Why We Do What We Do: Understanding Self-Motivation
     by Edward L. Deci

Ch. 1 – Authority and Discontents

1. By Failing to deal effectively with the stresses and pressures in their own lives, individuals add stresses and pressures to the lives of others.

2. When autonomous, people are fully willing to do what they are doing, they embrace the activity with a sense of interest and commitment. Their actions emanate from their true sense of self, so they are being authentic. In contrast, to be controlled means to act because one is being pressured. When controlled, people act without a sense of personal endorsement. Their behavior is not an expression of the self, for the self has been subjugated to the controls. In this condition, people can reasonably be described as alienated.

9. Most people seem to think that the most effective motivation from outside the person, that it is something one skillful person does to another. There are numerous prototypes. Think for example of the locker-room speech where the coach, through the power of his gifted tongue, coddles and urges, shames and exhorts, and in so doing turns wimps into champs. Or think of the orderly classroom where the concerned teacher, through the cunning use of rewards and punishments, turns little beasts into compliant learners.
      To the contrary, however, all the work that Ryan and I [Deci] have done indicates that *self*-motivation, rather than external motivation, is at the heart of creativity, responsibility, healthy behavior, and lasting change. External cunning or pressure (and their internalized counterparts) can sometimes bring about compliance, but with the compliance come various negative consequences, including the urge to defy. Because neither compliance nor defiance exemplifies autonomy and authenticity, we have continuously had to confront an extremely important—seemingly paradoxical—questions: How can people in one-up positions, such as health-care providers or teachers, motivate others, such as their patients or students, who are in one-down positions, if the most powerful motivation leading to the most responsible behavior, must come from within—if it must be internal to the self of the people in the one-down positions?

PART ONE: THE IMPORTANT OF AUTONOMY AND COMPETENCE

Ch. 2 – I'm Only in It for the Money: Early Experiments on Rewards and Alienation

19. But one of the most troubling problems we face in this culture is that as children grow older they suffer a profound loss. In schools, for example, they seem to display so little of the natural curiosity and excitement about learning that was patently evident in those very same children when they were three or four years old. What has happened? Why is it that

so many of today's students are unmotivated, when it could not be more clear that they were born with the natural desire to learn?

29. When people talk about control, they usually mean coercion—they mean controlling through power and threats. Most people find it easy to accept that the use of force can have a range of negative consequences. Dictators control, and dictators are despised. But money also controls. When people say that money motivates, what they really mean is that money controls. And when it does, people becoming alienated—they give up some of their authenticity—and they push themselves to do what they think they must do. One take on the meaning of alienation is that it begins as people lose touch with their intrinsic motivation, with the vitality and excitement that all children possess, with the doing of the activity for its own sake, with the state of being that Robert Henri called a more than ordinary moment of existence.

Ch. 3 – The Need for Personal Autonomy

37. ...two different interpersonal styles. One would be controlling, conveyed with words like "should" and "have to," while the other would be noncontrolling—more egalitarian, if you will.

39. But something else began to happen during practice sessions; Lisa would watch the clock. She as no more interested in the violin itself, but she was a lot more interested in completed the practice sessions.
    This was an observation about a young girl who was told to practice a certain amount of time to get a reward/gift at the end of the semester.

41. Pressuring people to win, which seems to come so naturally in competitive situations, is likely to have a negative effect, even for winners. And, of course, for losers, the effect is worse.

43. By setting limits in an autonomy-supportive way—in other words, by aligning yourself with the person being limited, recognizing that he or she is a proactive subject, rather than an object to be manipulated or controlled—it is possible to encourage responsibility without undermining authenticity.

Ch. 4 – Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivation: The Yields of Each

47. We expected that learning in order to be tested would feel very controlling to the students, whereas learning to put the information to active use [teaching] would feel like an exciting challenge. After students had learned the material, we assessed their intrinsic motivation with a questionnaire, and we found, as expected, that those who learned in order to be tested were less intrinsically motivated. ...the students who learned in order to put the material to active use [teaching] displayed considerably greater conceptual understanding of the material than did the students who learned in order to be tested.

