CHAPTER 1

Motivation and Optimal Functioning
Making the Most of Our Natural Gifts

> There's so much to discover about being human. The more we know, the better equipped we are to build the lives we want.
>
> – Barbara L. Fredrickson, *Positivity*

> Fish gotta' swim, birds gotta' fly.
>
> – lyricist Oscar Hammerstein

When we see fish swim and birds fly, it seems perfectly natural. After all, that's what they are designed to do. So, what comes naturally to members of our species? Although there are many answers to this question, they all boil down to a fundamental, overarching design principle (Damasio, 2003; Klinger & Cox, 2004):

> *Humans evolved to formulate and selectively pursue goals that, when accomplished, would enhance their survival and well-being, both individually and collectively.*

That design principle has made it possible for humanity to accumulate cultural solutions and innovations at a breathtaking pace. As a result, we can live virtually anywhere on the planet. We can imagine possibilities that do not yet exist and adapt to unfamiliar circumstances. We can invent new capabilities (like flying!) and share what we have learned with others.

Like all species, we are creatures of habit. Yet we are also capable of profound change. Indeed, because of the way we are designed, it is possible for *every individual person* to envision a better future for themselves and to take action to try to make those goal thoughts a reality. In other words, we are all designed to be *self-directed.* Within each and every one of us is the power to improve – or even transform – our own lives and the lives of those around us.

Surprisingly, during much of the twentieth century, scientists studying motivation were not particularly interested in what makes us self-directed or how to strengthen that natural capability. Instead, mainstream theory

and research focused on how our actions are influenced by external forces (like rewards and punishments) and biological mandates (like drives and impulses). Goal images and ideas were not only ignored as potential targets of research; they were regarded as unimportant and "unscientific" (D. Ford, 1987/2019; Seligman et al., 2013).

This mechanistic (machine-like) view of humans inhibited progress in understanding the natural gifts that enable us to be self-directed. Fortunately, things gradually began to change mid-century as *systems* models focused on goal pursuit began to emerge (e.g., G. Miller et al., 1960) and *humanistic* scholars introduced compelling theories emphasizing concepts like "self-actualization" and the "fully functioning person" (Maslow, 1954, 1962; Rogers, 1961). Eventually, by the 1980s, all mainstream theories of motivation were using terms that acknowledged the central role of self-direction in human behavior and development – terms like *goal setting*, *self-efficacy*, *self-determination*, *internal locus of control*, and *personal striving*, to name just a few (M. Ford, 1992).

Nevertheless, it has been challenging for both psychologists and the general public to escape the historical vestiges of a way of thinking that emphasized external direction over self-direction. It is easy, for example, to think of goal setting as something that bosses and parents and teachers do for us. Emotions can be dismissed as transient and unsystematic motivational forces. Even beliefs about personal control and competence can be treated as little more than a psychological facade, with the external influences that shape those beliefs still regarded as the underlying causes of our actions.

In short, it is not enough to superficially acknowledge that thoughts and feelings are part of the motivational landscape. Each of us must have genuine respect for self-direction as a basic, unifying design principle to truly understand our potential for motivating self and others. Yes, we are of course all influenced a great deal by forces outside of our control. That too is part of how we are designed. But when we look at the way our species evolved over the eons, it is clear that life is all about *imagining goal possibilities* and then *selectively pursuing those opportunities most likely to enhance our "survival with well-being"* (Damasio, 2003). That is the central organizing force in human behavior and development (Klinger & Cox, 2004; Seligman et al., 2013).

The Difference between Functioning and Optimal Functioning

There are many things we can do to strengthen and enrich motivation. That is the key to transforming ordinary lives into extraordinary lives. Yet,

when we look at the basics of human functioning, it is clear that motivational processes are always active at some level. We can't stop our minds from generating goal images and ideas. We can't stop ourselves from having thoughts and feelings that influence what goals we pursue. Even when our minds are wandering and we are not actively pursuing any particular goal, motivationally relevant thoughts and feelings continue to flow (as when we are daydreaming, reflecting on recent events, or worrying about life's uncertainties). The most we can do is to try to calm down the mind's natural inclination to evaluate and emotionally respond to things we perceive and think about. Indeed, that is the key skill that "mindfulness meditation" experts seek to cultivate in themselves and their students (Goyal et al., 2014). By diminishing the strength of the "spark before the flame" (an apt metaphor from traditional Buddhist literature), those who have mastered this skill can quickly dismiss evaluative thoughts that might otherwise lead to mental commotion and worry.

