Motivating Safety in Pharmacy: What Can We Do?

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Motivation: The Holy Grail of Management?

How many times have we heard managers and other supervisors lament that their employees just aren’t motivated? We want our staff to work diligently, to put forth extra effort and to treat the job as important, but we often find ourselves at a loss to encourage these kinds of behaviors. Fortunately, the stress that managers feel about this problem is not inevitable; much of it stems from a basic misunderstanding of what motivation is, how to measure it, and whether a lack of behavior necessarily indicates a lack of motivation. In this article, the goal is to educate the reader on the basics of motivation and how those basics may apply to the practice of pharmacy and ultimately to the safety of consumers.

An astute reader might say, “Isn’t there research about occupational health and worker injuries? Shouldn’t we just apply that to our problem?” Although occupational health psychology has made progress in the explication of safety behaviors and safety at work, it is important to note that in many of these studies, the accidents that were studied directly impacted the person involved. That is, when an employee drops a box on his head because of unsafe behavior, it is the employee that suffers the injury—the consumer is rarely (if ever) affected by such an accident. By contrast, when an adverse event is produced in the pharmacy, it is the patient who is in the direct path of that error, not the person or organization that generated it. Thus, techniques for motivating pharmacists and technicians to be safe must take a fundamentally different approach since the outcome risk of pharmacy errors does not fall on the pharmacy staff. In this article, emphasis will be placed on adapting motivational techniques and principles to situations like that in pharmacy where the innocent bystander is the party “in the crosshairs.”
What Do We Mean By Motivation?

When someone says the word “motivation,” what she means is not necessarily clear in all circumstances. In the context of this article, motivation refers to a specific force that provides the energy for behavior to occur. The problem here is that motivation by this definition is unobservable — if someone says that she is “motivated,” it is difficult to disprove the assertion. Further, if this were the definition of motivation used in this article, there would not be much more to say on the topic. Therefore, let’s define motivation as behavior comprised of three components: arousal, or the energy behind the behavior; direction, or the object in the environment that is being approached (or avoided); and persistence, or the ability to surmount obstacles and keep going in the face of failure. In other words, we want employees who have the drive to act, are directing that drive toward (or away from) the proper targets, and able to move in those directions even if the “going gets tough.” When motivation takes this definition, it becomes clear quickly that a simple pep talk before work is probably not going to accomplish anything of consequence.

A second point to make before getting into more specific topics is that motivated behavior is not always behavior toward something. People can also be very motivated to avoid something; in fact, the following statement speaks volumes about how to understand behavior from a motivational standpoint: When you choose to approach something, you are also choosing to avoid something. Every choice “for” is, by definition, a choice “against.” The trick is in knowing which force (the “pull” or the “push”) is the dominant force behind the behavior in question. Why is that important? Because this knowledge facilitates our ability to structure the environment to encourage employees to behave in certain ways (for example, the use of bonuses for salespeople to spur higher sales). Being able to structure the workplace to move employees in whichever direction is best at the time will make you a better motivator in the long run.

Now that the basics of motivation have been laid out, it is important to address some beliefs about motivation that tend to exist in the business world and briefly discuss their truthfulness. We can call these the “Big Three Motivation Myths.”

1) A motivated employee is a more productive employee. There is not a short
answer to this question, other than “maybe.” Productivity depends on so many other factors besides whether the employee is experiencing a motivated state and how frequently this is occurring. For example, motivation doesn’t provide much of a productivity boost if the task at hand is beyond the abilities of the employee. Thus, increasing productivity and profit is not as easy, unfortunately, as fostering motivation in the workplace.

2) **A motivated employee is a satisfied employee.** Again, the answer to this is not clear-cut. It has been shown that motivation and satisfaction can be related in some circumstances. However, satisfaction is linked to a number of factors that have nothing to do with motivation or may even be connected to declining motivation. Satisfaction has roots in personal assessments of pay, co-workers, supervisors, and promotion opportunities, to name a few factors. So, once again, motivation is not a panacea to the problem of employee unhappiness.

3) **We can always motivate employees with money.** This is a myth that is still perpetrated in some businesses today. Though money can be used strategically to increase motivation, its indiscriminate use can actually erode motivation in some situations. One of the more corrosive effects of money is on intrinsic interest in the job; being paid for some task can dramatically affect how much we like the task over time. For example, consider a person who enjoys playing his guitar in his spare time. However, having tried in his younger days to be a professional musician, he learned quickly that “working” at music made it less enjoyable very quickly. So, contrary to the beliefs of some, throwing money at employees to motivate them is generally a poor technique.

