



THE MOTIVATION COMPASS™

Interpreting Motivation Signals in the
Organizational System

In conversations with leadership teams, the topic of motivation surfaces more often than people expect.

At some point in the discussion, a leader will pause and say something like, *“Our team seems tired,”* or *“The energy in the organization isn’t what it used to be.”*

Sometimes the observation is quieter. A manager may simply note that something feels different in the way the team shows up.

The instinct in those moments is understandable. Leaders begin asking how motivation can be restored.

In recent years, many organizations have invested significant time and resources into engagement initiatives designed to support employees and strengthen workplace culture. Recognition platforms, well-being programs, professional development opportunities, and communication campaigns have all played important roles in improving the experience of employees inside the organization.

And many of these efforts matter.

Yet in working with leadership teams, I’ve noticed something that cannot be addressed through programs alone.

Motivation itself is intrinsic. It originates within the individual and cannot simply be installed by an organization. When motivation begins to shift, it is often because something in the surrounding environment has changed—clarity has faded, connection to the work has weakened, or the pace of change has disrupted employees' sense of steadiness.

For motivation to strengthen again, employees must experience something different.

Greater clarity. Renewed connection. Leadership that provides steadiness when conditions feel uncertain.

Seen this way, motivation becomes more than a workforce challenge. It becomes a signal of how employees are experiencing the organization around them.



Motivation as a Cultural Signal

Motivation is often treated as an employee condition—something individuals either possess or lack. But in many organizations, shifts in motivation reveal something more systemic.

Over time, I began to notice a pattern in leadership conversations. When motivation shifts in an organization, the issue is rarely motivation itself. It is often a signal of how employees are experiencing the organization around them.

Instead of asking, *“How do we motivate employees again?”* leaders begin asking a more useful question: *“What might our organization be communicating to employees through the way it operates?”*



Motivation Within the Organizational System

Organizations operate as interconnected systems composed of leadership behaviors, structures, processes, and communication patterns that shape how work happens.

Within this system, employees continuously respond to the conditions around them. Motivation does not exist separately from this environment. It interacts with it. When the system supports clarity, alignment, and meaningful contribution, motivation often strengthens naturally.

When friction emerges within the system, motivation can begin to shift. This friction rarely appears as dramatic dysfunction. More often it shows up in subtle ways such as competing priorities, inconsistent decision patterns, or processes that slow momentum.



The Motivation Compass™

To help leaders interpret these signals within the organizational system, I developed a simple framework called The Motivation Compass™.



The Motivation Compass illustrates a foundational principle: Motivation originates within employees, but the organizational environment influences whether that motivation flourishes or slowly diminishes over time.

Surrounding this core are three organizational conditions: Direction, Leadership Presence, and System Alignment.

HR as the Activation Point

If motivation reflects how employees are experiencing the organizational system, responding to that signal requires attention to how the system itself is functioning.

HR operates at the intersection of leadership behavior, organizational systems, and how employees experience the organization.

HR leaders often recognize emerging signals first, helping leadership teams interpret what those signals might mean.

Through this work, HR becomes an activation point—helping leaders align direction, leadership behavior, and organizational systems so intrinsic motivation has room to flourish.



Closing Reflection

Motivation rarely disappears on its own. More often, it is responding to the conditions employees experience inside the organization.

When leaders interpret motivation as a signal rather than a problem, they open the door to deeper insight about how their organizations are functioning.

Often the most meaningful leadership work begins not with trying to motivate employees—but with understanding what the organization may be communicating to them.



About the Author



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She is the author of *The Leadership Trilogy—Human Capital at the Core, You Should Be a Coach*, and *The Power of Presence*.

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