ELC 093: What really motivates us?
Self-Determination Theory Explained

The Elearning Coach Podcast

Connie: Hello, learning people, and welcome to episode 93 of The eLearning Coach Podcast. What motivates people to learn, to grow, and to keep going?

In this episode, I speak with Matt Richter about self-determination theory. It's a powerful theory for understanding human motivation. We explore the three universal psychological needs at the heart of the theory, how to apply the principles to your work and life, and how managers can create environments that support rather than undermine motivation.

Matt is a recognized professional in Learning & Development serving as co-director and cofounder of the Learning Development Accelerator and president of The Thiagi Group. He has consulted for major corporations including Microsoft, Sony, and Electronic Arts He is the author of The Motivation Blueprint: Designing Work That Fuels Energy, Growth, and Commitment.

Here's our conversation.

Connie: Hi, Matt. Welcome to The eLearning Coach Podcast.

Matt: Hi, Connie. I'm delighted to be with you.

Connie: I have really been enjoying The Motivation Blueprint. I never explored self-determination theory, and I'm so happy that you've written such a great, clear book about it, so I'm really enjoying that.

Matt: Well, I really appreciate that. It's one of the great passions of my life, although I do joke that I quit my doctoral program, which was in SDT, in self-determination theory, because I wasn't motivated enough.

Connie: I understand. Many times, I thought about getting a doctorate and did not. So, for the audience, let's start out with some general definitions so that we are all talking about the same thing.

How do you define motivation, and where does self-determination theory fit in? And perhaps from this point on, we may end up calling it SDT.

Matt: So, motivation formally is the energy that catalyzes behavior. But that's psychobabbly, so I like to say motivation is the energy that gets you off the couch.

It's what gets you to move, to do something, to think something, to feel something. So, it's that energy that gets you to act

Connie: And where does SDT fit in?

Matt: Self-determination theory comes out of the work of a guy named Edward Deci back in the early '70s, and then really synthesized into what it's become when he partnered with another guy named Richard Ryan in the late '70s, early '80s.

And what they posited, what they thought, was that there are basic needs that are psychological, and when those needs get met, our volition to act, to do something, to be more positively motivated goes up. Now originally, there were only two needs, but then in the '80s they identified a third need. When those needs are satisfied, our wellbeing increases, our quality of motivation goes up, and so forth.

And those three needs are: a need to feel competent, a need to feel effective at what one does. Whenever I do something, I want to feel like I'm capable of doing it, whether it's potentially or in fact already good at it, right? So, in the context of learning, it's usually I feel capable to learn this rather than I'm already a master at it.

There's a second need called autonomy. And autonomy sometimes gets conflated as having a need for a lot of choice or having complete independence or freedom to do something. That's not what they meant. What they meant is you opt in to do something. You choose to engage in something So for example, when my daughter comes home from college, we often can give her choices to do chores.

So maybe do the dishes, do the laundry. You can do either one. But that's a choice, but it's not something that's autonomy supportive because she doesn't want to do either of them. She's not opting in to do those. So, we often give people choices, but those choices can still feel controlling. So, autonomy is about endorsement, it's about interest, it's about volition, it's about wanting to do something because it's meaningful, purposeful, it has significance to you so you do want to engage.

And then that third need that they identified in the '80s is a need to feel related, so it's relatedness. Some of the folks in Europe call it a need for belonging. It's about having a sense of community. It's about feeling like you're connected to others around you. And this is really important because if you've ever experienced a toxic relationship, that toxic relationship can undermine something you really enjoy doing.

Or a positive relationship might actually make something you didn't initially enjoy enjoyable. And there's an interplay between all three of these needs which is why when satisfied together, you can see that people go through and get off the couch to do something in a positive, supportive way. But we need to flip it, and when those needs get thwarted, that, that's when we see motivation become more negative or non-existent.

And so when those needs are thwarted, I can feel frustrated, I can feel controlled, I can feel like I'll do it, but the minute that control goes away I stop, whether it's something we might perceive as positive like getting paid or something like guilt or an obligation or an order or fear or something like that.

Connie: Well, I liked so many things that you said. I have to say that when I read Get Off The Couch, I knew exactly what you meant. It made perfect sense to me. Not that the academic definition doesn't.

Matt: I am assuming that originally came from Deci or Ryan at some point. You know, both of them are incredible at explaining this in a way that anyone can get.

Like, you viscerally understand it and Ed Deci when I was taking classes with him he would say, "So tell me what you feel about that in your belly? What's your response? What's your reaction to that?" I'd be like, "Ah, okay, that makes sense to me. I get it now."

Connie: I knew when you said that the third one came about more recently, and you did say it was relatedness, correct?

