

## MOTIVATING SELF AND OTHERS

This book describes the essential nature of human motivation by integrating the best ideas and evidence from motivational and evolutionary science. In doing so, the authors explain how the cultivation of goal–life alignment and “thriving with social purpose” motivational patterns can inspire optimal functioning and enhance life meaning. Readers are provided with a comprehensive framework for guiding research and intervention efforts along with motivational principles designed to summarize the major themes in effective efforts to motivate yourself and those you wish to help or encourage. Special emphasis is placed on the importance of life meaning in empowering our motivational systems and protecting us from downward spirals of disappointment and suffering. Compelling evidence is provided to support the view that social purpose is as fundamental as self-interest in human motivational systems. The authors also focus on the catalytic role of social purpose in enabling humans to soar above all other species.

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# MOTIVATING SELF AND OTHERS

*Thriving with Social Purpose, Life Meaning,  
and the Pursuit of Core Personal Goals*

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*To our wives, children, and grandchildren, who bring social purpose  
and abundant life meaning to our lives each and every day*

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Preface

Our motivation for writing this book was to share with the world what we have learned in our scholarly and professional lives about the nature of humanity and how each of us can become a better person. For the past decade we have immersed ourselves in the latest scientific advances in psychology and human development in an effort to construct a practical, evidence-based understanding of how to help people increase their capacity for self-direction and develop patterns of optimal functioning. Our ongoing quest is based on a strategy that we call the “Big Bet” – a term often used by budding entrepreneurial teams to caption their proposition to potential investors. Our Big Bet is the hypothesis that

<i>Scientific understanding of what makes humans naturally successful, coupled with</i>	+	<i>Self-understanding of your core personal goals and learned motivational patterns, can provide you with</i>	→	<i>The insights and tools needed to increase your effectiveness, well-being, and life meaning.</i>
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Essentially, our bet is that if you make an effort to learn the fundamental science underlying motivation and optimal functioning, and then apply that knowledge to your own personal goals and life circumstances, you will increase your capacity for self-direction as well as your ability to lead – and to help others lead – a more successful and meaningful life.

The Big Bet comes with a big payoff. As you begin to look at life through the lens of your core personal goals, you will see how you can better align your daily activities with what really matters to you. And like an expert physician, your ability to diagnose and find solutions to complex motivational problems will become enriched and more intuitive as you learn about all the human qualities that make successful goal pursuit possible. That in turn will make extraordinary achievements seem more attainable.

Adversity and uncertainty will seem less overwhelming because you will always be able to find a way to restore a sense of direction and a resilient belief in your capacity to overcome obstacles and challenges.

And that's not the only payoff. Our work is also guided by the observation that when people invest themselves in activities that are aligned with their core personal goals, and those goals are infused with *social purpose* and pursued with a *thriving* motivational orientation, they experience greater effectiveness, an enhanced sense of life meaning, and improved health outcomes. The evidence for these positive outcomes is provocative and compelling, with far-reaching implications not only for individuals striving to improve their own lives but also for leaders and helping professionals.

In short, *goal-life alignment* and *thriving with social purpose* are the keys to leading a productive and fulfilling life. The positive thoughts and feelings those motivational achievements spark are good for us in so many ways. The energy and creativity they unleash fuel our ability to accomplish great things, grow in response to new challenges, and change for the better.

### Merging Science, Practice, and Big Ideas

Our immersion experience has been rather unique in that it has involved an intellectually intense partnership between a professor and a corporate executive. By teaming up, we have been able to accomplish things that we would never have been able to achieve acting alone, including the development of the Thriving with Social Purpose (TSP) Theory of Motivation and Optimal Functioning that is at the heart of this book (M. Ford & Smith, 2007), along with the “spin-off” TSP Theory of Life Meaning that we introduce in Chapter 7.

Our collaborative effort to bridge science and practice has focused on the ambitious task of synthesizing the best theoretical and empirical work available across a broad range of specializations related to motivation and optimal functioning. Our aspirations thus go beyond describing the next “big idea” for enhancing human motivation. We are more like puzzle enthusiasts trying to identify the best ideas (and evidence) that science has to offer so that we can, slowly but surely, connect the puzzle pieces related to motivation and optimal functioning in a unified way. In short, ours is a *systems* approach that is based on a strong belief that, regardless of how exciting a particular “big idea” might be, it will have limited value if it is not embedded within an accessible framework that encompasses the natural unity of the whole person-in-context.