The example of the "motivated meditator" makes it clear that, when we consider how the human mind is naturally designed, the question isn't how to turn someone's motivation "on" or "off." Rather, the question is, among all of the possibilities that cross our minds, why we choose to pursue some goals (with varying degrees of frequency, effort, and persistence) and not others. And can we use our capacity for self-direction to make different choices – *better* choices, with better outcomes for ourselves and others? In other words, can we go beyond ordinary functioning to something closer to *optimal functioning*? Or, to use the lingo we will introduce later in this book, can we go from merely "getting by" to *thriving with social purpose*?

Motivation is, of course, not the only pathway to self-improvement or for helping others with their goal pursuits. As we will explain in some detail in Chapter 5, optimal human functioning can also be promoted by developing knowledge and skills, by enhancing biological health and fitness, and by increasing available opportunities and resources. Nevertheless, because motivation plays a leadership role in directing, organizing, and regulating goal-directed activity, it is often the most powerful and efficient pathway for developing human potential. Indeed, studies of world-class experts and performers have repeatedly shown that the highest levels of achievement and creativity are most closely associated not with precocious talent or extraordinary intelligence but with motivational qualities such as passionate interest, a sense of personal mission or life purpose, high levels of energy and persistence, and a strong and resilient sense of self-confidence and courage (Bronk, 2014; Damon, 2008; Dweck, 2006; Snyder & Lopez, 2002, 2009). Without the invigorating and sustaining power of these

personal leadership qualities, cultivation of other elements of the person–environment system may be of little consequence. Imagine, for example, spending years developing the knowledge and skills needed to succeed in a career that doesn't really interest you or devoting much of your adult life to trying to fit in with a social network that ultimately leaves you feeling empty and unfulfilled.

In contrast, increased motivation for a particular kind of goal pursuit encourages us to take action to create the conditions needed to attain those goals – like seeking out new capabilities or searching for the right "fit" in our personal and professional relationships. Motivation focuses our attention, energizes our thoughts and actions, and keeps us going when obstacles and shortcomings get in the way. In simple terms, if motivation is sufficiently strong, it can transform the entire system. That is why this book highlights the challenge of "motivating self and others." Motivation is the key to making your life a *better* life – a life filled with purpose, fulfillment, and meaning.

What Is Motivation?

In this book you will learn about motivation from three different perspectives. At the core of *Motivating Self and Others* is an integrative, evidence-based theoretical framework – the Thriving with Social Purpose Theory of Motivation and Optimal Functioning – that is focused on the *psychological* processes within the person-system, with a special emphasis on motivational processes and their leadership functions. However, to the extent possible within an arena where scientific consensus on many details has not yet been reached, we also try to explain how basic motivational mechanisms work at a *neurological* level. That helps anchor our psychological concepts in the physical reality of the human body while also affirming that those concepts are not just arbitrary mental constructions that sound good yet fail to represent how our minds and bodies actually function. Finally, we offer an *evolutionary* perspective focused on the quest to understand the origins of what is unique to human motivation (and human nature in general) as it was shaped over many millennia by "gene–culture coevolution" (Lumsden & Wilson, 1981; Richerson & Boyd, 2005; E. O. Wilson, 2012). Of particular interest is a growing consensus that, while most of our physical and instrumental capabilities (e.g., bipedalism, sweat glands, opposable thumbs) evolved as a result of ecological selection pressures, our *humanity*, or essential human nature, evolved mostly as a result of social selection pressures that put goals related to *social purpose* at the center of our collective experiences. As we will

see, insights into how we evolved can help us become more self-directed and more capable of helping others achieve their personal and professional goals.

