

Motivation Mastery: Enhancing Workplace Culture Through Psychological with Aaron Robbins

Announcer: You're listening to the HR Mixtape, your podcast with the perfect mix of practical advice, thought-provoking interviews, and stories that just hit different so that work doesn't have to feel, well, like work. Now, your host, Shari Simpson.

Shari Simpson: Joining me today is Aaron Robbins, president of Intrinsic First, a company founded on the academic theories associated with intrinsic motivation. Aaron is a dynamic executive with nearly 20 years of expertise in leadership, HR, and process improvement dedicated to enhancing workplaces through leadership science and culture. Reflecting his commitment to organizational success, he has been recognized with a CXO Outstanding Leadership Award and the San Diego Top Workplaces Award. He is actively pursuing a PhD in organizational behavior psychology and holds multiple degrees in IO psychology and mechanical engineering.

Shari Simpson: Aaron, thank you so much for jumping on the podcast with me. Yeah, you're welcome. I'd love if you could share a little bit more about your background and your passion and what you do for our audience.

Aaron Robbins: Well, my background is a little bit interesting and twisted. I actually started as a mechanical engineer in the beginning of my career, but I moved into process improvement and then project management. And that led me into this role running executive leadership where my boss asked me to take over HR. or I got put into an HR position. I was VP of HR, and it turns out I actually really liked the psychology of leadership and organizational culture. And so I went back, got a master's in IO psychology, and then now I'm working on a PhD in organizational behavior psychology. So I've worked mostly in the defense space as a government engineer, a civilian, federal employee, and then as a contractor. And yeah, so I started my company Intrinsic First about four years ago, and we do some government contracting work, but what I'm really growing on my side is this new business line to do leadership and culture development for organizations.

Shari Simpson: That's fascinating. You know, for our listeners, they know I have kids that are in the military. So I'm always fascinated by hearing, you know, how people interact with different types of government entities. So what a cool story to get to where you are today. And we're going to be talking about motivation, which I think is just such an important topic right now. So let's start here. Can you explain the difference between increasing motivation versus improving the quality of motivation?

Aaron Robbins: Yeah, for sure. So it all comes down to a theory that we work in and everything that we do is founded in motivation science, right? And what we're trying to do is teach people how to apply that science and what the new science has shown us about self-determination theory is that the impact, the real impact and motivation is not about quantity. Like you said, it's about quality. And what that means is,

is that you can, measure motivation or assess motivation on different in different regulations from controlled to autonomous or from external to internal. And so you can look at motivation in terms of I need to motivate somebody, but really all that is is external motivation. It's really not motivation, it's manipulation. You're trying to bribe someone, essentially, or get them to do something to avoid a negative thing, or because it's imposition. They feel guilty or peer-pressured. And that's low-quality motivation. And that's how we typically look at things because of reinforcement theory and the industrial area and all that. High quality motivation is internal. It's internalized. It's inherent. It's part of who you are. You're doing it either because you love it or because it's how you see yourself. It's just part of your identity. And that, that's high quality motivation. That's what leads to well-being, higher performance, people taking on better, bigger challenges, being more creative. There's all these things that the research has shown over the last 20, 30 years of the benefits of being, you know, having high quality motivation.

Shari Simpson: What do you think some of those key components that we need to think about when we're really trying to understand how we enhance motivation in our employees?

Aaron Robbins: You set me up, I think. No. So again, going back to the research, the research has identified three basic psychological needs is what they call them. It sounds kind of academic. But there's three needs that are universal. Everyone has it. If you're a human, you have it, regardless of your demographic. And those are autonomy, relatedness, and competence. They sound kind of technical. We have different words. I'm also the managing director for a company called Mojo Moments. We call it choice, connection, and competence. But same thing really is autonomy is about feeling that you're doing something of your own volition, right? That you chose to do it and that you're not being manipulated. That it's not because some reward, well, I've got to do it for the money, right? I can't not do it. Or I feel pressured into it, so I'm going to have to do it. It's that you're doing it for your own volition. Relatedness is about connection with people and feeling that you're part of something bigger, that you're respected, that there's purpose behind what you do. And then competence is about not being competent. It's not about your level of expertise. It's about feeling that you can apply your skills in a way that leads to a sense of accomplishment, growth, learning, you know, that sort of thing.