Throughout *Motivating Self and Others*, we have adopted a strategy in which we move rather quickly in each chapter to the “bottom line” of what contemporary science has to offer and to our integration of those ideas and evidence. Along the way we point to some of the scholarly contributions that provide the best in-depth coverage of each topic so that our sources are clear and readers can dig deeper into areas that seem particularly intriguing. By “standing on the shoulders of giants,” we hope that the scientific underpinnings for our ideas are evident, while also putting us in a position to scan across the independent contributions of scholars working on related topics. This vantage point has enabled us to work on the critical but previously neglected task of integrating those contributions (and some of our own!) into a clear overall picture.

### **The Value of Integrative Science**

Emphasizing synthesis (in addition to analysis) is generally not a winning strategy for basic researchers, most of whom are required to publish (or perish) in journals where scientific advancement is associated with specialized knowledge and expertise. The value of integrative science becomes more evident when efforts are made to communicate scientific knowledge to broader audiences who are primarily concerned with solving complex, real-world problems. For example, back in the early 1980s, one of us (Ford) was assigned to teach a course on Motivational Processes in Education at a leading research university (Stanford). In his first attempt at covering the relevant territory, Ford followed a standard survey of theories approach. Students learned about goal setting, self-efficacy, learned helplessness, self-determination, and a variety of other “big ideas” in the field of human motivation. But it was clear that they were not getting a sense of how these ideas fit together, even though the leading scholars in these areas were all true “giants.”

This experience inspired Ford to try to synthesize the core substantive themes in more than thirty different motivation theories in psychology, education, and business into an accessible, unified framework. This led to the creation of Motivational Systems Theory (M. Ford, 1992), an overarching framework guided not only by the best theory and research available on human motivation but also by a comprehensive model of human behavior and development developed by his father called the Living Systems Framework (D. Ford, 1987/2019; M. Ford & D. Ford, 1987/2019). The availability of this integrative resource paid immediate dividends not only on the research front but also in class, as students could now

see the “forest for the trees.” They were better equipped to appreciate the significance of the advances they were reading about in scientific journals and the potential interconnections between different specialized topics in the field. They were also better able to apply the relevant science to practical motivational problems they were dealing with in their jobs and in their personal lives.

### What You Will Learn

By grounding *Motivating Self and Others* in a broad systems framework, we believe that we can provide you with these same kinds of insights and practical wisdom. We start our journey into the science of human motivation by explaining how nature has equipped you with several mechanisms that make self-direction possible. These mechanisms evolved because they helped us survive and thrive in challenging life circumstances, not only by strengthening our individual capabilities but also by enhancing our capacity to live and work in cooperative groups with shared interests.

We then help you discover the “leaders within you” – your *core personal goals* that represent the strongest and most authentic motivational forces in your repertoire of “possible selves” (Markus & Nurius, 1986). Our basic premise is that life is all about the ongoing process of imagining goal possibilities and then selectively pursuing those opportunities most likely to enhance our *survival with well-being* (Damasio, 2003).

*The first secret to success, happiness, and life meaning is to know your core personal goals and to make life choices that ensure you will be able to pursue those goals on a regular basis.*

To help you appreciate this insight, we provide you with the most recent thinking from evolutionary biology and motivational psychology while also introducing you to the Assessment of Personal Goals (APG), an online tool designed to help you identify your most important sources of motivation and life meaning (<https://apg.gmu.edu>).

In the next chapter of *Motivating Self and Others*, we explain how personal goals naturally work together with emotions and personal agency beliefs as a leadership team. In doing so, we emphasize how thoughts and feelings that are grounded in current realities but also filled with hope for the future create a fertile psychological climate for imagining possible goal options while also providing sound advice about which goal thoughts should be “in the driver’s seat” at any given point in time. We also clarify that goal attainment requires not only strong leadership from *motivational*



*headquarters* but also a responsive environment and effective support from the *instrumental troops* (e.g., goal-relevant knowledge and skills) responsible for carrying out the leaders' directives.

