

Motivated by the Organization's Mission or Their Career?

Implications for Leaders in Turbulent Times



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Rising competition for talent along with federal pay and hiring freezes are bringing increased pressure on leaders to motivate and retain employees. This article describes research on what motivates employees to choose to work where they do and describes how leaders can use this information to engage and retain a workforce as competition for talent increases. The authors describe three employee profiles—Mission focused, Career focused, and those stuck with no other options—and how leaders can motivate and retain them.

Introduction

A tough economy has caused a large number of employees to feel that they have limited job options; and as a result, they are not actively pursuing other job

Leadership can happen anywhere within an organization, at any level, and in any job category. Some leaders lead through formal authority; others lead through influence and interpersonal networks. Because people at every level can act as leaders, and because people at every level sometimes need leadership (rather than just people at lower levels), this report offers recommendations to those whose intent is to lead, regardless of their formal role in their organization. Leadership recommendations are therefore not aimed at senior executives, front-line supervisors, or any other specific group. We refer to people at any level who choose to act as leaders to motivate and influence others.

opportunities. However, as the economy improves—and there is evidence of improvement—retaining and engaging valuable employees will soon need to be among the top priorities of leaders in both government and private industry. What can leaders do to retain and engage employees in a complex and turbulent economy?

Leaders who understand and address what motivates their employees are more likely to hold on to their best people and maximize performance by all employees.¹ Compensation and benefits alone neither retain good employees nor motivate them to contribute their very best. In many cases, an employee's motivation comes down to his or her relationship with an individual leader. The quality of that relationship depends in large part on how well the leader understands the employee and his or her motivation.

The Center for Creative Leadership and Booz Allen Hamilton conducted research to identify the relationship between why people are in their current positions and how motivated and committed they are to their organization. The results shed new light on what drives employees in public and private institutions, and how leaders can motivate and retain employees through continuing complexity and change.

“Smart agency leaders should strive to understand the reasons that individual employees and groups or categories of employees leave, and then to use that information to improve aspects of the workplace environment they find lacking.”²

¹ Meyer, J. P., Becker, T. E., & Vandenberghe, C. (2004). Employee commitment and motivation: a conceptual analysis and integrative model. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 89(6), 991-1007.

² <http://ourpublicservice.org/OPS/publications/viewcontentdetails.php?id=154>

What Drives Employees Today: Mission or Career?

Federal government employees are often described as primarily Mission focused, and their leaders frequently rely on the mission to motivate them. From warfighters to emergency responders to scientists, the mission is the shared goal that breaks down barriers, drives collaboration, and sustains careers through immense challenges and tangles of red tape.³ Some believe that private industry is very different in that leaders there focus on career advancement and compensation as motivators for people presumed to be driven primarily by personal ambition.

But for many people, work is not just about money or promotions; it is about making a difference and the mission of their organization. Research suggests that though some people are focused on money, compensation is not the primary reason people stay in their jobs and work hard. So what is?

When thinking about how people are motivated, one way to group people is according to whether they stay in their position because of the organization's mission (Mission focused), because staying in the job furthers their personal career (Career focused), or because they currently see no other options for employment (No Options). How people answer the question about why they stay in an organization is strongly related to their motivation and how committed they are to their organization. Leaders who understand how these three orientations to the current job affect perceptions and behavior will be more equipped to use available resources to motivate their teams.



³ Wright, B. E. (2007). *Public service and motivation: does mission matter?* *Public Administration Review*, 67(1), 54-64.

⁴ For additional information on survey methodology and sample, see Appendix 1.

Leaders must adapt their styles as needed to employees who are Mission focused, Career focused, and stuck with a perceived lack of options.