Shari Simpson: Yeah, so what are we getting wrong then in HR? What are the misconceptions that we're bringing to the table as we try to have those, you know, we're all having those conversations. How do we increase discretionary effort? How do we make our employees excited about it? If it's all internal, what are the things that we're bringing to the table that just aren't working?

Aaron Robbins: Where do you start, right? I think the first thing is, is even a mindset is that it's not about how do we get our people to do this, right? We're not, that, that just, that language leads to the

low quality motivation. It leads to the external rewards and incentives and We have to change our thinking on that. We have to create, I love the analogy of leadership as a gardener, right? And being a leader is like growing plants in a garden. You can't tell a plant what to do to make it grow bigger or faster, right? You can't yell at it to make it grow faster. You have to create the environment for it to thrive. You have to have the right sunlight, the right food, the right water, the right soil and all those things, that's how you improve motivation. And so you think about like, for example, reward systems, right? Reward systems are good if they're used in a way that enhances a person's feelings of relatedness and competence, the basic psychological needs. So we want a reward not to be the object of what they're doing, which is a fine line, right? And you got to be very careful about how you do it. You want it to be a way of recognizing the accomplishments they've made or recognizing the growth or learning they've made and creating connection, right?

Shari Simpson: It's amazing because I think you're right that we think that there's this correlation to the thing that they're getting, right? And that's not it. It's more dynamic. It's more internal than that. How do you see leaders then really thinking about those things like the environment, rewards and recognition, coaching and feedback? How do we help our leaders think about those as a gardener? How do we help them make that transition?

Aaron Robbins: So I think first is, I don't know, what I see is everybody wants the simple, easy solution, right? And in leadership, there just isn't that. And there's so many books out there that the first thing they say in the book is leadership is not easy, right? Or leadership is complicated, and it is. There is no, there's lots of things that you can get a recipe for or a process for to do very well and make it repeatable. The way, in my opinion, you make leadership repeatable is by learning some of the theory, and you have to be able to balance that, right? There is a way to apply it in the process, but you have to know some of the theory, right? So I think the first thing we do is we have to help educate people just on how motivation works. if we're talking about that motivation, because some of it is just realizing that, oh my gosh, that's why I feel this way, right? And then, you know, you get into mindfulness and being more emotional intelligence, being more aware of your emotions. The more you understand your feelings and emotions, the more you can understand what your values are and what your needs are to be able to essentially shift your motivational outlook and you can proactively do that. That's what we believe. And that's part of what we say motivation is a skill. It's not being motivated. Everyone's motivated in one way or another, but it's about shifting that motivational quality from low quality to high quality. So I think, you know, we have training programs where we teach individuals how that works. First, you got to understand where you are. Just like any place you're going, if you don't know where you are on the map, you don't know which direction ahead. And then you work on how can I fulfill my basic psychological needs? And then as a leader, how do I create an environment that's

supportive of people's psychological needs? And how do I make my interactions in terms of my skills for feedback or an active listening and having empathy and trust and all these things? That's what helps create and fulfill those needs.

Shari Simpson: What do you say to those leaders who, and I'll go back to your Gardner analogy, you know, those leaders who are looking at their field and like, well, my field is producing, why do I have to do all this extra work to create a great environment if my KPIs are being met, if my goals are being met? Why do I, I mean, and I'm playing devil's advocate, obviously, because I believe that that's important, but we do run into that as HR professionals, where we have to kind of convince leaders that all the things you just talked about are actually super good for the bottom line.

