

MOTIVATION AND ENGAGEMENT

Process Theories of Motivation

Vroom · Adams · Locke & Latham

PAPER 02 / 03

A Furtherance reference compendium on the intellectual traditions behind organisational design, leadership, execution, and culture.

IN THIS PAPER

The first paper catalogued *what* people want. This paper turns to *how* motivation works – the cognitive processes that convert wants into effort. The question it answers: given that people have needs, what determines how hard they actually try?

Process theories model motivation as reasoning. Vroom casts it as a rational calculation of expected reward. Adams makes it a judgement about fairness. Locke and Latham show that specific, hard goals drive effort – the most robustly evidenced finding in the field. Where content theories describe the fuel, these describe the engine.

Victor Vroom 1932–2023

Organisational psychology · expectancy theory

CORE THESIS

Motivation is a **rational calculation**. People exert effort in proportion to the product of three beliefs: that effort will produce performance (**expectancy**), that performance will produce an outcome (**instrumentality**), and that the outcome is worth having (**valence**). Because the terms multiply, if any one is zero, motivation collapses to zero.

FRAMEWORK

Term	The question in the person's head
Expectancy	If I put in effort, will it lead to good performance?
Instrumentality	If I perform well, will it actually lead to the reward?
Valence	Do I even want the reward on offer?

Motivational force = Expectancy × Instrumentality × Valence.

METHODOLOGY

A cognitive model of choice, formalised and tested through empirical studies of effort and performance.

SIGNIFICANCE AND CRITIQUE

The dominant rational account of motivation, and its multiplicative logic is broadly supported. The critique: it assumes conscious, deliberate calculation people rarely perform, and the three terms are difficult to measure cleanly.

John Stacey Adams 1925–1984

Behavioural psychology · equity theory

CORE THESIS

People judge fairness by comparing the ratio of their **inputs** (effort, skill, time) to their **outcomes** (pay, status, recognition) against a **referent other**. Perceived inequity – whether under- or over-reward – creates tension, and that tension motivates action to restore balance.

FRAMEWORK

Response to perceived inequity	What the person does
Adjust inputs	Work harder or, more often, ease off
Adjust outcomes	Seek a raise, recognition or better terms
Distort perception	Rationalise the gap to reduce the tension
Change referent or exit	Compare to someone else – or leave

METHODOLOGY

Built on social-comparison theory and tested experimentally, particularly on reactions to unfair pay.

SIGNIFICANCE AND CRITIQUE

The foundation of the organisational-justice literature and the reason perceived fairness of pay and process matters as much as the absolute level. The critique: the effects of under-reward are strong but over-reward effects are weak, and the choice of referent is subjective and hard to predict.

Edwin Locke & Gary Latham Goal-Setting Theory, 1990

Industrial-organisational psychology · goal setting

CORE THESIS

Specific and difficult goals produce higher performance than vague or easy ones – provided the person is committed and receives feedback. Goals work by directing attention, mobilising effort, encouraging persistence, and prompting strategy. This is among the most heavily validated findings in all of management science.

FRAMEWORK

Element	Role in performance
Specificity	Clear targets outperform “do your best”
Difficulty	Harder goals lift performance – up to the limit of ability
Commitment	The goal must be accepted and owned
Feedback	Progress information is required to adjust effort
Task complexity	For complex work, add learning goals, not just outcome goals

METHODOLOGY

Hundreds of laboratory and field experiments accumulated over several decades – an unusually strong and consistent evidence base.

SIGNIFICANCE AND CRITIQUE

The best-evidenced motivation theory in the canon, and the loose ancestor of every goal-setting practice from management-by-objectives to OKRs. The critique – “goals gone wild” – is real: aggressive goals can narrow focus, invite gaming and unethical shortcuts, and crowd out intrinsic motivation and learning.

Synthesis

Theorist	Motivation is...	Key variables	Evidence
Vroom	A rational reward calculation	Expectancy × instrumentality × valence	Broadly supported; hard to measure
Adams	A fairness comparison	Input/outcome ratio vs a referent	Strong for under-reward
Locke & Latham	Goal-directed effort	Specific, difficult goals + feedback	Very strong; decades of studies

FOR THE OPERATOR

Process theories explain how wants become effort – through the expectation of reward (Vroom), the perception of fairness (Adams), and the pull of specific, difficult goals (Locke & Latham). Their common cast is largely extrinsic: effort in exchange for outcomes. The final paper turns to the motivation that needs no external reward at all – the intrinsic and prosocial drivers behind sustained engagement.