

4-Drive Model: New Theory on Employee Motivation

By Kurt Nelson, PhD

The 4-Drive Model of Employee Motivation was presented by Lawrence and Nohria in 2002. The model is a holistic way of looking at employee motivation beyond the typical “pay” model that is prevalent in the corporate world today. I will not go into detail regarding the model here, but just give an overview and how this model presents a new way of thinking for organizational leaders.

*The Four Drive theory is based on research that shows four underlying drives – the drive to **Acquire & Achieve**, to **Bond & Belong**, to be **Challenged & Comprehend** and to **Define & Defend**.*



Each of these drives is important if we are to understand employee motivation. While companies typically focus on the drive to Acquire & Achieve (i.e., base pay, cash incentives, etc...), the other three drives play an integral part in fully motivating employees. Thus, this new theory provides a more comprehensive model for employers to look at when they are trying to find ways to increase employee engagement and motivation.

For instance, companies often pay lip service to team building as they don’t see how it really impacts performance. The Four Drive model shows that team building relates directly to the drive to Bond & Belong – which in turn can influence an employee’s motivation. Thus conducting a team building session should no longer be just about having fun for a few hours, it should help a company’s employees positively build and enhance the bonds they have with their co-workers.

The drive to be Challenged & Comprehend highlights the fact that we perform better when we are engaged (i.e., not bored) and learning on the job. Instead of trying to automate and simplify all work, leaders should look at how they can enhance or create challenges for employees and provide them opportunities to learn and grow. With this in mind, organizations must look at how they are structuring their jobs, their projects, their incentives.

Finally, organizations do not typically think of the drive to Define & Defend when they are thinking about motivation. The Four Drive model indicates that a company’s reputation, its moral bearing, being part of

some larger aspirational group, and the culture can all be significant factors in how motivated employees are. This drive can be activated by the company as a whole, but more often is driven by smaller sub-groups within the organization (e.g., division, district, award winners, guild systems, affinity groups, etc..).

Sales Motivation using the Four Drive Model

Salespeople who are engaged in their roles, who are motivated to succeed, and whose goals are aligned with the organizational goals have been shown to have a significant impact on helping an organization succeed (Badovick, Hadaway, & Kaminski, 1992). Successful organizations understand this and try to keep their sales employees motivated and engaged through a variety of motivational methods - mostly involving extrinsic rewards.

While much has been much written in the popular press about how extrinsic rewards may have a detrimental effect of on a sales person's intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, Kohn, or Pink) there is little support for this in real world sales applications. Indeed, no one disputes the significant short-term impact that extrinsic rewards can have on a company's performance. The benefits of extrinsic rewards assure us that these rewards will be used in businesses no matter what Dan Pink has to say on the topic. However, this does not mean that these types of programs can't be improved.

Successful organizations and leaders of the future not only need to focus on the optimization of extrinsic reward programs but also on moving other levers within the organization that can drive sales motivation.

Sales and the Four Drives

First, **the Drive to Acquire & Achieve** must be met. This means that extrinsic incentive programs need to be optimized around the Acquire aspect, as well as the Achievement element. Thus, the way that outstanding performance is recognized, the type of perks that are provided, the career path that is provided must be looked at in terms of their overall motivational value. The standard "pay them more and get more performance" mantra doesn't apply – it means that sometimes a written letter of appreciation generates more motivation than a thousand dollar check. It means that titles and achievement awards can have a significant boost to engagement.

The Drive to Bond & Belong is also key to driving motivation. Leaders need to understand that sales representatives thrive on building relationships – both inside the company and with their clients. However, systems, processes and rules that are put in place have a way of getting in the way of this. Today's clients often don't allow for your sales people to take them out on the golf course or to a fancy dinner. Sales representatives often work out of their home office with little interaction with other employees. Successful leaders will look for new and unique opportunities for their sales people to interact and form social connections. District meetings are more than just a time to convey information and train, they become an important connection moment for the team. Additional opportunities to meet with others or interact are also important – such as training sessions, sales meetings, social groups, select groups, and award programs. Social media is a new tool that holds a huge potential for building these relationships.

The Drive to Comprehend & Challenged motivates many sales representatives to higher performance. For years it has been known that setting stretch goals can greatly impact sales performance. This type of goal creates a challenge that drives motivation. This is a key motivation in a sales culture. It is why competitions (President's Clubs, Top Performer Awards, Circle's of Excellence) work. We are driven to overcome challenges – and sales people are typically highly attuned to these types of programs. Sales organizations also need to look at ways to leverage this drive beyond just achieving sales goals. Key to this is providing opportunities to be challenged across a broad range of corporate initiatives (i.e., customer value, quality, intelligence gathering, new products, etc...).

This drive also focuses on comprehension or learning. This is something that is often missed in sales incentive programs or sales jobs in general. To maximize performance, make sure that there are regular ongoing opportunities or requirements that get the sales representative engaged in learning (learning more about the customer, how to sell, product information, program information, etc...). This is beyond the standard two week intro training and the training that happens in a crash course over the three day National meeting. The more that you can keep the sales people engaged everyday with learning, the more engaged they will be.

The Drive to Define & Defend is often the hardest lever to pull. This drive is focused on providing a larger purpose for what sales people do – more than just “selling” whatever product or service your organization is offering. This means that you need to align their job to something larger and meaningful. For instance, pharmaceutical companies' sales operations often focus on meeting sales numbers but neglect to focus on how their drug can save or improve people's lives. Take a tip from your advertising or marketing team – make sure to focus on what the company is doing for your customer. It also means that leaders need to communicate more often and about both the negative and the positive aspect. Sales (as well as all employees) have an innate ability to pick up BS. They will fight long and hard for a company that they believe in and one that has their back – but the moment they sense deceit or feel belittled, they can turn into your biggest liability.

While alignment with the larger organization is desirable, we have found that most individuals feel a greater sense of bonding with a smaller group within the organization. These can range from the region, division, or district type affiliations; they can also be groups within a company that a sales person feels a part of such as award winners (President's Club winners), project teams, sports team, guilds, or affinity groups (i.e., Iowa Hawkeye Club). These types of groups should be encouraged or started.

This means...

Sales representatives and district managers are motivated by more than money. If we are truly focused on improving the performance of sales people, then we have to look beyond the typical extrinsic reward paradigm. The 4-Drive Model of Employee Motivation highlights how this can be done. This means taking a holistic look at all the drives that impact sales performance and having them work in tandem together.

The impact that this insight can have on the bottom line for an organization is significant. Companies that enhance all four drives, leverage their overall impact. Research from Harvard shows that 1% relative improvement in one drive leads to a 6% increase in employee motivation level while 1%

increase across all four drives increases can increase the overall relative motivation by 38%. The whole is greater than the sum of the parts.