The reader might be wondering, then, what can be done to motivate employees? In the next sections, we will answer these questions.

**Motivation in Pharmacy: Some Theories to Consider**

The first question we must ask has to do with what specifically we want to see from employees in terms of behavior. In the context of this article, we are interested in
motivating employees to consider medication safety as a priority at work and behave accordingly.

Secondly, we must search for factors that are potentially impeding motivation concerning safety. In other words, it is improbable that pharmacy staff would admit that they don’t care about patient safety and have no qualms about sending a wrong prescription out of the store. However, general attitudes about safety don’t always translate into safety behaviors. For instance, a pharmacy might require double-checks on all scripts, but time pressure or other factors might keep employees from doing them. It is not that the staff is not motivated to be safe; it is that the work environment does not reward the checking behavior appropriately to compensate for the loss of time to do it. Once these factors have been identified, we must either eliminate them or work them into the motivation strategy.

Third, we must choose a theory of motivation to use. In the section that follows, a select few of these theories will be described. It is important to note that these theories are not all-inclusive of all situations or employees. But, they have shown the most promise in practical situations.

**Goal setting.** The act of setting goals can generate a considerable amount of motivational force if the goals are set properly. In general, four principles must be considered when supervisors work with employees to set goals for their performance. First, the goal must take the ability of the employee into account such that the employee considers the goal to be moderately difficult. If the goal is too hard, the employee will experience frustration; if the goal is too easy, the employee will experience boredom and apathy. It is critical to note here that, in order for a supervisor to guide the employee on this principle, they must know the abilities of the staff. A supervisor that does not know what the staff is capable of will have a difficult time adhering to this goal-setting principle. Second, the goal must contain adequate specificity so that employees know what behavior(s) are expected. A clear target not only makes the supervisor’s job easier when it comes time to evaluate performance, but it encourages motivation in employees because they know exactly what they are targeting and they know exactly how far they are from achieving it. This plays into the third principle, which is that the goal must be connected with timely feedback. Imagine how difficult it would be to play darts if the markings were
not painted on the dartboard. How would you know whether you hit the target or not? In the same way, goals without feedback do not motivate because the employee has no way of determining if she is “on the right track.” Finally, the well-developed goal must foster commitment from the employee. In other words, a goal must be accepted as important and valuable before it will generate motivation. In some cases, allowing the employee to have a voice in setting the goal can improve this commitment, but this strategy does not always work.

We can apply goal setting to pharmacy safety in a number of ways. For example, we could create a set of goals around self-reporting. One goal could be that 90% of self-reports received by supervisors will be discussed in safety meetings each month. Another goal could be that each employee will be subjected to a performance audit each month and that their performance should reach specific levels on metrics that are completely within the control of the employee. This means that setting goals regarding adverse event counts, errors, and similar metrics are not a good idea. A third goal could have to do with the quality of self-reports, such that 95% of all reports contain suggestions from employees on how to correct the problem that led to the incident. It should be noted that goals are not just individual-level phenomena; goals can be set and implemented at the unit or organizational level as well. Though some attempts to integrate goals at multiple organizational levels did not work out as planned in the past, this does not mean that group-level goals cannot work.

**Expectancies.** A second general approach to understanding motivation involves employees’ perceptions of the incentives that are connected to desired behaviors. Specifically, these perceptions are assumed to lie along three dimensions, which are then multiplied together to obtain an estimate of overall motivational force. In other words, motivation in this theory is a direct result of the way in which the situation (goals, incentives, etc.) is perceived by the employee.

The dimensions can be characterized using introspective questions that the employee can ask. The first question has to do with performance expectancies and asks, “What are the chances that I will be able to achieve the goal or incentive before me?” This question relates closely to the goal-setting principle of difficulty in that the best answer to this question is not necessarily “100%.” Such assuredness of success may mean that the
goal is too easy and could make the employee vulnerable to apathy over time. The second question has to do with reward expectancies and asks, “What are the chances that, if I achieve the goal, I will be recognized and/or rewarded for it?” Ideally, this answer should be as close to “100%” as possible. Consider the following scenarios to illustrate this point:

- A supervisor tells employees that everyone who raises their sales by 15% will receive free tickets to Six Flags.
- A supervisor tells employees that everyone who raises their sales by 15% will receive a chance to win free tickets to Six Flags.

The difference is obvious in these two situations. The reward expectancies for Scenario 1 are 100%; the reward expectancies for Scenario 2 are lower by some degree. According to the theory, Scenario 2 should generate less motivation, all other things being equal.

