

Motivation or manipulation?

Can we motivate toward literacy without manipulation?

by Christopher L. Hurst

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[Topics: motivation]

Introduction

This paper addresses a problem which confronts all personnel of the Summer Institute of Linguistics. On the one hand, we are involved with a particular group of people in order to help them. Successful involvement will be measured by change in the people's attitude and behavior. On the other hand, we value the people's personal dignity and their right to make choices of their own free will. The problem might be summarized thus: "How do we know whether we are motivating people to change or manipulating them?"

My purpose in this paper is to outline some motivational theory as a basis for distinguishing motivation from manipulation. I would like to apply this theoretical understanding to a real literacy situation as described by Lynn Dennis ([1979](#)). In so doing, I hope to raise our awareness of the importance of examining our own motivation as we seek to motivate others.

It may be suggested that any fine dividing line between motivation and manipulation is merely playing with words. From the viewpoint of SIL critics, such as Hvalkof and Aaby, our reason for serving others predetermines a manipulative approach.

Considering SIL's institutional commitment to God, to folks back home, and to national governments, there is hardly reason to believe that SIL will divest itself of its paternalism in the future ([Hvalkof and Aaby 1981](#):182).

Although we do not exist to please our critics, we should recognize the value of their input. Our commitment to God should predetermine an approach which is neither paternalistic nor manipulative.

1. Theoretical perspective

1.A. Motivation

Motivation is the inner drive of reason which causes people to act the way they do. In the individual, motivation is shaped by experience, behavior (that is, satisfying behavior is reinforced) and by the expectations of other people.

So, motivation may be said to come from within an individual as he relates to his physical and social environment. The question then arises, "Can we motivate other people if motivation is an internal drive?" In order to answer "yes," we need to think in terms of our ability to alter another person's environment so that his motives will be affected.

When we "motivate" ... a person to action, we are actually trying to change something about the environment in which a person does something, so that that particular thing will be more attractive, less repulsive, or less difficult We are setting the stage for that person's own motivation to take charge (Robinson 1975:5).

Maslow's theory of motivation proposes a hierarchy of needs which determine personal motivation. Basic needs must first be met before a person is likely to be motivated to meet higher needs. Briefly, the categories of need are as follows:

1. The basis need is *physiological*: food, shelter, sleep, and so forth.
2. *Safety* is the need for security, freedom from fear, law and order, and so forth.
3. *Belongingness* and *love* needs: group identity, roots, giving and receiving love.
4. *Esteem*: the approval of self and of others—worthiness.
5. *Self-actualization*: the need to realize one's potential as a person is likely to be motivational only after needs 1–4 have been met.

(1986). *Notes on Literacy*, 48.

By this framework, Maslow does not mean to oversimplify reality. It is possible for a person to be motivated at a higher level, while lower needs are only partly met. A particular behavior may well be motivated by a combination of needs at different levels.

From an organizational point of view, it is normal to focus on higher needs to produce useful motivation. Longer coffee breaks and softer chairs tend to oversatisfy lower needs and not really motivate performance. Self-development is, therefore, the theme area, with maturity as the goal. This is important to bear in mind since, as affluent westerners, we may be in a “village” situation and judge needs to be in the lower range, whereas, by local standards, these lower needs may already be satisfied.

1.B. Motivational styles

Three motivational styles are commonly recognized:

1. Negative style
In order to ensure a desired behavior from *A*, *B* keeps *A* on edge by threats of losing privileges, of losing things he wants or needs, and of disapproval or rejection.
2. Permissive style
In order to develop self-confidence and self-motivation, a person is given freedom to experiment without the threat of judgment.
3. Positive style
In order to encourage desired behavior, it is rewarded while undesirable behavior is extinguished by ignoring it. (Rewards focus on higher self-needs.)

The *negative style* may be very effective in motivating the individual. However, the costs may be great. Fear of the consequences of not attaining makes for a poor relationship with the person in authority. Guilt and other negative emotions are likely to undermine, rather than build, the personality self-worth is not likely to grow.