Aaron Robbins: Yeah, and that's part of the hard part, I think, is it's a long term proposal, right? And yeah, so you think about motivation, external motivation, you can get some big jumps in intensity or, you know, amount and quantity of motivation from external, but it's inconsistent. It's up and down. You're on a roller coaster ride and it's not going to last. The research shows that it doesn't last over the long term. So I would, you know, I would say to those leaders is going well now, but how's that going to look later? And what's your turnover look like? Right. And what's the wellbeing of your employees? What's the toll it's taking on them? So, um, Yeah, we have to be concerned not just with the bottom line. We have to be concerned about employee well-being and stress and all these things because you've got these great employees that are performing high today. Most likely, they're either going to leave or it's going to change at some point. And then you also look at like devious behavior when it's really high external measures or motivations, you start to see cheating, lying, cutthroat, you know, stab you in the back kind of cultures. And I don't want to be part of that. I don't know. Maybe some people like that.

Shari Simpson: Yeah. What do you think the role of rewards and recognition is then if we're really trying to tap into that, that personal motivation?

Aaron Robbins: Right. So, so again, I think rewards and recognition is all about doing it in a way that enhances those psychological needs. So employees need to feel that the recognition or reward, it's not, you know, Dan Pink, I, one of the things that I really like, he changed the names and it's all based in self-determination theory. It's the same theory of his book, Drive. And so there's some differences in how I think he simplified things, which I understand, because, you know, we want to get this out and understood by people. So I appreciate all the stuff he's done. But in particular, he talks about rewards being different in terms of if then versus now that. And so when you have it, if then, it's contingent. It's creating it as an external. If you do this, then I'll give you that. And now all of a sudden, very easily, the work you're doing can be the object of your motivation is now this external thing instead of doing it for yourself, and it can erode it. On the other hand, now that reward and

recognition can be, hey, you did this, now that it's done, I really appreciate that and I want to recognize it. Because you've got to help enhance that sense of accomplishment, I guess, the sense of competence and relatedness and connection. Because we all, you know, we all want to feel belonging, right? We all want to feel like what we're doing is value-added for not just ourselves, but for the community or society or our organization and the mission.

Shari Simpson: Yeah, and you know, as you were talking, it made me think about how we miss the mark on the type of rewards and recognition we do. We either take a blanket approach, right, where everybody gets this public call out. For some people, they don't want that. They don't want that spotlight. They would much rather have a handwritten thank you note. So that's definitely a part of it, making sure that it fits right.

Aaron Robbins: Totally. And that's, I think that's part of where autonomy comes in as well. Right. As if you have, you know, not to get in too much into traits and, um, you know, it's a big piece of it, but let's say, you know, you're more introverted. You don't want, you don't want the public recognition and that's not, that's going to actually, it could potentially erode your feelings of competence or relatedness in particular thrown me out there. This makes me uncomfortable. So yeah. And that's part of the challenge of being a leader is you got to know your people to know how they want to be rewarded or recognized. Again, not in a way that's external, but in a way that's helping them feel more sense of relatedness and competence and autonomy.

Shari Simpson: So for those listening who are like, okay, I totally get it. I understand it. I got to make this connection. But now I got to have a program, right? So, you know, I mean, asked to create a rewards and recognition program. How do I make sure that I'm creating something that's inclusive, that's equitable, that ties into the things that you've mentioned?

Aaron Robbins: So that gets, that's a little more challenging. They can call me and I'll help them with it. Um, uh, I guess it comes down to your culture and your values, right? And a lot of it in motivation in particular. So you look at extrinsic motivation, if you're external, um, identified motivation where it's just part of who you are, that's still an extrinsic motivator. Right. And so, um, We want people to be identified like that, but you can't be identified if you don't know what your values are. So just like it's the same for an organization, how can you effectively support your employees if you don't know who you are, what you stand for, what your mission and your values are? So I would say you start with that. How do I make sure that the rewards and recognition that I'm giving are aligned with the values and the culture of our organization? And hopefully the values and culture of the organization are supportive towards supporting the employees and caring about not just the bottom line today, but the bottom line later in terms of how our employees are being supported and their well-being and all of that.

Shari Simpson: Well, and I suspect if you take that approach, those

conversations around expectation and performance look much different. They're more collaborative, they're more forward thinking, and the now then kind of mentality that you talked about. You know, you have such an amazing background, bringing that engineering in, how has that influenced or changed the way that you think about leadership now, having that as your base?

