

Strategies to Build Intrinsic Motivation

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"The fox leapt high to grasp the grapes, but the delicious-looking fruit remained just out of reach of his snapping jaws. After a few attempts the fox gave up and said to himself, 'These grapes are sour, and if I had some I would not eat them.' The fox changes his attitude to fit his behavior." - Aesop's Fables

There is a general misconception that our beliefs are the cause of our actions. Often it is the other way around.

Just like the fox, people will tell themselves a story to justify their actions. This helps to protect their ego during failure or indicate why they committed a certain action. Teachers need to place students in situations where they can persuade themselves that they were intrinsically motivated to behave a certain way or to carry out certain actions.

Punishment, Rewards, and Commitment

The issue with classroom management policies in most institutions is that it operates on a carrot-and-stick model. Carrots include PBIS (Positive Behavior Intervention and Supports), Classroom Economy, and other class rewards. Sticks include punishment such as detention, suspension, or withholding from other activities. Teachers and educational leaders believe that these measures will help control the students. However, [self-persuasion](#) produces more powerful and longer-lasting benefits than direct techniques of persuasion produce. The key is letting the students convince themselves.

The goal of self-persuasion is to create [cognitive dissonance](#) in the mind of the one being persuaded. Cognitive dissonance is characterized by holding opposing thoughts. (Example: "I am a good person, but I just lied.") This produces discomfort, and humans put pressure on themselves to reduce or eliminate the dissonance by telling themselves a story. (Example: "The teacher made me lie.")

Punishment

In 1965, [Jonathan Freedman](#) conducted a study in which he presented preschoolers with an attractive, desired, "Forbidden Toy." One group was told not to touch it or they would be severely punished, and the other group was told not to touch the toy because it was wrong. He left the room, and the preschoolers stayed away from the toy. Afterward, the children were asked how much they wanted the toy. The severe threat group still really wanted it, but the mild threat group were less interested.

Weeks later, Freedman pulled the students out of class one by one and had them do a drawing test. While he examined their drawings, he allowed them to play with any toy they wanted. Of the severe threat group, 77 percent played with the Forbidden Toy, while only 33 percent of the moderate threat group engaged with it. This latter group had to justify to themselves why they did not want to play with the Forbidden Toy since the external motivation (the degree of punishment) was not strong enough by itself. Therefore, they convinced themselves that the toy was not very attractive.

[Recently studies](#) (PDF) have shown that using fear in high-stakes testing actually lowers performance on that test.

Rewards

Programs like [Classroom Economy](#) may appear to work because the extrinsic rewards offer short-term motivation. Stanford's [Mark Lepper and David Greene](#) found that those being offered a reward "tended to work more quickly," yet were less likely to do the puzzles later. Extrinsic motivation is found in [meta-analysis](#) (PDF) after [meta-analysis](#) to produce only short-term effects (at best).

Commitment

The goal here is getting people to commit to something, but it has to be their own decision. According to [Robert Cialdini's Six Principles of Influence](#), "Once we have made a choice or taken a stand, we will encounter personal and interpersonal pressures to behave consistently with that commitment."

Punishment and rewards may have their place in certain circumstances, but we should never rely on these methods to persuade the class to comply with requests. Instead, classrooms should model their management on self-persuasion.

7 Examples of Self-Persuasion

1. Two Lines

Dan Pink, in his show [Crowd Control](#), got people to stop double dipping their chips in guacamole by setting up bowls for double dippers and single dippers. Before class, form two lines called "Ready to Learn" and "Going to Misbehave." Then have students select a line to stand in.

2. Questions With a Scale

In the book [Instant Influence](#), Yale Professor Dr. Michael Pantalon describes a counterintuitive way for people to persuade themselves.

First ask students, "On a scale of one to ten, how ready are you to . . . ?"
Then ask, "Why didn't you pick the lower number?"

For example: "On a scale of one to ten, how likely are you to do your homework tonight?" The follow-up question is key to their persuading themselves that they are likely to complete the task.

3. The Goal Sheet

A simple form, filled out every class period, has students commit to learning at the beginning of the class, and then has them review their commitment at the end of class.

4. Student-Created Rules

Have the students set the class rules. Violating those rules creates cognitive dissonance.

5. Public Goals

If students [publicly declare goals](#), they become accountable not only to themselves, but to others as well. No one wants to think of him- or herself as a hypocrite. Therefore, we convince ourselves that our commitment should be honored or we would feel this shame.

6. Remind by Asking

If you tell students what they are supposed to be doing, it may cause [psychological reactance](#), an aversive reaction caused by a real or perceived reduction in autonomy or freedom. However, if you ask students what they are going to do, the [freedom to choose](#) is one of the most persuasive tactics ever found.

7. Commitment Cards

This is one reason that the De La Salle High School football team holds the record for the longest winning streak. They all made [commitment cards](#) each week and were held accountable by a partner.

In conclusion, self-persuasion takes patience and some critical thinking. But when it's May and the class next door is still unmotivated through rewards and punishments, your own class will be asking you for more.

Classroom Management

What can we do to create a positive dynamic in the classroom?