The *permissive style* allows for independent discovery and may be a useful part of a program. However, if this is the only style used, the individual will probably go his own way and not make any changes that may be desired. It may also undermine his motivation because he hears that people do not care. “Anything you do is fine with me” may be a refreshing message once in a while, but if repeated it comes to mean that it does not matter (is of no worth) what you do.

The *positive style* is proven by behavioral psychologists to be the most effective. Some behavioral psychologists would claim that a person’s whole life is directed by this kind of influence and that any kind of behavior can be controlled this way. If the focus is on building maturity (appropriate self-esteem and self-actualization), the approach offers much for the Christian. However, the effectiveness of this style leads many to question the ethics of some of its uses. It becomes easy to direct a person’s behavior without his knowing the direction or even the process.

1.C. Motivational process

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So far, we have looked at motivation from a change motivator's perspective. W. G. Dyer ([1972](#)) examines three processes of motivation from the viewpoint of the client as follows:

1. Compliance

This is the kind of response given to the negative style of motivation. "Because of your threat, I have no better choice than to comply." There is no real motivation for the desired behavior, just motivation to avoid the consequences of not complying. This may also be the response to the positive style of motivation. The person may equally have no motivation for the behavior itself, but "because I want your rewards, I will comply."

2. Identification

Because the person has a good relationship (of admiration, trust, or respect) with the motivator, he accepts the change agents view over his own. Out of motivation not to hinder the relationship, he modifies his behavior.

3. Internalization

Because the facilitator's suggestion agrees with the values and ideals of the person, he accepts the idea as if it were his own. There is little resistance to change, because the motivation is purely his own. Persuasion—the display of an idea in such a way that people have an opportunity to accept it in place of their own—works on the basis of this mechanism.

Dyer expects a mixture of these three processes to operate, but prefers identification over compliance and internalization over identification.

If self-directed choice is valued more than changed behavior, then compliance and identification are unacceptable mechanisms. They are also less likely to have lasting effects when the change motivator no longer rewards or relates to the person. It is possible for compliance behavior to become internalized over a period of time, especially if the new behavior brings satisfaction other than that given by the change agent. (In child rearing, Dyer sees the ideas as a progression from compliance through identification or internalization.)

By definition, the change motivator exercises power if, as a result of his influence, people do something they would not otherwise do. Knowledge of motivational theory gives a lever to increase power. The question is, "How may it rightly be used?"

1.D. Manipulation

Whether the mechanism for motivation is compliance, identification, or internalization, there is a further dimension to be considered; that of awareness. As was mentioned in the section on positive motivational style, it is possible to alter a person's behavior without his knowing it. This is manipulation.

Stated more fully: **Manipulation occurs when a person thinks that he makes his own decision but the change motivator has only permitted him to see factors calculated to get the result which the motivator desires.** A skillful Machiavellian will employ all types of motivational style and technique while maintaining a "front" of total democracy.

I see a distinction between paternalism and manipulation in regard to “awareness.” A paternalistic relationship assumes the superiority of one party, that party taking responsibility for the decisions of the other. Only if this aspect of the relationship were hidden, would it be manipulative as well. Nonetheless, a paternalistic relationship is equally inappropriate for any motivator.

Manipulation is most likely to occur when the motivator places highest priority on the **task** to be accomplished rather than on the **people** involved.

1.E. Ways of exercising power

In thinking about how we may use our power to motivate people, the following distinctions may be helpful:

1. Coercing

Making people do things they do not want to do (except when they do not want to obey the law) is a fairly clear contravention of their human rights.

2. Deceiving

Making people think they want to do things, which they would not want to do if they knew all that the change motivator knows, is dishonest and is called *manipulation*.

3. Introducing ideas

Enabling people to want to do things, which they would not have thought of without outside influence, is the high privilege of the motivator.

4. Introducing means

Enabling people to do things which they want to do, but are unable to do without outside help, is certainly a role which the facilitator may choose, if the activity is compatible with his values.

In practice, the dividing line between 2 and 3 may be the cause of discussion. Hvalkof and Aaby would probably say that the introduction of ideas is, itself, manipulative. Oltrogge ([1974](#)) says that “to withhold ideas is coercion because it denies any choice to the people.”