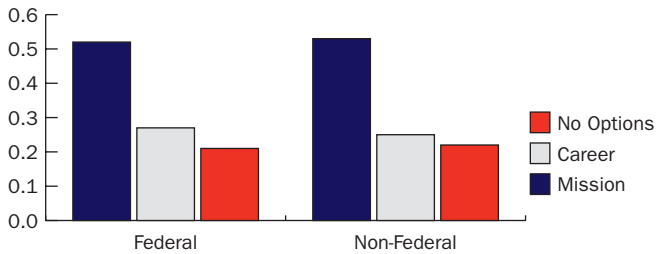
To help leaders understand how these three orientations to the current job affect perceptions and behavior, we asked 1,133 people employed in the United States between July 2010 and October 2010 to tell us whether they were in their current position because of the mission of the organization, because staying in the job furthered their personal career, or because they currently saw no other options for employment. At the same time, we asked them about their—

- Commitment to the organization
- Job and pay satisfaction
- Perceived support from the organization
- Personal motivation
- Feelings about the organizational structure
- Opportunities for development
- Intention to remain with the organization, and
- Beliefs about what leaders should do and be.⁴

Out of 326 federal government employees, 52 percent responded that they were motivated to stay primarily because of their organization's mission; 27 percent responded that they were motivated to stay primarily because of career opportunities; and 21 percent responded that they stayed because they had no other attractive options (see Exhibit 1 on page 3). Out of 807 participants working outside the federal government (in for-profit and not-for-profit organizations), 53 percent responded that they were motivated to stay in their current jobs primarily because of their organization's mission; 25 percent responded that they were motivated to stay primarily because of the career opportunities; and 22 percent responded that they were staying in their current jobs because they had no other attractive options. Mission-focused and Career-focused employees are found in equal proportion in federal and nonfederal sectors, at all levels of

⁵ In for-profit organizations, mission-driven types are more frequently found at higher levels in the organization. Whether they are at higher levels because they are mission driven or whether they are mission driven because they create the mission because they are at the level to do so is an unanswered question. To answer that question would require longitudinal data not currently available.

Exhibit 1: Motivation to Stay in Current Job in Federal and Non-Federal Organizations



Source: Center for Creative Leadership and Booz Allen

the organization,⁵ in both genders, and across generations (e.g., Baby Boomers, Generation X, and Millennials) and races.

The Impact of Being Mission vs. Career Focused⁶

On average, both Mission- and Career-focused employees reported being committed to the organization, having high job satisfaction, and being strongly motivated. They reported that they felt supported by their supervisors and the organization, believed they had good opportunities to develop within the organization, and were unlikely to leave their organizations. Fundamentally, leaders benefit by working with both types of employees because they are committed, intrinsically motivated, and intend to stay with the organization. Investing in the development of both types of employees is a good bet.

How Are Mission-Focused and Career-Focused Groups Different?

Mission-focused employees felt more supported by the organization than Career-focused employees. Higher levels of perceived organizational support have been shown to be related to higher job satisfaction, lower stress, higher employee commitment, greater retention, and higher performance—all of which result in greater employee and organizational effectiveness.

Mission-focused employees reported feeling greater commitment to the organization than Career-focused employees. Higher levels of organizational commitment have been shown to be related to reduced intentions to turnover and increased job involvement.⁷

⁶ No Options people are so different that they will be discussed in a separate section.
⁷ For a review see Kacmar, K.M., Carlson, D.S., & Brymer, R.A. (1999). Antecedents and consequences of organizational commitment: a comparison of two scales. *Educational and Psychological Measurement*, 59, 976-994.

Mission-focused employees reported greater job satisfaction than Career-focused employees. Higher levels of job satisfaction have been shown to be related to reduced absenteeism⁸ and more organizational citizenship behaviors,⁹ both of which help improve organizational productivity.

Which of these am I? Ask yourself the question we asked the respondents: Are you in your current position because of the mission of your organization, because the job furthers your career, or because you are stuck and have no other options? You may not see any of these as 100 percent accurate, so allocate a percentage to each. The next question is how important each of these is to you. Not everyone feels the same need to be dedicated to the mission or their career. Many employees are happy being dedicated to their career and feel they make a difference regardless of the organization's mission. Others feel that a strong connection to the mission is what matters, and that building a career is a hassle more than a goal. However, if you find yourself mostly stuck in the No Options category, you need to act to improve your situation. Our research clearly shows that employees who feel stuck with no options face a number of challenges, including more friction with organizational systems and reduced perceptions of effectiveness. Getting "unstuck" will require effort and creativity on your part—and the leadership of others can offer valuable support. As a leader, understanding your own orientation toward mission, career, and a lack of options will help as you motivate your employees.