69. It is thus imperative, when using praise, to be careful about your own intentions. Are you praising in an attempt to get the person to do more? Are you perhaps being subtly controlling? With praise, with rewards, with limits, if you want to use them in a way that does not undermine intrinsic motivation, you have to take pains to minimize the controlling language, the controlling style, and your own agenda of controlling the other person's behavior.

71. When people were told that they did not perform well, they felt in competent and controlled, and all their intrinsic motivation was drained away.

72. One of the heartening things you will find if you are truly autonomy supportive with trainees, subordinates, or anyone else you are teaching or supervising, is that those people will typically be amazingly accuracy in evaluating their own performance. In many cases, they may be more accurate than you are.

PART TWO: THE ROLE OF INTERPERSONAL CONNECTEDNESS

Ch. 6 – The Inner of Development

84. The important of autonomy support [a.k.a. the teacher] for human development has been confirmed by Ryan and myself not only by our research, but by our clinical work as well.

86. Repeatly, the experiments have shown and I have emphasized that people need to feel competent and autonomous for intrinsic motivation to be maintained and, I now argue, for development to proceed naturally.   **...To be intrinsically motivated people need to *perceive themselves* as competent and autonomous; they need to feel that they are effective and self-determining. Someone else's opinion does not do the trick. ....People's perception of competence (or incompetence) are often quite closely linked to their actual performance at some target activity. When people succeed at an activity, the research shows that they are likely to perceive themselves to be more competent. The same is true when they win a competition and when they receive positive feedback.**

Ch. 7 – When Society Beckons

92. ...our job goes beyond just encouraging them to do the activities; it's more challenging than that. *The real job involves facilitating their doing the activities of their own volition, at their own initiative, so they will go on doing the activities freely in the future when we are no longer there to prompt them*.

101. **First, providing a rational for doing the uninteresting activity seemed necessary**. ....In the experiment, our rationale for asking subjects to do the vigilance task was so that they could improve their concentration; it is after all, a task much like the ones use for training air-traffic controllers. **Second, it seemed important to acknowledge that people might not want to do what they were being asked to do.** ....Here, we expected it to help the subjects integrate the regulation of the uninteresting behavior. **Finally, we thought it essential that the language and style we used to initiate participation in the activity involve minimal pressure.** The request should be more like an invitation than a demand, emphasizing choice rather than control.

104. ...autonomy support is hard work. It requires being clear, being consistent, setting limits in an understanding, emphatic way.

Ch. 8 – The Self in a Social World

116. He began living up to his potential because he stopped trying to. He had given up his ego involvement. It's a paradox, but it's true.

120. What characterizes the most mature and satisfying relationships is that the true self of one person relates to the true self of another. Each is dependent on the other, but each maintains his or her autonomy, his or her integrity, his or her sense of self. To the extent that each is in the relationship autonomously, with a true sense of choice, the relationship will be healthy, and each partner will be able to respond from his or her true self and will be able to support the individuality and idiosyncrasies of the other.

Ch. 9 – When Society Corrupts

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PART THREE: HOW IT ALL WORKS

Ch. 10 – How to Promote Autonomy

142. Autonomy support is a personal orientation you can take toward other people—particularly other people in one-down positions. This orientation flavors every aspect of your interactions with them. It requires being able to take their perspective—being able to see the world as they see it. It thus allows you to understand why they want what they want and why they do what they do. **Simply stated, to be autonomy supportive as, say, a manager means being able to grasp what it is like to be an employee of yours, in your company, community, and industry.**

149. When limits are necessary, there are several important considerations that will help ensure that the limit setting does not undermine autonomy. First, it is possible to have people set their own limits. If an individual's choices might infringe on the rights of others in

the group, the group as a whole—rather than its manager or teacher—could discuss the issue and arrive at a set of limits.

150. When people who are being limited understand the reason for limits, they are also more likely to accept them without feeling undermined.