2. The Tolpan

Lynn Dennis ([1979](#)) also treated the topic of motivation. Her purpose was to gain insight into the motivation of preliterate people, in order to increase the effectiveness of their literacy program amongst the Tolpan of Honduras. I would like to express my appreciation of her research on motivation and the emphasis on indigenous principles found in her article. Because many of the factors she enumerated, in regard to the Tolpan, are also faced by other SIL workers, I would like to reexamine these factors and the motivational style used in handling them.

In outlining the Tolpan situation and relating it to various aspects of motivational theory, Dennis mentions at least eight factors which hinder the move toward literacy. These are resisting forces.

Resisting Forces	Goal
< Literacy unfamiliar 1. < — — — — —	T
< Possibility of failure 2. < — — — — — in attempt to learn	O
< Unpleasant process 3. < — — — — —	L
< No purpose or 4. < — — — — — pressure for literacy	P
< Low self-esteem 5. < — — — — — (competence)	A
< New things are 6. < — — — — — threatening	N
< Irrelevant to lifeway 7. < — — — — —	L
< No material 8. < — — — — —	I
	T
	E
	R
	A
	C
	Y

For the facilitator whose objective is to help the group toward literacy, this is a discouraging array of opposing forces. Yet these are probably typical of the forces which have kept many groups preliterate.

In discussing this situation, Dennis notes that the Tolpan do not see literacy as an option for themselves. She proposed that, by teaching some to read and write and producing some materials, this option would be realized (that is, by reducing forces 1 and 8). But she seems to shelve this approach because, sociologically, it would be difficult to get someone to “stick out” by becoming the first literate Tolpan. She also sees the need to work through the local authority structure when introducing change, rather than through a few individuals. She then looks at factors in favor of literacy. By displaying both the “driving factors” and repeating their “resisting forces,” an analysis (called “force field”) reveals a more complete picture. (Note, that numbering the forces is arbitrary and does not indicate any paired relationship.)

Driving Forces		Resisting Forces		Goal
1. Seeking ways to adapt to outside	→	← Literacy unfamiliar	1.	T
2. Chief favors literacy for children	→	← Possibility of failure in attempt to learn	2.	O
3. Some young men interested in reading	→	← Unpleasant process	3.	L
4. Some new literature	→	← No purpose or pressure for literacy	4.	P
5. Christians' desire to read N.T.	→	← Low self-esteem (competence)	5.	A
6. (Possible future government requirement)	→	← New things are threatening	6.	N
7. (Possible group orientation to literacy)	→	← Irrelevant to lifeway	7.	L
(Potential forces in brackets)		← No material	8.	I

Having taken into account the fuller picture, Dennis proposed another strategy ([1979](#):8):

First of all, **we** should get official endorsement of literacy for the Tolpan from the Honduran government. Possibly, an official could come out and speak to the people about the need for reading and writing skills. Then **we** should leave it to the chief to be the one to motivate his own people to cooperate in making their society literate [emphasis mine].

She goes on to outline a praiseworthy literacy program, based on community involvement and indigenous-authored literature. My question is whether the above strategy is the best way to get such an indigenous movement started. The problem is clearly the lack of Tolpan motivation to get the literacy ball rolling.

3. Discussion

I would like to take Dennis' strategy as a basis for discussion under the following three headings: "The motivational process," "Control," and "The change process."

(1986). *Notes on Literacy*, 48.

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3.A. Motivational process

Motivation only comes when the in-culture folks come to feel the new thing will satisfy what they themselves sense as real needs ([Dennis 1979:2](#)).

This is the best kind of motivational process, which Dyer calls internalization (see Section 1.C). However, when we suggest that an authority figure request the Tolpan people to do something, we are more likely to see the process of compliance at work (or, at best, identification with the chief). **We have not really found true motivation to read, just motivation to do as directed.**

Sarah Gudschinsky ([1973:9](#)) has some pertinent advice for situations like that of the Tolpan:

And what about the people who do not want to learn? Should we try to teach them in spite of it? Probably not. Prepare the literature if you can, have the primers ready for the future, but relax about teaching the people until they begin to want it.