⁸ Wegge, J., Schmidt, K., Parkes, C., & van Dick, K. (2007). 'Taking a sickie': Job satisfaction and job involvement as interactive predictors of absenteeism in a public organization. *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology*, 80, 77-89.

⁹ Organ, D. W., & Ryan, K. (1995). A meta-analytic review of attitudinal and dispositional predictors of organizational citizenship behavior. *Personnel Psychology*, 48, 775-802.

Mission-focused employees reported possessing greater personal political skill than did Career-focused employees. This means Mission-focused employees may be more effective at navigating the political environment within the organization.¹⁰

Mission-focused employees reported experiencing less political behavior within their organizations. The experience of political behavior within organizations can lead to lower organizational commitment and lower intrinsic motivation. Mission-focused employees may report less political behavior because they experience less of it, or because they are better at managing it. Either way, their experience of political behavior within the organization likely has less of a negative effect on their organizational commitment than it does on Career-focused employees.

Mission-focused employees reported somewhat higher intrinsic,¹¹ and lower extrinsic,¹² motivation than Career-focused employees. Intrinsic motivation comes from pursuing personally meaningful objectives and is closely

Do people leave their jobs when the economy improves? Some leave, but most stay. Employees who reported that they had development opportunities available, were committed to their organization, felt supported by their supervisor and their organization, and were satisfied with their jobs were unlikely to identify the current economic conditions as a reason for remaining where they were. Conversely, employees who intended to leave their organization identified the current economic conditions as a reason for why they had not left yet. This is good news for employers and for leaders: Mission and Career respondents generally reported they intended to stay with their organization and did not identify the economy as an influence on their decision to work for their current employer.

associated with productivity, engagement, and innovation. Extrinsic motivation comes from pursuing goals that are motivated by demands, requirements, or obligations.¹³ The implication is that there is a subtle difference in the type of motivation that Mission- and Career-focused people bring to their jobs.

These distinctions between Mission- and Career-focused employees highlight different motivations, perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors. Earlier, we noted that Mission- and Career-focused employees appear in similar proportion in all types of organizations, from federal government to private industry, and across levels of management responsibility. Leaders who recognize and leverage the value of both Mission- and Career-focused employees in both federal government and private industry, and at all levels of management responsibility, will benefit their organizations and their employees.

No Options: A Different Perspective

In comparison with Mission- and Career-focused employees, those employees who described themselves as having “no other options” for employment appeared stuck in many ways. These employees reported lower commitment to their organizations, lower intrinsic motivation, less job satisfaction, and less support from their organizations and supervisors than Mission- or Career-focused employees. They reported that the systems in their organizations limited the effectiveness of their own leadership behavior, no matter what they tried to do; and they believed they had less support from their organizations and supervisors than did Mission- or Career-focused employees. Despite these differences, employees reporting “no options” did not report working fewer hours than Mission- or Career-focused employees. They did, however, report themselves more likely to quit than either Mission- or Career-focused employees.

Practical Ways that Leaders Motivate: Creating Developmental Opportunities and Good Leadership

How can leaders motivate and retain Mission- and Career focused employees—and what can leaders do with employees who feel stuck with no options? Employees

¹⁰ Ferris, G. R., Davidson, S. L., & Perrewé, P. L. (2005). *Political Skill at Work: Impact on Work Effectiveness*. Mountain View, CA: Davies-Black Publishing.

¹¹ Intrinsic motivation is defined as finding joy in work.

¹² Extrinsic motivation is defined as the extent to which one is motivated by money and other tangible rewards.