Matt: Yeah, but back in the '80s.

Connie: It's been a slowly emerging realization how much relatedness and social learning, just how much the entire social fabric has to do with learning, motivation, and just how important it is.

Matt: Yeah.

So many people forget, especially with elearning, that if we're doing the asynchronous elearning, there's no social context to it, at least if it's designed the way horrible elearning has traditionally been designed.

And yet, if you want to keep people fully immersed doing the work that learning requires, you got to have a social component. There has to be a sense of we're in

this together, a community. Whom do I turn to when I need help? Is there a faculty member I can talk to? Is there, uh, students that we can engage?

That has to be built into the design, and that's one of the reasons why I think the bot thing is a little scary to me because if you're connecting with a bot, that's very different than connecting with a human.

Connie: Right. Right.

Totally agree, and my ideal way to do elearning would be to, after several lessons, get together and discuss, especially because you may have applied it and something didn't work in your situation, and you're trying to find out, like, "Did this work for you?

What does this mean?" It’s great to get together and discuss, and it still amazes me how important that is.

Matt: Well, Clark Quinn and Paul Kirschner, Mirjam Neelen, they've all been saying for a long time we have not evolved beyond this. I mean, it's not like it's changed in the last 20 years. We need to think then that this requires effort.

And so, we know how people learn. It requires work. It's hard. Learning is not an easy process, and so motivation is a crucial, crucial partner in that. Motivation gets them off the couch to do the work. So, we need to have motivation to get them in the room, virtual or in person. We need to have motivation to get them to do the work in the program, and there has to be motivation post-program for them to continue to practice and continue to apply and master.

If we don't design a more motivating, more positively motivating environment, we fail.

Connie: And I think that's really lacking in most workplaces, especially the post. How many supervisors follow up? How many managers check in with people, make sure they're applying what they've learned, answer questions?

Often, it's just something where people are away or on their own doing a self-paced course, and that's it. It just ends, and there's no additional support.

Matt: Right. And there's no concept amongst participants either of how learning works. How many learners go and sit and say, "Ah, I took the course, I now know how to do this. I got it."

Connie: I read your intro, and it sounds like you've been attracted to self-determination theory for a very long time. Can you explain what attracts you to the theory so much?

Matt: It's a hard question because there's so much that I love about it.

One of the, the things I love, the brain part of me likes the fact that it's researched. So, there's, I think currently over 8,000 peer reviewed studies, meta-analyses and affiliated studies. All of which most are readily available for free on the Center for Self Determination Theory website because we want to keep it out there.

And it's got over fifty years of that replication work, and it's continuing to evolve. So there's a whole research paradigm that I love. The second thing is it intuitively feels good. So unlike things like learning styles that feel good but have no research pedigree, this feels good and it makes sense and there's a research component to it that's solid.

But the other thing is I find it to be utterly ethical in how we engage. And so we tried to raise our daughter through a lens of SDT, which meant no punishments, no coercive language. We were never perfect, but we tried to raise our kid in a world where we were autonomy supportive. We provided structure so that she knew where her boundaries were, she had the tools to grow and develop, and we tried to create a community for her amongst family and friends where she felt connected to people.

And so, it gave us a blueprint for how to raise our kid. It gives us a blueprint for how to manage. It gives us a blueprint for how to manage healthcare. It gives us a blueprint for how ~~to,~~ to run classrooms and so forth. The big message that came out of the conference we just had in Geneva was these three basic needs are universal.

And we've known that for decades, right? There's so much research to show that they're around cross-culturally. The needs are universal, but not uniform. Which means the way you experience autonomy is different than the way I do. Now, that could be scary, especially if you're a designer or an engineer or manager.

But in reality it's liberating because as long as we put in place some of the parameters that are autonomous supportive or provide structure to support competence and so forth then how you experience those will be different but the fact that you do experience them isn't different So that lack of uniformity is liberating because it means that something that works for you may not work, but we can help find something that does.

It also means that you may not engage in a workshop or course because it's not meaningful to you, but it is meaningful to the person next to you. And so how do we

connect that to you? We have to see you. We have to look for you. We have to engage you. We can't just say, "You're one of 40 people.

Connie: Mm-hmm. Well, okay. I see why you're attracted to it.

Matt: Yeah.

Connie: I mean, it sounds like you have used it in many different aspects of your life, which is kind of amazing.

Matt: Every one of us who have been immersed in it have had similar experiences where it's like, ah, this explains things.

Connie: You write that simply asking if someone is motivated misses something important. So, what should managers, leaders, supervisors be paying attention to instead?

