

An Invitational View of Human Motivation

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This paper identifies three apparent misconceptions about human motivation and explains how Invitational Education provides a better understanding of human behavior.

The first misconception is that some people are unmotivated.

This misconception is probably caused by the belief that because people don't do what we want or wish them to do, they are unmotivated. The opposite is true. Every human being is motivated 100 percent of the time when engaged in any activity. This motivation is a personal, internal force that every person has at all times and places. People may do things that make little or no sense to us but this does not mean that they are unmotivated. If they really were unmotivated, they would not be doing anything. They would be dead.

By accepting the assumption that every person is always motivated, the Invitational Educator is freed from trying to be some sort of god, reaching down to motivate other people. Rather, he or she is free to focus on influencing the direction this motivation will take. By analogy, the automobile is ready and the engine is running. Invitational Education focuses on preparing the road and providing roadmaps.

The second misconception is that we can motivate other people.

If we define motivation as an intrinsic and basic drive toward self-fulfillment, it is impossible to motivate another human being. We can trick, threaten, reinforce, shape, punish, reward, bribe, seduce, or invite other people, but none of these can be called intrinsic motivation. Of these efforts, the only one that is in keeping with Invitational Education is to summon people cordially to realize their potential.

Invitational Education takes the position that we cannot and should not attempt to motivate other human beings. Respect for the integrity and freedom of the other person is paramount. Rather than taking a "do to" approach, Invitational Education advocates a "do with" process intentionally based on trust, respect, optimism, and care. This environment consists of people, places, policies, programs, and processes that are designed to intentionally invite people to see themselves as able, valuable, responsible and to behave accordingly.

The third misconception is that we act "without thinking."

Behavior is lawful. It is never capricious. Our thoughts may be at a low level of awareness (the feeling of a belt around the waist), or a very high level (a sudden scary noise at night.) There is always some level of awareness and purpose in our

behavior. Although we may live to regret some or many of our actions, we never act without purpose. This purpose is to maintain, protect, and enhance the personal perception of self. No matter how counter-productive or self-destructive a person's behavior might appear from an external viewpoint, from the person's viewpoint, at that moment of action, it is perceived as the best and safest available behavior to maintain, protect, and enhance the self.

Invitational Educators who accept the premise that people always act with purpose will seek to "read behavior backwards." How does the world appear from the other person's personal awareness? Since all behavior is a product of perceptions, to understand the behavior of others requires that we work backward to understand their perceptions. If we observe behavior carefully, it should be possible to understand the feelings, attitudes, purposes, and perceptions of other people.

By avoiding these three misconceptions, the Invitational Educator is in a far better position to understand human motivation and to use this understanding to become a beneficial presence in the lives of fellow human beings.