¹³ Though Mission-focused employees expressed greater intrinsic motivation than did Career-focused employees, they do not appear to work more hours. Number of hours worked was found to be a direct result of organizational level: the higher a respondent was in his or her organization, the more hours s/he reported working, regardless of their focus.

are motivated both by the opportunities they have and by their leaders' behaviors. Effective leaders in all types of organizations can influence employee motivation by helping find good learning and development opportunities for them and by leading more effectively. Leaders will be able to motivate a wider range of employees by ensuring that they provide opportunities that appeal to Mission- and Career-focused employees, and that they look for ways to alter the perceptions—or the realities—of employees stuck with no options.

Learning Opportunities

One of the most important actions leaders can take is to help employees find opportunities that will help them build a career and support the mission. Opportunities to develop new and better skills are critical to motivation and retention in the workplace.¹⁴ Our research indicates that having access to learning opportunities is strongly related to being engaged at work for Mission-focused and Career-focused employees. Both types reported that they had access to learning opportunities, but Mission-focused employees reported having more access and also felt more committed to the organization than did Career-focused employees. Learning opportunities, such as those described below, may not always directly result in employees being Mission focused, but our research shows that those employees who say they have more access to learning are more committed to the organization's mission.

“Researchers have found growth opportunities to be an important motivator for employees to stay at their jobs. These opportunities provide benefits to the organizations, as people learn and master new skills and knowledge.”¹⁵

*—Partnership for Public Service and
Booz Allen Hamilton*

These findings likely reflect a self-reinforcing spiral. In part because of access to learning and developmental activities, Mission-focused people identify and pursue developmental opportunities, thus acquiring new skills

and experiences. They then leverage their increased capabilities for both professional advancement and organizational impact. Career-focused people may need more prompting to get into the same spiral but are clearly primed to move that direction when provided with opportunities to learn and develop.

People stuck with No Options are likely to be more difficult to move into this positive spiral. This research found No Options respondents to be neutral about whether they had the opportunity to develop but were positive about learning within the organization in general.

People complain that organizational systems get in their way and hamper their motivation. Are systems the problem, or are the people who complain mainly those who are otherwise just unmotivated? Our research found that many people believe that organizational systems do get in their way, and those people are not just the ones who are generally dissatisfied with their job. Though No Options respondents are more likely to say that organizational systems get in their way, Mission- and Career-focused people also identify organizational systems as limiting their effectiveness. This means that organizations can benefit substantially by identifying where even the best people believe the systems limit effectiveness and by altering those systems to be less of an impediment. When organizational systems are altered to reduce their negative impact on employee effectiveness, another positive spiral can begin: people experience the organization hearing their concerns and taking steps to address them, which results in the employee thinking more positively about the organization, which results in improved employee commitment, which results in improved motivation, which results in increased employee effectiveness.

¹⁴ Donohue, R. (2007). Examining career persistence and career change intent using the career attitudes and strategies inventory. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 70, 259–276.

¹⁵ <http://ourpublicservice.org/OPS/publications/viewcontentdetails.php?id=154>



Providing them with more opportunities to develop and prompting them to follow up on such opportunities could tip the scales and open doors to new perceptions of opportunities—and consequently to new attitudes about the organization in general and the work specifically. A No Options employee may have reached a career plateau—a level with no apparent prospects, at least from his or her vantage point.¹⁶ No Options employees may have become disconnected with the mission, possibly by losing “line of sight” to how their job contributes to the overall mission of the organization.¹⁷ In cases where an employee can take action to overcome career challenges or reconnect with the mission, leaders can help “unstick” employee perceptions by identifying valuable opportunities and leading effectively.

Developmental Assignments. Developmental assignments and job rotations are powerful motivators for employees. When leaders in formal supervisory roles provide a special assignment or a job rotation opportunity, it furthers the person’s career development. Such opportunities also result in a better understanding and contribution to the organization’s wider mission by the

employee. Connecting the employee with the opportunity to have impact and continued development demonstrates a commitment to that employee—whether Mission or Career focused. Critically, this combination of opportunity and commitment can keep high potentials and high performers from sensing they are stuck with No Options. This combination is especially important when few actual promotions are available.

