



Activating the **DESIRE** to Learn

Bob Sullo



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Understanding Internal Motivation

Most schools and classrooms operate on the reward or punishment model, and use stimulus-response, behavior modification, or assertive discipline techniques. Rooted in 19th-century wisdom, this model is based on the belief that human behavior is the result of environmental factors. Explaining the impetus for great works of art and other spontaneous human behaviors requires us to identify the shortcomings of the reward or punishment model and to reject it as incomplete.

Given that we've spent a century or so believing that external stimuli explain human behavior, teacher training programs typically require educators to learn how to systematically reward and punish students. Many educators thus see themselves as responsible for shaping the behavior of students by extrinsically rewarding them for compliance. Yet ironically, our system of rewarding students for academic achievement devalues the very thing we say we want: learning. We send an alarmingly clear message, even if it is unintended: "If it weren't for the reward we are offering, what we are teaching you would not be worth learning." In short, a system of education based on rewards and punishment is fundamentally anti-educational.

According to William Powers (1998), developer of perceptual control theory, one of the first articulated theories of internal control,

People control their own experiences. The only way you can truly force them to behave as you wish is through the threat or actuality of overwhelmingly superior physical force—and even that is only a temporary solution. (p. 122)

Educators agree. Renowned author, consultant, and speaker Alfie Kohn (1993) notes:

Fact 1: Young children don't need to be rewarded to learn. . . . Fact 2: At any age rewards are less effective than intrinsic motivation for promoting effective learning. . . . Fact 3: Rewards for learning undermine intrinsic motivation. (pp. 144, 148)

Eric Jensen (1995), noted author and educational consultant in the area of brain-based learning, writes:

If the learner is doing the task to get the reward, it will be understood, on some level, that the task is inherently undesirable. Forget the use of rewards. . . . Make school meaningful, relevant, and fun. Then you won't have to bribe students. (p. 242)

As William Glasser (1990), creator of choice theory and internationally acknowledged leader in the field of internal control psychology, notes:

What happens outside of us has a lot to do with what we choose to do, but the outside event does not cause our behavior. What we get, and all we ever get, from the outside is information; how we choose to act on that information is up to us. (p. 41)

To successfully apply any psychology, it is essential to have adequate knowledge about that model. To help you take full advantage of the case studies that make up the bulk of *Activating the Desire to Learn*, this chapter provides a comprehensive overview of internal control psychology with an emphasis on choice theory. I highlight choice theory for several reasons:

- Choice theory is a fully developed theory of human behavior, not simply a collection of strategies.
- William Glasser has been involved in schools for over 40 years. His ideas have stood the test of time and have improved the quality of education.
- Choice theory is the approach I have practiced personally and professionally for more than 20 years.

A Question of Belief

If you believe that human behavior is the result of rewards and punishments, that outside events “make” us do what we do, then you are undoubtedly satisfied with our current educational model. On the other hand, if you believe in free will and personal responsibility, then you must be troubled by the prevailing fascination with rewards, punishment, and the desire to externally control others. If you believe that our accomplishments cannot be explained by enticements laced with the fear of being punished, then internal control psychology will make sense to you. You already sense that we are motivated from the inside out.

As someone who believes in personal responsibility, I reject the notion that I have been shaped by rewards and punishment. External forces have an impact on me, but they don’t “shape” me. I accept responsibility for my success and my failure. Freedom, choice, and responsibility are the essence of humanity, and I embrace them fully. I share that with the students, teachers, and parents I work with every day. It is why I have written this book. It is what I believe.

Motivation from the Inside Out

Internal control psychology is based upon the belief that people are *internally*, not externally, motivated. Powerful instructions that are built into our genetic structure drive our behavior. The outside world, including all rewards and punishment, only provides us with information. It does not *make* us do anything.

Not surprisingly, students who are subjected to rewards and punishment over an extended period see themselves as “out of control”—people whose success or failure is attributable to forces *outside* of themselves. They become irresponsible. That children develop a mind-set of irresponsibility should not surprise us when they have repeatedly been told that we will “make” them behave, do their homework, learn the assigned material, and so on. Our reliance on the principles of external control psychology has unwittingly spawned a population alarmingly