150. The issue of providing useful information, of course, goes far beyond just making limit setting more effective. Understanding the usefulness or importance of the tasks people are doing and of the organization's policies allows people to feel more a part of the organization, less alienated from it. In some cases, particularly in education, it may be useful to beyond just providing a rationale to encourage people to think for themselves about why a task might be useful for them. Even when students or employees are told what they must do and how they must do it, encouraging them to think through why they are being asked to do it in a particular way can be a valuable problem-solving task. When they fully understand why something is important they will be more willing to do it autonomously.

151. One of the main purposes of setting limits with children and students is to communicate that life is full of choices and every choice has its consequences. They can choose what they want, but they need to be ready for the consequences. Those are simply the facts of life. Limit setters are working against themselves if they try to force others to comply. Only when the others have *chosen* to stay within the limits will the process be successful, and the process is most likely to succeed when the limit setters can take the others' perspective, minimizing the pressure and keeping the lines of communication open.

152. In setting individual limits, it is important to approach the task from the other person's perspective. I have known many managers who routinely work sixty-hour weeks. They work evening and weekend hours, and they keep very task-focused throughout. For such people, who often have substantial salaries and various perks, their job is challenging, exciting, and rewarding. It is a source of personal fulfillment. But a problem that I have sometimes seen arise is that they expect other employees, such as a secretary or assistant, to be there whenever they need him or her, no grasping that the expectation may be very inappropriate. The other person's life may not allow it, even if it does, the expectations may still be inappropriate given the circumstances.

153. The best way to set goals that are optimal for a work group and its members—or for a class and its students—is to involve the people in the process. Being autonomy supportive results in optimal goals that people will commit to because they themselves play an active role in formulating those goals. Through group or individual discussions, the people one supervises or teaches can be encouraged to think about what they are doing, what they ought to be able to accomplish in the weeks or months ahead, what potential obstacles might pop up, and so on. This process is useful in many ways: it leads to optimal goals; it helps people reflect on the way they are doing their jobs; it encourages them to take on new challenges; and it enhances their motivation to attain the goals. And, it provides a standard against which performance can later be appraised.

155. Competition s are typical all or not, which means that many superb performers become losers. A team that is second or third (out of, say, eight) on every single criterion wins nothing, even though in a sense they may be the best overall performers of the year.

157. Over and over, teachers have told us that they began their careers with excitement and enthusiasm, eager to work with students to facilitate their intellectual and personal development. But as the years. Passed and the pressures and demands intensified, the teachers have said, they lost much of their enthusiasm. They point to standardized curricula, where they have to teach specified material rather than what seemed right to them, and to the pressures on them to be sure their students get high standardized achievement scores.

It occurred to use that these kinds of pressures may actually make the teachers more controlling—they feel pressured, so in turn they pressure the students. We did an experiment to test this hypothesis. We had subjects come into the lab to teach students how to solve problems. We gave the teachers plenty of time to practice with the problems, we gave them both a list of useful hints and the actual solutions to all the problems. The teachers had been randomly assigned to one of two groups, and everything was the same for the two groups except for the fact that we made one additional statement to the teachers in one group. We said, "Remember, it is your responsibility as a teacher to make sure your students perform up to high standards."

We tape-recorded the teaching session that followed, and later we analyzed the teaching styles. The results were astonishing. The teachers to who we had mentioned "performing up to high standards" spent twice as much time talking during the teaching session as the other teachers. They also made three times as many directives and three times as many controlling statements (e.g., using words like "should" and "must").

In a way, it is all quite ironic. Parents, politicians, and school administrators all want students to be creative problem-solvers and to learn material at a deep, conceptual level. But in their eagerness to achieve these ends, they pressure teachers to produce. The paradox is that the more they do that, the more controlling the teachers become, which, as we have seen so many times, undermines intrinsic motivation, creativity, and conceptual understanding in the students. The harder the teachers are pushed to get results, the less likely it is that the important results will be forthcoming. The same is true for managers and others in one-up positions. The more they feel pressured to get results from their employees (or children, or athletes, or students) the harder they push. Unfortunately, the process, they typically sabotage their own efforts.