Mentoring/Coaching. Employees can be motivated by being provided with the opportunity to have a mentor or coach. Leaders can connect staff with mentors or coaches who can help the employee identify new opportunities, learn strategies for advancing, and call the attention of higher-level executives to them. Mentoring and coaching provide powerful complements to other learning opportunities by sustaining and expanding on their benefits over time. Further, there is evidence that the mentors themselves benefit from engaging in a mentoring relationship,¹⁸ and leaders can motivate even senior people in organizations by providing opportunities to mentor junior employees. Mentors benefit by having enhanced visibility within the organization, opportunities to shape their leadership and management skills, and a lasting professional network.

Recognition. One of the simplest ways a leader can motivate others is to recognize efforts and contributions.¹⁹ Unlike pay raises and promotions, a verbal “thank-you” or an e-mail to share the mission impact of a recent project taps into the internal motivations that are inherent to the positive spiral of both mission and career motivation. Leaders who share credit for mission impact and note the positive career directions of others foster a positive, motivating climate.

Leadership

Effective leadership is critical to motivation and retention, but the question is often what type of leadership is most likely to be motivating. Our research shows that all employees (Mission, Career, and No Options) believe that the same characteristics result in effective leadership: charisma, team orientation, encouraging participation, and being humane.

¹⁶ Chao, G. T. (1990). Exploration of the conceptualization and measurement of career plateau: a comparative analysis. *Journal of Management*, 16, 181–193.

¹⁷ <http://www.ourpublicservice.org/OPS/publications/download.php?id=147>

¹⁸ E.g., Lentz, E., & Allen, T. D. (2009). The role of mentoring others in the career plateauing phenomenon. *Group & Organization Management*, 34, 358–384.

¹⁹ Luthans, K. (2000). Recognition: A powerful, but often overlooked, leadership tool to improve employee performance. *Journal of Leadership Studies*, 7, 31–39.

While all types of people believe that those characteristics result in effective leadership, they do not all believe it to the same extent. As shown in Exhibit 2, all types of people believe that leaders who are Charismatic,²⁰ Humane Oriented,²¹ and Team Oriented²² are more effective, but Mission-focused people think each is more important for good leadership than do Career-focused or No Options people. Finally, all types of people believe that leaders who are Participative²³ are substantially more effective than those who are not. Fewer people believed that being Hierarchical²⁴ or Autonomous²⁵ were effective leadership characteristics.

Critical competencies for leader effectiveness include sharing information, providing help, encouraging collaborative behavior among team members, and having the ability to inspire commitment to values or to a mission.²⁶ A common thread among these competencies that are critical to leader effectiveness is the emphasis on the interpersonal nature of leadership that enables leaders to adapt their styles to the employees' different orientations. Leaders who bring charisma, humane and team orientation, and participative approaches that enable them to adapt to the employees' different orientations will be better able to motivate and retain employees.

Conclusion

As competition for talent rises, leaders cannot afford to disregard what motivates and connects employees to their organizations. Leaders must be able to adapt their styles to motivate and retain Mission-focused and Career-focused employees, and to reengage employees who are stuck without options. Leaders who succeed stand to realize meaningful, long-term competitive advantage for their organizations as well as individual benefit for their employees.

