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# CREATING A MOTIVATED AND ENGAGED WORKFORCE

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*All a company needs to do is fulfill employees' need for three things: competence, relatedness, and autonomy*

In [Self-Determination Theory](#) (SDT), Edward Deci and Richard Ryan posited that an individual's feelings of autonomy, competence, and relatedness play a decisive role in that person's motivation in any given situation. Within a professional context, providing an environment that satisfies all three needs is perhaps the single most important task for a corporate leader.

"Leaders are like farmers," says **Andrew Calvert**, Regional Sales Operations Director at sales training firm, MHIGlobal Singapore. "Farmers cannot make a seed germinate, but what they can do is provide the right kind of soil, with the right balance of sand and clay, the right temperature and the right amount of sunshine etc. You plant that seed, and it is almost guaranteed that the seed will grow.

"That's what we do as leaders: create an environment that allows employees to grow and blossom."

## Red rules, blue rules

Competence describes an employee's feeling of being good at the job, while relatedness pertains to an employee's feeling of belonging to the organisation and colleagues. While both are important, the feeling of having autonomy is arguably the most important of the trio. After all, few things demotivate employees more than a micromanaging manager.

Given the need for accountability and reporting within a corporate environment, how does a manager go about giving employees a sense of autonomy? Calvert proposes a framework of autonomy within guidelines that differentiates between "red rules" and "blue rules".

"Red rules are those that you cannot change, and they pertain to ethics and legality," Calvert told *Perspectives@SMU* on the sidelines of the recent SMU Wee Kim Wee Centre Lunchtime talk, "*Workplace Motivation*". "An example of a red rule would be: You cannot steal from the company. Other red rules include 'You have to file taxes' and 'You cannot drink and drive.' A blue

rule could be something like: 'You don't have to come to work five days in a row if you can make arrangements with your boss to have him or her and your colleagues cover some of your work.'

"Employees who experience autonomy, competence, and relatedness become fully engaged and the businesses "will eat every competitor" in the marketplace."

"Oftentimes, what happens is that blue rules become so entrenched that people think of them as red rules. As leaders, we must understand what the true red rules and blue rules are, and give people leeway around the blue rules. We then explain why the red rules are red rules."

## **The price, and prize, of engaged employees**

To create a feeling of competence and relatedness, recognition should be given. While affirmation is always welcome – "I have never had a hand go up when I ask, 'Who gets too much recognition?'" Calvert says – what if employees perceive the praise as being insincere?

"Employees' perception towards management is like credit card debt: nobody wakes up one morning and, suddenly, they owe \$30,000 on their credit card," Calvert explains. "It's taken a few dollars a month over the course of years to build that debt. Just as it takes a long time to accrue that debt, it takes a long time to pay it back."

"Leaders have to recognise that it will take a while to get rid of that deficit of employee perception. Leaders can do that by being honest, by acting with integrity etc. If they can walk the talk, if they can empathise with employees and they do it consistently and when it is appropriate, then they can get good results."

If all three psychological needs – autonomy, competence, and relatedness – of employees are met, they become fully engaged and businesses "will eat every competitor" in the marketplace, Calvert says. However, a successful business needs to do more than that.

"Even if a company has high levels of motivation, there can still be problems with the company," warns Calvert. "Their products could be priced too high; the company could have an aggressive competitor; or the economy could be in a downturn. All that can affect the bottom line."

"All things being equal, if you have two companies with the same products and services, and are in the same situation, one has a high level of motivation and one does not, the one with the higher level of motivation wins."