chapter that teaches them some skill. They might transcribe why this course is important to them—a task that has been shown to enhance persistence (Schwartz, Eyal, & Tamir, 2018). |
| Ask candidates to form implementation intentions—in which they imagine the precise behaviours they will undertake whenever they feel unmotivated. | “I learned a technique that has been shown to be effective. Apparently, you should imagine yourself, as vividly as possible, feeling unmotivated. Then imagine yourself completing a motivating task, such as learning a skill. Now repeat five times “Whenever I feel unmotivated, I will complete one of the motivating tasks on this list”. |

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| **General demeanour** |

Whenever you interact with your candidates, you should apply this sequence of principles—principles that are collectively called autonomy support. These principles increase the likelihood the candidates feel they can trust their intuition rather than appease you. If candidates feel they need to appease you, their intuitions, innovation, and persistence decline.

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| Principles to follow during all conversations |
| Do not communicate hints, such as “You can choose any methodology, although grounded theory could be better”. Explicitly specify the benefits and drawbacks of each approach, from your perspective. |
| Acknowledge that your perspective may be incorrect—and that you are always receptive to their intuitions or preferences |
| Emphasize the choices, such as “I think you should conduct grounded theory—but you can choose whether you would prefer a constructivist or traditional approach” |
| Refrain from denigrating other people when interacting with candidates; denigrating comments foster an atmosphere in which research candidates feel they might be judged harshly—inciting perfectionism and thus increasing the likelihood of mental health problems |

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