The third question has to do with incentive value and asks, “Do I want the incentive that is being offered?” What if an employee doesn’t like amusement parks? Then the way in which the tickets are meted out probably will not matter to that employee; their motivation will diminish because they don’t value the incentive attached to the goal.

Expectancies may also play a role in motivating safety behavior in the pharmacy. First, consider carefully what rewards are offered for safe behavior. They must be rewards that are valued by the majority of the staff. It may be true that a safer pharmacy will result in an “improved reputation for the store,” but how valuable is that to the average staff member? Second, the concept of reward expectancies suggests that how rewards are dispensed plays a large role in whether motivation will increase or decrease. Psychologists have known for some time that the most persistent behaviors are the ones that have unambiguously contingent rewards. For example, when we are thirsty, we may search out a vending machine. Why? Because we have learned that the chances of getting a drink, providing that we carry out the appropriate behaviors, are virtually 100% (save a machine malfunction). Employees will be motivated to act if they have become convinced that their actions will result in virtually certain rewards.
**Self-determination theory.** Pharmacy is depending more and more on technicians to carry out important work duties. In general, technicians are not as well-trained, are likely to be younger and less experienced than pharmacists, and may be pursuing this line of work temporarily as they attend school to do something else. As such, they may not identify themselves as much with the job of pharmacy and may be less likely to see how safe behavior at work relates to their own sense of self. Self-determination theory may help to explain what motivates these individuals at work. The theory argues, among other things, that the individual is motivated towards three general needs just by being human: the need to develop competence, the need to relate to others, and the need to determine their own lives (autonomy). The data are clear that these needs emerge in infancy and are largely pursued without conscious thought; in other words, they are somewhat innate. Wherever we choose to work, that environment must foster and encourage the attainment of these three needs as much as possible if the ultimate goals are increased motivation, citizenship behavior (going beyond the minimums), and commitment to the organization.

When these needs are applied to the typical pharmacy environment, it is fairly easy to see that the need for competence can be met. Technicians can develop their knowledge of the medications, increase the speed with which they work, and over time feel more confident about their ability to produce scripts in an efficient and timely manner. Pharmacists can also develop competencies beyond their knowledge of medication: multitasking ability, business acumen, counseling techniques and other skills can be grown. However, it is also probable that the typical pharmacy staff member will reach a point where they have mastered the competencies required for the job. The other two needs become more important at that point, as the competency need strivings change from development to maintenance. In other words, the expert is more concerned with *remaining competent* rather than *becoming competent*.

The need for autonomy is also valued in pharmacy. There is typically not a set method for filling scripts; the pharmacist or technician can devise their own system, so to speak. In some pharmacies, the pharmacist is the boss, an entrepreneur who has complete control over her operations. Even in situations which are less flexible (say, for example, a technician in a chain store), supervision is not usually rigid and considerable freedom exists around the way in which work is done. With this environmental support, autonomy
needs are usually satisfied adequately.

The third need, relatedness, is not always met in pharmacy. Even if the pharmacy staff is working together in the same room, a team-based atmosphere generally does not exist. Instead, there are several professionals all working relatively independently on their own tasks. Because of the pace of pharmacy work, interpersonal needs such as relatedness tend to be placed in low priority. Unfortunately, system errors can emerge from poor team-level interactions that have the potential to produce events that can harm patients. Relatedness has been an ignored need in the past in this industry.

Returning to our question of motivation and self-determination, we can start to draw a picture of how this theory may relate to safety behavior. The employee may believe that he is growing in competency, and may believe that he has some autonomy, but the lack of emphasis on relatedness forces him to seek that need outside of work. Having met that need elsewhere, it is difficult to encourage commitment and a sense of identity in the workplace because he has “located” himself in other domains. In other words, if the pharmacy does not emphasize the belongingness aspect of team and organization, the employees will find it somewhere else, and they will not have any desire to identify with the organization. It becomes a means to an end (typically a financial end), and the job ultimately becomes expendable if the going gets tough. This relates to safety because one of the “punishments” for errors is a loss of reputation and a black mark on the organization — but, if the employees don’t care about the organization and are motivated by self-interest, we see blaming and self-protection rather than acceptance of responsibility. It is difficult to learn from and grow beyond errors in such an environment.