Matt: My friend who is a business professor says it's not about the quantity of motivation. It's not how motivated are you. Are you motivated is a quality question. It's what's the quality of your motivation?

We're always motivated. Sometimes we're motivated to stay on the couch. Other times we're motivated to get off the couch for a controlling reason, and sometimes we're motivated to get off the couch for a meaningful, purposeful reason. So what's the quality of the motivation? And if we can train managers to think about structure and autonomy support and involvement in a way where they design the environment in such a way where needs can be met, then we're focusing on quality versus quantity.

Connie: So, if someone seems unmotivated, can you explain how, let's say, a manager can use that theory to analyze what's causing the lack of motivation?

Matt: The first thing is to try and figure out are they not engaging because they don't understand why they're doing it? Are they skipping out because they're feeling frustrated that they don't have the resources or the tools?

Perhaps they don't understand the goal, or perhaps it is in conflict with something that is important to them. We need to explore why it's not meaningful for them. We need to explore why they might feel that they're overwhelmed, that it might feel chaotic to them. We need to do an assessment.

We need to have a conversation and try and uncover what some of these barriers are to needs getting satisfied. Maybe you'll find out that this goes against something that's really important to them ~~and,~~ and you can either align or you find a way to support them in a different way.

And sometimes that even may mean that you let them go and you help them find something else. So sometimes it's not reconcilable. We need to take a moment and sit down and say, "Here's what works and what isn't working." In the book, I give a checklist. By the way, I'm happy to give that checklist to you if you want to post it.

Connie: Sure.

Matt: But the checklist says that here's what's needed to provide competence support, here's what's needed to provide autonomy support, and here's what's needed to involve people who provide relatedness support.

I work the checklist as part of my assessment.

Whether it's observing what's missing, checking myself to see if we put into the environment those things that are needed, or asking the person overtly and directly

Connie: Can you go through, I don't know, one, two, or three of the psychological needs and give an example of how a manager might respond to an issue with each one of those?

Matt: Well, structure is the easiest. I often will tell managers start with structure. That's not academically or even psychologically ~~the,~~ the best move, but it's the easy move for a manager. It's the low hanging fruit for a manager. So, structure involves do the employees understand the goal?

Do they understand what good looks like? Do they have the resources to do the work? Do they have the tools, the time? Do they have the training? Are they receiving feedback? Feedback that's informational, not punitive or judgmental. So we start with structure to figure out, you know, what's missing logistically in the environment because anything missing can feel overwhelming.

And so that chaos or that, that lack of structure can throw people into a tizzy and that's never comfortable, even if it's meaningful to you. So I like managers to start there because it's the easy place. The more complex or harder part is to start digging into autonomy. But in many ways, autonomy can sometimes feel like the more important need in the moment because you have all the goals and tools and resources in place, but you don't even see a reason to get off that couch.

There's no purpose for you to do it, then it doesn't matter that all that other stuff is there. How do we align to your reason to opt in to endorse this? And sometimes it may be aligning to a bigger picture. So a lot of times bosses have to ask employees to do things they don't wanna do, and no one would want to do them, right?

We all have scut work we have to do at our work. So what's the reason for doing that scut work? What's the bigger picture and how does it connect to, uh, to something they do care about? So we need to align to that. And we also will find a lot of times that employees don't quite understand what that value proposition is.

They understand why it's good for the organization, but they don't understand why it might be good for them. And so facilitating a conversation that helps the employee begin to see why those two merge together, those two purposes merged together, is difficult but crucial

Connie: I do have a question about that though. Often what's good for the organization does not necessarily benefit the person other than that they'll go out of business or they'll shut down. How do you deal with that?

Matt: Well, and that's the difference between an idealistic world that we hopefully can live in and sometimes the reality of the one we do live in.

Connie: Mm-hmm.

Matt: Sometimes we just don't get it. Sometimes you're going to work in the place because it's a paycheck. It's a way for you ~~to,~~ to get through the day, go home, be with your family, and pay the bills, and I get that. Ideally, we're finding a way to create an environment which would be for everyone to find something that's exciting to them and meaningful to them.

As a manager, you need to understand that you are contributing to either someone's positive motivation or undermining motivation. How can you facilitate those conversations i- in a way ~~that,~~ that helps? It also might be, "Hey, this is kinda sucky, and maybe you don't like doing this, and... but we need it for the betterment of the organization."

Okay. Why is that good for you? Why is that useful to you? And not in a you get your paycheck kind of way, but in terms of here's how you can grow, develop, and find another path later. I mean, there are all sorts of ways we can take that, but it's the reality of why sometimes we push back on autonomy.