As you immerse yourself in the layered chapters of this book, you will learn that motivation is a complex, multifaceted phenomenon. However, because motivational processes work in part by controlling what thoughts, feelings, and perceptions capture our attention, you probably already have a pretty good intuitive sense of what motivation is all about. To test this hypothesis, try the following thought experiment:

> Think of the most motivating activity or experience you engaged in during the past few weeks. What were you trying to do? How did you feel? Were there particular thoughts and feelings that stood out in your mind during that experience?

Over the years we have collected hundreds of anecdotes in response to such questions. The stories people tell are both informative and inspiring. Some focus on extraordinary events, such as overcoming a major obstacle, helping someone in crisis, or birthing a baby. Others focus on everyday events that are reliable sources of life meaning, such as spending time with loved ones, earning respect through hard work, or becoming immersed in a favorite activity.

Although such stories vary widely in content, nearly all of them share common themes – themes that are at the heart of what motivation is all about. See if these themes apply to your experience.

1. A Strong Sense of Purpose (Goal Theme)

When people are highly motivated, they *feel* self-directed. They have personally compelling goal thoughts in their minds (e.g., "This is really important to me"; "I am on a mission") and a sense that these ideas and images are self-chosen. Usually these goal thoughts involve clearly conceived outcomes ("I know what I want"; "This is what I need to do") or vivid images that exemplify an extraordinarily meaningful part of their lives (e.g., images of loved ones; images of tranquil locations). The most powerful goal thoughts typically encompass multiple sources of motivation and are accompanied by feelings of authenticity and personal identity (e.g., "This is the real me"; "I am doing what I was meant to do").

2. Emotional Experiences That Are Powerful and Memorable (Emotion Theme)

Strong motivational patterns are virtually always infused with strong emotions. These emotions are not uniformly positive (e.g., emotions like

fear, anger, and guilt and related affective states like pain and fatigue can be highly motivating), but positive emotions (e.g., excitement, happiness, affection) usually predominate in the stories people tell us about their most motivating life experiences. These experiences are highly memorable because events that are emotionally intense are almost always easier to recall than experiences that are emotionally bland or neutral (Bower, 1981).

3. *Feeling Self-Confident and Supported (Personal Agency Belief Theme)*
When people are highly motivated, they feel empowered and believe that they can overcome problems and obstacles. One source of empowerment is confidence in your personal capabilities, which is the dominant focus of many motivation theories. However, an equally important source of motivational power is a fundamental belief that the world around you (e.g., the social, material, and informational resources in your environment) will be supportive of your goal pursuits. When we have faith both in ourselves *and* in the resources and opportunities available to us, our thinking about what is possible becomes robust and expansive ("The sky's the limit!").

You can also get an intuitive feel for these three motivational themes by running the opposite thought experiment – that is, by thinking of a time when you were decidedly *un*motivated with respect to some challenge or opportunity (e.g., a request to do an onerous chore; an invitation to attend an event that did not appeal to you). In all probability, one or more of the elements described above was clearly deficient. It might be the lack of a strong or personally meaningful goal (e.g., "That's not my thing"), or the goal may lack sufficient clarity to be motivationally compelling (e.g., "I'm not sure what's in it for me"). There would almost certainly be a lack of any strong supporting emotion (e.g., "I just don't feel like it"), which may reflect a more general state of energy depletion (e.g., "I'm just not up to it right now"). Even if you have positive goals and emotions activated, you might dismiss the opportunity based on a belief that you do not have the necessary skills (e.g., "I'm intrigued but wouldn't have a clue what to do") or the necessary resources to take advantage of the opportunity (e.g., "Sounds great, but I can't afford it").

It's Good to Have a Goal!