Ch. 11 – Promoting Healthy Behavior

162. People with autonomous reasons for entering the programs [drug addition, weight-loss, etc.] were ones who were ready to take charge of their own drinking or eating

behaviors because they were tired of having dulled senses, hangovers, and stressful relationships caused by alcohol abuse, or of feeling sluggish and having trouble moving around cause by severe obesity. They were simply ready to improve the quality of their own lives.

162. One might wonder, therefore, why all participants in treatment programs aren't ready to take charge of their drinking and eating behaviors, and more generally why people are not fully willing to be autonomously self-regulating of behaviors that will make them healthier.

The reason, quite simply, is that abusing alcohol, as well as smoking and overeating, all serve a purpose. They bind anxiety, provided an escape from pressures, or provide some other similar type of comfort. Drinking may dampen people's feelings of loneliness, for example; eating may allow people to avoid their fears of rejections; and smoking may help people tolerate the nervousness they feel when they encounter a group of people in a social setting. Each of these behaviors can serve many different purposes which make them resistant to change.

163. To be ready to change self-destructive behaviors, people have to reach the point where they are willing to allow the feelings that the behaviors are blocking. People must be ready to feel the frightening sense of inadequacy, the painful fear of abandonment, the terror of their mortality, or whatever it is that continues to power the unhealthy behaviors. They also have to be willing to "feel different" from others when they drink seltzer at a party where everyone else is drinking liquor; they have to be ready to resist the rich desserts that are put on the table in front of them; and they have to be willing to get up and go bogging when they would rather sit and watch television.

When people are ready to accept responsibility—responsibility of the deepest and most profound type—for the behaviors that are so directly related to their well-being, the returns are likely to be great.

166. Compliance conveys the sense of being a "pawn"; it conveys the sense of doing something because others told you to. Using the term can thus strengthen the view that "encouraging people to behave in health-promoting ways" is a matter of controlling their behavior—making them comply.

168. Then the doctor came in wearing a Hawaiian print shirt rather than a white smock, and he introduced himself using his first name. His assistants, while clearly respectful, also called him by his first name.

169. People sometimes ask how they can tell if their doctor is autonomy supportive. The answer, really, is quite straightforward. Pay attention to how you feel when you leave the doctor's office. Do you feel constricted, one-down, and passive, as I did when I left that internist's office? Or do you feel comforted and respected, as I did when I left my dentist's.

170. Focusing on the technical aspects leads one to specialize in order to be a true expert. With the concern for biological causes and cures, doctors have to become oriented

towards treating organs rather than people. The patients, in turn, have often felt that they are not being related to by their doctors and that they are not getting the information they need to manage their own health care. The highly technical focus has thus widened the gulf between the expert doctors who are the prescribers and the patients who are expected to comply with the doctors' orders.

Ch. 12 – Being Autonomous Amidst the Controls

184. In one study, for example, patients in a weight-loss program who personalities were more autonomy-oriented viewed their health-care providers as being more autonomy supportive, and these perceptions, in turn, had positive health consequences. In another study, medical students who personalities were more autonomy -oriented experienced their instructors as being more autonomy supportive, and that, too, had positive consequences.

      The important point, both theoretically and practically, is that the extent to which people's behaviors is autonomous, creative, vital, and intrinsically motivated is determined by an interaction of their own personalities (what we call their autonomy orientation) and the degree to which the social context is autonomy supportive.

192. *The true meaning of being alive is not just to feel happy, but to experience the full range of human emotions.*

194. The truth is that there are no techniques that will motivate people or make them autonomous. Motivation must come from within, not the techniques. It comes from their deciding they are ready to take responsibility for managing themselves.

196. Meaningful change comes out of an organismic readiness. It comes when people feel that now is the time to change, when they are ready to enact a commitment each moment. Pressuring does not help; indeed, it is likely to hurt just as blaming oneself is likely to hurt. When people feel pressured, compliance or defiance results. Compliance produces change that is not likely to be maintained, and defiance blocks change in the first place. Meaningful change occurs when people accept themselves, take interest in why they do what they do, and then decide that they are ready to do differently.

PART 4: CONCLUSION

Ch. 13 – The Meaning of Human Freedom

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