We then use Motivational Systems Theory as a foundation for constructing the TSP Theory of Motivation and Optimal Functioning. TSP is what results when each of the elements in motivational headquarters is effectively "amplified" while also incorporating concerns that go beyond ourselves, thereby increasing our capacity for personal growth, teamwork, and effective leadership of others. Of particular interest is the fact that *life meaning* naturally flows from the qualities associated with thriving motivational patterns that have been infused with social purpose. These qualities include active engagement in goal pursuit, resilience in the face of obstacles and setbacks, and a genuine interest in helping others attain *their* core personal goals. These insights led us to construct the TSP Theory of Life Meaning, which is intended to both illuminate and demystify one of the most important yet least understood aspects of optimal human functioning.

Although TSP represents human motivation at its best, it is within the grasp of every reader. That is because *we are wired for TSP*, with an evolved infrastructure of prosocial motives and social-cognitive skills that support a wide variety of impressive – and at times inspirational – human achievements. Although our self-enhancing goal pursuits can be quite compelling, we are also naturally designed to formulate and pursue goals focused on helping others, and doing so often makes us feel good – sometimes to our surprise! That is a profoundly important dynamic from a motivational perspective. It means that, absent pathology, social purpose is something we are born with. That is why we spend so much time engaging in culturally and developmentally enriching activities, such as connecting with friends and family, sharing knowledge and expertise, serving in supportive leadership roles, and relieving others' distress and suffering. Indeed, social purpose is what caused humans to soar above all other species.

*TSP thus represents a second secret to success, happiness, and life meaning – a life-affirming pathway for simultaneously promoting the well-being of self and others.*

In the final two chapters, we shift our focus from the task of constructing a framework of ideas and evidence to the practical question of how you can apply insights from the science of human motivation and optimal functioning to increase goal-life alignment and TSP in self and others. To

accomplish this objective, we offer seven broad principles for motivating self and others and explain how they can be used to address the kinds of motivational questions and dilemmas that people often face in their daily lives.

We also provide readers with a concise “toolbox” of figures, formulas, and frameworks designed to help readers remember the key ideas in our book and envision how they might be used for their practical purposes.

It is our Big Bet that by helping readers gain a working understanding of what it takes to motivate self and others, we can empower people to make a difference in their own lives and in the lives of others. The odds are now in our favor, as progress has accelerated on many fronts, including

- a deeper understanding of the evolutionary roots underlying the human capacity for *self-direction* and behavior change
- increased awareness that it is difficult to sustain motivation and life meaning unless *core personal goals* are aligned with life circumstances
- greater appreciation of the powerful and ubiquitous role that *emotions* play in activating goals, guiding our decisions, and energizing our thoughts and actions
- major advances in understanding the nature and coordination of *conscious and nonconscious thought processes* in the pursuit of personal goals
- groundbreaking research on *brain plasticity*, revealing that, under the proper conditions, significant changes in brain and behavioral functioning are far more common and achievable than previously imagined
- progress in identifying the evolutionary, neural, and biochemical processes underlying *survival with well-being* (Damasio, 2003), with many of those processes oriented toward cooperation, helping, and social bonding
- growing awareness that *social purpose* and *social intelligence* are central to virtually all forms of human activity, and thus “a life well lived” results from effective efforts to motivate self *and* others

Our ideas and conclusions have also been significantly influenced by the burgeoning fields of positive psychology (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; Snyder & Lopez, 2002, 2009) and positive organizational scholarship (e.g., Cameron et al., 2003) – two domains in which the scientific study of optimal functioning is flourishing. In each of these fields, the human capacity for self-direction and self-renewal and the benefits of developing that capacity are central organizing themes – just as they are in our TSP frameworks. However, rather than focusing on qualities that are assumed to be “positive” regardless of an individual’s circumstances, we

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offer a more *contextual* view that recognizes that “psychological traits and processes are not inherently positive or negative; instead, whether psychological characteristics promote or undermine well-being depends on the context in which they operate” (McNulty & Fincham, 2012, p. 101).

As part of this contextual view, we introduce a new concept in this book called *equipoise*, which captures the idea that effective goal pursuit is a dynamic process that requires not only doing the “right things” but also an appropriate degree of psychological and behavioral flexibility so that ongoing adjustments can be made when there is a need to adapt to changing circumstances. Equipoise helps explain, for example, why, across many different categories of occupational success, a “giving” motivational orientation (what we will call “social purpose”) is characteristic of both the best performers and – when equipoise is lost – the worst performers (Grant, 2013).

We invite you to join us as we share what we have learned about the science of motivation and optimal functioning. Our Big Bet is that by doing so, you will enhance both your own and others’ ability to lead a life filled with meaningful accomplishments and an enduring sense of well-being.

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