We frequently use this phrase to affirm that rewarding life journeys begin with personal goals that are powerful and meaningful. The phrase is a bit deceptive, because in reality, our neurons are continuously firing in ways

that cause goal-related thoughts and feelings to pop into our heads – as evidenced, for example, by neuroimaging studies and eye-gaze experiments that link brain-based activity with goal-directed thoughts and actions. So, to be more precise, what we are really trying to emphasize when we say "It's good to have a goal!" is that you can optimize your goal pursuits if you can (a) increase your *awareness* of the personal goals that are the most compelling and meaningful for you and (b) enhance the *clarity* of those goal thoughts so that they can direct and organize your behavior with strength and precision.

Do you have a good feel for what kinds of challenges and opportunities are most likely to capture your attention and "rev your motor"? Do you know what your *core personal goals* are – that is, the goals that, when activated and fulfilled, provide you with the greatest emotional rewards? Do you have any sense of whether your core personal goals are aligned with your current life circumstances? And do you have any idea how you might "rethink" your goals or change your circumstances to improve your goal–life alignment? These are some of the questions that we will be addressing throughout this book as we work through the implications of what it means to be *self-directed*, with personal responsibility to take that natural design principle and make the most of it.

Motivational Systems Theory

Consistent with the thought experiment we invited you to carry out to tap into your intuitive understanding of motivation, scientists have focused on three sets of psychological processes – personal goals, emotions, and personal agency beliefs – in their efforts to understand the key factors involved in motivating self and others. These processes work closely together as a *motivational system* (M. Ford, 1992) and therefore cannot be understood in isolation.

Personal goals provide direction (i.e., self-direction) by mentally representing the future outcomes you hope to achieve and by preparing your mind and body to pursue those outcomes. Among your overall repertoire of personal goals, *core personal goals* are the strongest sources of direction and energy – which is why we metaphorically refer to them as "the leaders within you."

Consistent with the integrative concept of *possible selves* (Markus & Nurius, 1986), different "leaders" may come to the forefront as you take on different roles and explore different ways of fulfilling the desired outcomes that you have envisioned. The most effective goal thoughts will be

those that not only can arouse your passions but are also capable of efficiently organizing your thoughts and actions around coherent purposes and targeted objectives.

Emotions and personal agency beliefs (aka PABs) are also essential contributors to the leadership team in *motivational headquarters* – our metaphor for the dynamic convergence and integrated processing of personal goals, emotions, and personal agency beliefs. The unique role of emotions and PABs is to provide helpful guidance, sound advice, and, when necessary, compelling demands about what goals should be pursued at what level of effort and persistence.

Fans of the Star Trek franchise can picture how motivational headquarters operates by imagining the ship's captain (the directive function) being peppered with urgent reports about the ship's condition and impending threats (and opportunities), coupled with advice (offered with a combination of logic and emotion) about what actions need to be taken.

As we will see, in providing such advice, emotions and PABs influence the leader in different ways. When emotions are triggered, they activate particular kinds of goal thoughts. Imagine, for example, not seeing your wallet or smartphone where you expected it to be. That would immediately trigger emotions like surprise and consternation (if not panic!), which in turn would activate a goal to see the missing item and have it in your possession. Emotions also influence – through feelings that range from gentle nudges to irresistible urges – which mentally activated goals get selected for actual goal pursuit. Emotions help us prioritize goal options by energizing certain thought patterns over others ("I won't be able to think about anything else until I find my wallet") and by preparing the body for particular kinds of action ("I can't just sit here and do nothing!").

Personal agency beliefs also participate in this "here and now" decision-making process ("OK, calm down, I'm good at finding things"). However, their unique strength is in situations where there is a need to reflect on available capabilities and resources before making a decision about whether to pursue (or to continue pursuing) a goal. Indeed, the primary role of PAB thinking is to provide the leader with a realistic assessment of what outcomes might be anticipated if a particular goal is pursued. It is important to maintain hope and persistence when a goal is in fact attainable ("I'm sure I can find my wallet if I carefully retrace my steps"). However, if goal pursuit would likely be a waste of time and energy – or perhaps even counterproductive – the leader needs to be advised accordingly ("I'm probably not going to be able to find my wallet, so I better start calling my credit card companies ASAP!").