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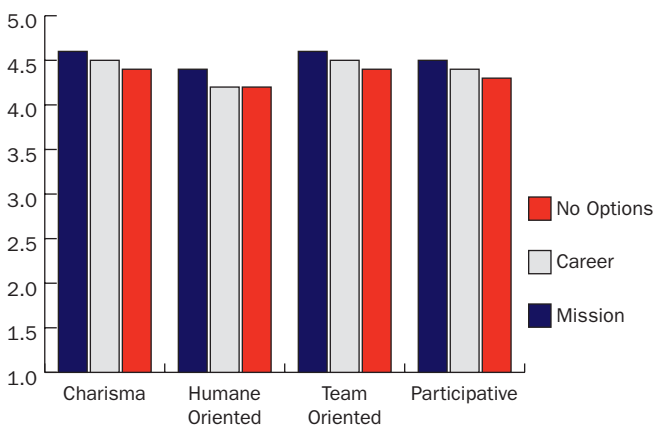
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Exhibit 2: Leadership Preferences Across Motivations



Source: Center for Creative Leadership and Booz Allen

²⁰ Charismatic: The degree to which a leader inspires others around a vision or values, motivates his/her followers, and maintains high performance expectations.
²¹ Humane oriented: The degree to which a leader is supportive, compassionate, considerate, and generous. It has to do with being humble and concerned about the well-being of others.
²² Team oriented: The degree to which a leader effectively builds and manages teams that work together to achieve a common goal, emphasizes the growth of the team, and instills pride, loyalty, and cohesion among team members.

²³ Participative: The degree to which a leader shares power and allows others to take part in decision making and take actions based on decisions made.
²⁴ Hierarchical: The degree to which a leader influences others by formal status, authority, or position power.
²⁵ Autonomous: The degree to which a leader is independent, individualistic, or self-reliant.
²⁶ Gentry, W. A., Harris, L. S., Baker, B. A., & Leslie, J. B. (2008). Managerial skills: What has changed since the late 1980's? *Leadership & Organization Development Journal*, 29, 167-181.

Appendix: Report Methodology and Sample

This Center for Creative Leadership and Booz Allen Hamilton report was a joint initiative conducted as part of the Center for Creative Leadership's World Leadership Survey research initiative.²⁷ The sample for this report was collected from July 2010 through October 2010.²⁸ This sample includes—

- 1,133 respondents from the United States
- 326 respondents from the federal government
- 807 respondents from organizations other than the federal government, ranging in size from very small (1 to 9 employees) to very large (10,000 or more employees)
- 51 percent male, 49 percent female
- 79 percent white, 21 percent nonwhite
 - “Nonwhite” includes 9 percent Black, 4 percent Asian, and 7 percent “Other” (Hispanic, Multiracial, Other)

- Generations: 95 percent between the ages of 22 and 65 (Millennials, Gen X, and Baby Boomers)
- Organizational level: 19 percent of the sample indicated that they were at the top (C-level), 11 percent described themselves as an executive, 17 percent upper management, 29 percent middle management, 18 percent professional, and 6 percent first-level management.

Differences Between the Federal and Nonfederal Samples

- There were more C-level and executives in the nonfederal sample, and more managers and professionals in the federal sample.
- There were more Baby Boomers in the federal sample, and more Gen Xers in the nonfederal sample.
- There were no differences in gender or racial distribution between the samples.

²⁷ The World Leadership Survey has collected data online in English since its inception in March 2008, and currently collects data in 15 additional languages. Participants in the research come through partner organizations, interested individuals, and enrollment in CCL programs. Participants fill out a survey online that is hosted by Clear Picture Corporation and takes them approximately 20 minutes. In thanks for their participation, participants receive a free CCL Guidebook to download immediately upon completion of the survey. Questions about the survey are sent to the World Leadership Survey e-mail account at WorldLeadershipSurvey@ccl.org.

²⁸ It is important to note that this is not a random sample of North American managers or employees either in the federal government or in for-profit industries, and therefore it is likely not fully representative of the working population.

About the Authors

Jeffrey L. Herman is an Associate at Booz Allen Hamilton based in Rockville, Maryland, and serves as the team lead for leadership development strategy and research. He supports clients across the federal government in the design, development, delivery and evaluation of leadership development and other human capital interventions. Mr. Herman's research centers on global and adaptive leadership development.

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Marian Ruderman, Ph.D., has broad expertise with 25 years in the field of leadership development. At the Center for Creative Leadership, she has held a variety of research and management positions. Dr. Ruderman has written several books and developed

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