Therefore, it is important to prioritize the development of the team behind the bench so that employees will be more apt to incorporate the organization into their personal identity structure. When asked, do your techs say they are “pharmacy technicians” or do they identify themselves as members of your company first? Their answer to this simple question can mean a lot, especially when it comes to tolerating and learning from safety-related mishaps.
A Final Note: Remaining Realistic

Sometimes when the topic of motivation is discussed, some will come to the erroneous belief that applying these ideas will lead inevitably to a super-charged, constantly motivated business juggernaut that is unstoppable, crushing everything in its wake. Though such results would be nice, they are unrealistic. Application of the ideas in this article will set the stage for motivation, but there are a number of other factors that also play a role in whether motivation is realized and whether it leads to observable behavior. In this section, a few of these factors will be outlined in the form of cautions and with the intent of clarifying what the interested pharmacy manager can expect from these ideas as far as tangible results.

1) Motivation changes in intensity over time naturally. Motivation is never a constant; at this moment in time, I am motivated to write this paragraph, but in 30 minutes, I may close the file and go home. Nothing about the task changed, but motivation waned anyway. Researchers have argued for some time that the brain will try to cycle from left to right hemispheric dominance (and back again) about once every 3 hours. A task like writing this article, involving mostly left-hemispheric skills (reading, writing, etc.), will eventually give way to an interest in (and motivation towards) tasks that involve more right-hemispheric activation (like watching TV or playing guitar). So what, you may ask? Well, pharmacy staff are not immune to these cycles, so we can expect their motivation to work to be affected by them. Perhaps the work space could be designed so that employees, once made aware of these cycles and what they “feel” like, can escape for 10-15 minutes to disengage and allow the cycle to take over for a time. It is a far more desirable strategy than autocratically scolding a loss of motivation that is largely beyond anyone’s control.

2) Motivation requires supportive conditions to flourish. Some believe mistakenly that individual motivation is just that — individual. Thus, a motivated person should be motivated regardless of the circumstances within which they must exist. This belief is not in line with the evidence. Remember that motivation is only “seen” when it generates behavior, and behavior is obviously constrained by what’s happening around the
person at the time. Consider the following hypothetical situation:

Serah had always wanted to bungee jump. She talked about it incessantly and she had twice made plans to try it but had to cancel them last minute. Finally, she and her friends have found the opportunity at the state fair to give it a shot. Serah stood at the foot of the tower and looked up; she could barely contain herself. She raced to the top of the tower and began to strap herself into the cords, when suddenly she froze. She remembered her friends telling her that she was nuts and how they would never do something so crazy. The attendant asked her what was wrong, and she nervously said, “I don’t think I want to do this anymore. I’m going back down.”

What happened to Serah? She was clearly motivated by the idea of bungee jumping as evidenced in her behavior before the fair. But, on top of the tower, everything changed. Her friends didn’t support her ambition; was their lack of support affecting her? Did that sink in when she got to the tower? What was she doing this for? Maybe she was crazy?

The point of the story is that motivation without support from the environment has very little chance to get beyond the “dream” stage — we’d like to do it but we never will. I would love to get my private pilot’s license, but my wife refuses to support that. As motivated as I am to pursue it, that motivation will not translate to behavior because of the lack of support.

Safety must be a cultural value that is considered to be critical, inescapable, and valuable. If it is not, employees will not consider it first and behaviors associated with safety will be less likely.

3) **We are not always aware of what motivates us.** This is probably the most problematic of the three statements in this list for managers and supervisors trying to motivate a crew. Sometimes, asking them what they want or how to make the job better may prove fruitless because they don’t really know what to tell you. Consider the types of
music you enjoy (or detest). Why? What is it about country, rock, or soul that you like over other music types? These kinds of questions are difficult to answer, yet the motivation to engage in those music types remains. We see people every day doing jobs that we can’t imagine doing ourselves, yet these people do them daily and are motivated enough to wake up the next morning and do them again. In fact, there are some, I’m sure, who look at pharmacists and wonder how you do it! Therefore, when it comes to motivating a workforce, there is no substitute for trial and error. Remember that you probably won’t get it right the first time, and you may never get it right for everyone at the same time.

There is plenty of data to show what sorts of factors affect the employee’s sense of safety at work, their satisfaction with safety as a core value, etc. But, errors still occur and employees still do unsafe things at work. And, in truth, sometimes they won’t know why.

**Concluding Our Discussion**

In this article, motivation has been discussed from both theoretical and pragmatic perspectives. Attempts were made to trigger ideas about not only what motivates people at work, but how those concepts might be incorporated into the practice of pharmacy. Every employee enters the organizational system with different goals, different aspirations, and different expectations. Motivating them to achieve the level of safety that the pharmacy demands can be trying given all of these ways in which each employee can differ. But, by working on the basic motivational principles outlined in this article first, your chances of understanding your employees and working with your employees to improve the “soil” within which safety motivation can grow can increase.