This may seem like a very passive approach, especially if it takes 10 years! However, an alternative which moves toward coercion is not justifiable in the context of manipulation. I pointed out that awareness of the motivator's strategy was a test for manipulation. From the Tolpan article, it does not appear that Dennis expected the people to be aware that the "gringos" were responsible for the government directive requiring them to become literate. What will the peoples' attitude be if they find out? What level of trust will they have for the "gringos?"

3.B. Control

Referring to the second Tolpan force field, Dennis changed from trying to reduce the resisting forces to increasing the driving forces. In fact, her strategy is to introduce forces which were not originally there but only identified as potential or possible forces (driving forces 6 and 7). Her reasoning seems to be based on the fact that, "People are accustomed to having their decisions made for them by the chief, or, more recently, by the Honduran government" ([Dennis 1979:6](#)) My question is: What is an appropriate level of control for an outsider to take in community change? Since the idea of government endorsement for the project had not yet come from the chief, are we really strengthening local leadership by coming to them with ready-made plans? Would it not be better to present the problem (as clarified by the second force field) to the chief and see what suggestions he has for heightening motivation and reducing resistance? If our acceptable role is that of "introducing ideas and means," we need to be creatively working with local authorities on ways to help the people see the use of literacy and their unique ability to create Tolpan literature.

My impression is that the problem of "control" is common among outside facilitators. Since we are sent to do a job, we, and those who sent us, expect to see results; yet, on the other hand, we respect the people's right to self-determination. Larry Yost addresses this conflict of interest:

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The pressure [need of the SIL worker] to succeed, to bring about the changes we see are needed, is so great that we may work to fulfill our own needs and not be willing to give equal or greater priority to the needs the people see as being important. Our putting priority on our own needs, which may be the needs of the people as we see them ... communicates a strong message. It may be a message of paternalism, of control, and not a message of love and caring ([Yost 1983](#):2).

3.C. The change process

In response to the above comments someone may say, "So what? As long as the Tolpan become literate, it doesn't matter what route they take; they will be better off." My concern is that the process is every bit as important as the product. If, for the Tolpan, the process of becoming literate reinforces the idea that outsiders make all the significant decisions, that they have little control on their destiny, then such a literacy program may contribute to the weakening of their community.

I would suggest that, since the Tolpan already feel threatened by the outside world in regard to their competence, to have an official come and exhort them to do something they have never been successful in may be very discouraging. Hopefully, there will come a point, when the chief is convinced of the value of literacy and when a group of Tolpan have proven that they can master a written form of their language, when it would be highly appropriate for government officials to come out to show their approval of the achievements of these people.

I sympathize with Lynn Dennis as she struggles to be sensitive to the Tolpan people. She states her ideal so concisely:

It is becoming obvious that development should come from within the community and that any changes, such as literacy, should be something they themselves want ([1979](#):6).

The concluding strategy of her paper shows how difficult it is to stay with this ideal while having a burden to see a particular change come about.

4. Conclusion

I have tried to show that, through motivational theory, a change agent may increase his effectiveness. By focusing his attention on forces which resist desired change, and by allowing peoples' own motivation to take charge, the motivator may help to smooth difficult transitions. The potential danger is that he may act without the people's full awareness of his goals or strategy. If this happens, the people may be manipulated to do things which they would not choose or to reach goals in ways they would not choose.

We do not want to compromise the very gospel of truth and freedom which we bring, and we want our influence to have the best long-term effect possible. We do well to focus on introducing means and ideas.

By consciously deciding to leave control in the hands of local people, the facilitator can stimulate and strengthen leadership and avoid the problems of handing on projects and “visions” when he leaves.

The practical difficulties of this do not escape me. Lippitt and Hooper state it very well:

One of the most difficult things for an individual, a group, an organization ... to accomplish is the act of helping another human system without creating suspicion, hostility, or dependence ([Lippitt and Hooper 1978:5](#)).

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