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 poisner.com/2014/07/why-you-lead-matters/

I recently came across a study published in Harvard Business Review that crystallized some of my own thinking about how to motivate leadership.

The [article](#) outlines the results of a study of 10,000 graduates of Westpoint (the U.S. Army officer training college) through their graduation and well into their careers. The graduates were asked questions to determine what motivates their leadership. In general, leadership motivations were classified as intrinsic (internal) or extrinsic (instrumental). An example of an intrinsic motivation is “improving people’s lives.” An example of an extrinsic motivation is “more pay” or greater status from a position of more stature. Many people demonstrated evidence of both intrinsic and extrinsic motivations.

I was not surprised that those who were intrinsically motivated had proven over time to be more successful leaders than those extrinsically motivated. [I previously posted a great video on this precise subject.](#)

What surprised me about the study was that those who were *both* intrinsically and extrinsically motivated also proved inferior in leadership success compared to those whose sole motivations are intrinsic.

[In the words of the study author:](#)

“Adding external motives didn’t make leaders perform better — additional motivations reduced the selection to top leadership by more than 20%. Thus, external motivations, even atop strong internal motivations, were leadership poison.”

Personally, I’ve always been wary of organizations that consider using bonuses or other similar rewards as a means of improving employee performance. This is especially true in cause-related organizations. It creates a perverse incentive that can change how employees perceive their role.

Anecdotally, I’ve seen an organization go awry in this way. A few years back, an organization I knew hired an Executive Director who insisted that the pay for his role be increased to match what they had been receiving at the job they were vacating, even though this higher pay would be dramatically more than the organization’s traditional pay scale. In their words, they didn’t want to be taking a step backwards in pay. It didn’t surprise me that the E.D. in question flamed out in 18 months. They were more motivated by extrinsic factors (pay) than intrinsic (the desire to best fulfill the organization’s mission).

What implications does that have for nonprofits? For those doing hiring, if a candidate says or does something suggesting their personal motivation is extrinsic, I suggest you think long and hard before going down that road. Focus on candidates where the flame is burning on the inside to accomplish the mission. Skills can be trained. The fire inside cannot.