Richard Ryan talks a lot about they don't have to be in opposition to each other. We can align your values and your goals to the organization's. We just have to find that path.

Connie: Mm-hmm.

Matt: We won't always get it. It won't always happen, but there's probably some way we can find a way to make them non-opposition.

Connie: What about relatedness? I'm curious how a manager might get that happening. Yeah. That almost seems like it could be, in some ways intrusive to someone's life, so what are some, acceptable ways to do that?

Matt: I always start saying just walk around and say hi to people. And smile. Like an authentic smile, not one of those fake smiles that we all can tell, right?

An authentic smile. Ask, take a pause, breathe, just say, "Hey, how are you today?" And wait for the answer. And if they just say, "Fine," say, "Tell me more." And if you're really being intrusive, you'll know. Most people actually when they start to believe and trust that you're authentically asking will appreciate it.

Foster trust. What does that mean?

Well, it means that even though sometimes the role of manager, puts you at cross purposes with the individual, I get that. Most of the time if the employee can feel like you have his or her back or their back. Be predictable. Predictability is important. If an employee comes to you and says, "I have good news," and you're grumpy but then the next day you're, uh, enthusiastic, that's not predictable and that's annoying.

Employees want to be able to accurately predict how you're going to engage with them, how are you going to work with them. They need to feel you're authentic genuine, that you don't lie to them. They also need to feel all these things with each other too. So if you see there are problems amongst the team, you've got to facilitate and navigate that as well.

People need to get to know each other, and I don't mean pizza parties. But over time, people start to develop an intimacy with each other, and that's important. That's crucial. People who know each other for a long period of time tend to feel that connection even more so. And then lastly, people, and this ties to competence, but they need to believe that you know what you're doing Because that affects the level of trust they have in you, right?

If I don't think you know what you're doing, I'm not going to trust you.

So those factors are important. Use inclusive language. Don't exclude people. So, all different tactical things we can do, that are again listed on that checklist I like will give you.

Connie: That sounds great. Let's turn to the organization now. We were talking about how to support individuals. What are some ways that workplace structures and systems can undermine the three psychological needs, competence, autonomy, and relatedness?

Matt: So, just like managers can design the environment for the team or for an individual employee, organizations can do that as well.

So, take Payroll. Payroll is a structural factor. It would go under competence, right? And if employees are supposed to be paid on the first of every month, make sure people get paid at that time. Make sure that people see a way for a path to grow and develop. If you are an organization where there's no growth opportunities, that's going to undermine competence.

Talk to people about why you're doing things. So, we're about to invest heavily in an AI strategy. I'm working with a, a client right now, and they're mandating AI and mandating AI use. I don't get it. I don't understand it.

What do you think is going to happen motivationally? Well, everyone is feeling forced.

They're not even having a conversation about why it's useful. They just need to put in the time to use it. So that lack of dialogue about why you're mandating something undermines autonomy. Organizationally, we can do the exact same thing that we're talking about doing for managers with individuals and teams. You build structure, you foster autonomy, you involve people

Connie: You know, I spoke to someone recently who told me the same thing. He said they're demanding that we do AI and there's no goal, there's no conversation. They just have to use AI.

Matt: Right ...

Connie: and figure it out themselves. That's crazy. He was so unmotivated as a result.

Matt: Right. We should be talking differently about pay, right? I mean, you know, pay is a fundamental component to how and why we do things, right? It's integral to the way work environments happen. So, can we design compensation in a way that's more meaningful? Can we make compensation informational rather than judgmental?

In other words, can we design it in a way where I don't feel like it's a statement about my character? About whom I am? Can we make pay something that tells me when I've performed well or not performed well based on the process I used? Can we design pay that's fair and equitable and just instead of, "Hey, Connie just got a promotion and a raise because she spoke up more than I did."

The bosses saw her, not me. And so, it's all about design, and every aspect of our organization can be designed in a way that satisfies needs or attempts to

Connie: So, we really need leaders and managers to be reading your book.

Matt: Yes, yes, yes. I was told by our team to make sure I sell the book.

Connie: Okay, leaders and managers…

Matt: Yes, buy the book.

Connie: Can you talk about a time you used these principles to help transform a struggling workplace? And what did you do, and how did you do it, and then what were the results?

Matt: Yeah. My first real corporate job was working in a call center, and I was working as a supervisor and then a manager.

And I had about 200 people in the group, and we had about 130% turnover a year. 100% would leave, and then 30% of the new people that would replace them would leave too.

Connie: Wow.

Matt: So, when I took over, that was our turnover rate, and I had no idea what to do. I volunteered for the gig because no one else would take it.