Motivational science took on a fresh new look when it began to recognize the central role that these self-directive and self-regulatory influences play in human behavior and development. However, the tendency has been for motivational scholars to focus on one particular facet of motivation rather than looking at the integrated functioning of personal goals, emotions, and personal agency beliefs. This "one at a time" approach can help provide specialized knowledge about particular aspects of motivation, but it leaves a significant gap in terms of understanding how motivation naturally operates in the real world, where goals, emotions, and personal agency beliefs always work together as a leadership *team*.

> To date, our field is characterized by theoretical fragmentation, with a multitude of constructs denoting similar phenomena . . . and theories that are largely complementary but lack integration. Fragmentation hinders not only the development of a cumulative science of motivation and emotion but also our communication with policy-makers and practitioners. (Pekrun & Marsh, 2018, p. 20)

To address the need to not only "zoom in" on specific motivational elements, but also to "zoom out" to see broader motivational patterns, co-author Martin Ford developed *Motivational Systems Theory* (MST) during his professorial career at Stanford University. MST is grounded in a comprehensive, evidence-based theory of human behavior and development called the *Living Systems Framework* (LSF), which was developed in the 1980s by Donald Ford (Martin's father) to help guide human development scholars and practitioners in interdisciplinary fields of research and practice. That is not to say that Motivational Systems Theory was developed primarily as an academic exercise. Indeed, the initial impetus for developing MST was more practical than theoretical. Due to a new teaching assignment, Ford found himself struggling to help his doctoral students make sense of the hodge-podge of motivation theories that had suddenly sprung up in the 1970s and 1980s, after it had become acceptable to take mental phenomena such as goal thoughts, emotional triggers, and self-evaluations seriously. What was clearly needed was some way to think about motivation that was simultaneously simpler yet more comprehensive – in other words, more *systematic*.

MST's ability to respectfully "stand on the shoulders of giants" and to consolidate their scientific contributions within a coherent framework paved the way for efforts to use MST to guide research and intervention in a variety of applied fields of study. For example, during his executive training directorship at a large Fortune 50 corporation, co-author Peyton

Smith was impressed with the inclusive nature of MST and its applicability to real-world problems, and subsequently used it as the foundation for an international leadership program he developed and implemented on five different continents.

When You Stand on the Shoulders of Giants, You See More

There are a number of advantages to using an integrative systems model to understand motivation and optimal functioning. Perhaps the most obvious is the capacity of such models to be thorough and complete in their coverage of relevant phenomena. For example, while some motivation theories focus on just one or two categories of goal content (e.g., equity theory, self-worth theory, achievement motivation theory), MST includes a comprehensive goal taxonomy that covers *twenty-four* fundamentally distinct goal themes. Even Maslow's (1954) popular needs hierarchy only covers a fraction of this motivational "road map."

MST is also unique with respect to its emphasis on the ubiquitous importance of emotions in motivational patterns. Although respect for the role that emotion-regulation processes play in motivation and optimal functioning is growing (e.g., Gross, 2015; Harley et al., 2019; Pekrun, 2018; Thompson, 2011), emotions are still regarded by many scholars as hard to pin down in a scientific way. Although they are generally not left out of motivation theories completely – emotions are hard to ignore when trying to understand why people do what they do! – it is evident that there has been less emphasis on emotions than on expectancies, beliefs, goals, and values in mainstream motivational theorizing.

In short, there has been a fundamental imbalance in the scientific literature when it comes to understanding the role and significance of thoughts and emotions in human motivation. MST helps restore the proper balance.

Similarly, MST is one of the few scientific theories that places as much weight on context beliefs (beliefs about environmental responsiveness) as on capability beliefs (beliefs about personal competence) when trying to understand the choices people make. That is a direct result of the emphasis in systems models on seeing the environment as an infused element within a person's functioning. This *contextual* orientation helps combat the tendency to look at motivation in overly narrow or individualistic terms. The MST approach to self-direction is a genuinely "systems" way of thinking in which the person is embedded in the environment and the environment is