Aaron Robbins: Yeah, you know, I catch myself sometimes like, oh, that's the engineer in me, you know, wanting the order and, you know, one of the things I think that's helped at least is one of the things you learn in engineering just from the very beginning in school is creating a control system, right? When you're trying to evaluate what's happening in the environment, you have to set the boundaries of what are you looking at? And I think that's important when you're looking at any kind of scientific thing or process or project management, which is the majority of my background. And yeah, so you have to, you got to scope what you're doing. And then I don't know, you know, sometimes my process and order and wanting data and get, you know, sometimes that's, it's not good because people don't want to hear all the details and the specifics and a lot of people don't want to know why, they just want to know how to do it, right? So, I don't know, it's a give and a take.

Shari Simpson: As you've gone down this road in your doctoral degree, what are some things that you've learned or in the research that you're doing that you're like, wow, you know, more people should know this?

Aaron Robbins: I think the SDT stuff is super important. More people need to know, so this is great, you know, hopefully people listen to this and they take away something about the basic psychological needs and the importance of looking at motivation in this way. I would say from school, oh man, I, you know, I'm taking a survey class right now. I think one thing that's very important is how complicated survey writing really is. And I learned this myself before I got into all the academic stuff on the psychology side. I created a 360 as when I was in HR. I was really proud of it, right? And I thought it was great. And I had all these different competencies that I created and I wrote the questions about it. And then I got introduced to this PhD who was big on statistics and she ran what's called an exploratory factor analysis, confirmatory factor analysis. Essentially, you're looking at how the questions correlate with each other to see are you actually measuring what you say you're measuring. If these three questions are measuring accountability, They should correlate together, right? As different people rate their accountability. Well, she came back with the results from my 360 and she was like, well, you're measuring something. But it's not what you think you're measuring. Basically, they were all just measuring some big conglomerate thing. And so, I mean, it's really important for organizations to understand, yeah, you can create your own survey. You can get data on it. But, man, it's kind of scary to think, you know, you're making some big financial decisions on some data that isn't validated or reliable. You don't necessarily know that you're actually measuring what you think you're

measuring. And so all the science behind how to write good questions and things, that's something kind of relevant right now for me. But there's a lot.

Shari Simpson: Well, it's fascinating. You've kind of brought it full circle in a way that there's so much science behind some of the things that we practice in HR, and we don't know the science. And if we did, we'd be that much more impactful in our organizations because we could back up what we're doing.

Aaron Robbins: Right. And so for me, I, I think that's great. And I totally agree. My business partner, Jimmy and I, one of the things that we learned for ourselves and what we realized over the last, you know, say 10 years is that we were doing all these things and some of it worked. Most of it worked thankfully. Right. I think we had some good intuition on things and we cared about our people. So we did a lot of good things, but some of it didn't. But as we started to learn the theory and read the books, and then as I went back and got my advanced degrees, I started to realize why the things I did worked and why they didn't. And that is where you create repeatability. If you don't understand why it's happening, then you can't make it repeatable. Right. And so that I think is super important.

Shari Simpson: So as we wrap up our discussion, I'm curious, where do you see the evolution of motivational theory happening?

Aaron Robbins: The evolution of motivation theory. Oh man, I don't know how it's going to evolve. I think it's pretty foundational. It's always been this way. It's just that, you know, we don't, we didn't know it. Right. And, you know, you think about back in the industrial era where work was super boring and hard and manual. It made sense why they focused on the reinforcement, and that's how they did their experiments. It's a self-fulfilling prophecy, I guess, to a certain extent. I don't know that the theory is going to evolve at all, but I think evolution needs to be that it's going to grow and become more important and more relevant, hopefully. in industry and that we're going to recognize how foundational it is to be able to weave that through and how we teach and develop leaders, how we create our cultures and define our cultures and just how we work with each other overall.

Shari Simpson: I love it. Aaron, thank you so much for sitting down and really introducing our audience to the idea of motivational theory and hopefully they're walking away with a passion to dive into it more.

Aaron Robbins: Oh, for sure. Thanks for having me on.

Announcer: I hope you enjoyed today's episode. You can find show notes and links at thehrmixtape.com. Come back often and please subscribe, rate, and review.