I didn't know what I was doing. So, I got coached by Ed Deci, who suggested that we look at putting in structure, finding ways to give people ways to work more autonomously in within the parameters of what a call center would allow, and then

how to involve them more in the decision making. And so, we redesigned the call center around the three needs.

For anyone who wants to ping me, then I'd be happy to share what we did specifically. But one example was in a call center, you have to have coverage. So especially if it's in the inbound teams where people call into the center. And so we go from 6:00 AM to 6:00 PM, that's our time, then we need to schedule out who's going to be on the phones when.

Well, what happens if you assign John the 6:00 AM slot, but John's got kids And John's got to take the kids to school in the morning. That 6:00 AM slot's horrible for John. So, Ed had suggested, what if we give people a sign-up sheet? And each week or every two weeks, people could sign up for the slots, but it's first come, first serve.

So, if the slot wasn't available for you, you're out of luck. But that's the structure, the boundary. That's the fact of life. But we let people choose when the coverage would be. We let people choose their lunchtimes. Just an example of an environmental design and that worked really well.

Connie: So even in that case, all the slots got filled?

Matt: Yeah, because it was only the right number. We had to do it when everyone was around, and we came up with fair ways to do it. It had to be viewed as fair. Another example is around compensation. In call centers where you often pay based on metrics getting met, call time and talk time and number of sales and all that.

Well, a lot of times, the metrics are in conflict with each other. You might have a metric for talk time, and you might have another metric for number of dials for an outbound team. Well, they're in total conflict with each other. So, what we did is we said, "Okay, here's what we care about as the management team.

Now, what metrics should we hold you accountable for your bonuses?" And we gave them parameters. So, these are the rules. These are the minimum standards that we need to be considering. Now, as a team, you guys come up with it, and then we have veto power. And so, we let them participate and work with us in designing their bonus structures.

So, we gave them voice.

Connie: Really nice.

Matt: The turnover rate dropped to... When I left, it had dropped to under 40%.

Connie: That's amazing. So, in closing, Matt, I know in your book you mention 10 myths that managers still believe about motivation that they should no longer believe. Can you come up with the two that you think are most important, that could be most harmful if they are believed.

Matt: Sure.

Well, the biggest one for me is that autonomy is not about choice. Autonomy is not about independence. It's not about freedom. It's about people seeing the importance of what they're doing and opting in. But here's another one. If people aren't performing well, it's a systemic problem, it's not a lack of motivation.

We often see that people aren't performing, and we blame them. We need to take a step back and look first at the system. I'm a big systems believer. I don't like to credit people, and I don't like to blame people. I like to look at the system. And motivationally, if people aren't performing or even if one person isn't performing, there's likely a systemic reason for it.

And motivationally, we can look at structure, autonomy, support, and involvement, and what's missing within that system for them. So that's one of them. And finally, another one that I really want to home in on is feedback. An executive who explained to me feedback's a gift. No, it's not. Feedback's not a gift.

Feedback is punishment. Feedback is often horrifying unless we make feedback informational. So, we need to remove this notion that feedback is something that's judging you as a human.

That it's judging the quality of who you are. It is telling you how do I learn to do that better? Then feedback becomes informational, and then negative feedback becomes something that's really embraceable and useful, and positive feedback tells me what to continue to do well.

And so, I like that dichotomy. But if we think about negative feedback as a characteristic about you, of course it's horrible.

Connie: Sure.

Matt: So, feedback is a gift if and only if it's information.

Connie: I like thinking of negative feedback as a course correction. It's not about the person.

Matt: Love that. And that's so helpful, right? Everyone wants to do better, but if it's a judgment then it hurts.

Connie: I read somewhere or heard someone say nobody gets up in the morning and says, "Ah, I want to go to work and do a really bad job."

Matt: Right!

Connie: But anyway Matt, thank you so much. It's been so enjoyable and I hope everyone has learned and fallen in love with self-determination theory.

Matt: Me too. Me too. Once a month we offer a series called Motivation Talks, and it's a meetup. And it's with people from around the world, and we rotate around, someone brings a problem and we talk about it.

Mm-hmm. And then the second half we just talk about motivational issues that are in the workplace or around learning.

And we do this in partnership with the Center for Self Determination Theory. So, if anyone who's listening to this wants to come we'd be delighted to welcome you in.

Connie: Thank you.

Matt: Thank you.

Connie: I hope you found this episode valuable. You can find the transcript and links to the resources at theelearningcoach.com/podcasts/93.

And if you'd like to go deeper into instructional design, I invite you to visit Mastering Instructional Design my professional development membership site. You'll find courses, speaker recordings, and resources to help you continue building your skills. You can find it at masteringid.com. Take care and I'll talk to you next time.