Motivation Is Not Really Required to Succeed



Progress comes from establishing smart systems and habits, then getting out of your own way.

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Motivation influences our needs, desires and actions. It exists on a spectrum from zero interest to an off-the-charts drive to take action. And it often comes naturally. After all, no one needs an extra nudge to flee a burning building.

In lower-stakes scenarios, though, procrastination can take over. Should you initiate that tough conversation or hope things blow over in time? What about hitting the gym now versus starting your new wellness program next week?

“At some point, the pain of not doing it becomes greater than the pain of doing it,” Steven Pressfield wrote in “The War of Art.” Eventually, it feels worse to avoid your angry coworker than it does to take a deep breath and knock on his or her door to hash out the problem.

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Success doesn’t necessarily require motivation or ironclad willpower. And you don’t need to wake up before sunrise to drink bulletproof coffee, meditate, journal or do headstands before you can bring great ideas to life.

Creating systems and habits can remove a fickle internal drive from the equation. When routines do the heavy lifting, it doesn’t matter if you feel like tackling a task. You simply need to show up and follow through. Established, efficient processes will not only benefit your business but enhance personal and team productivity.

Systems aren’t exactly a hot topic in startup circles, but they do work. Clear, repeatable routines have fueled my 12-year entrepreneurial journey. I’d be lost without those near-automatic steps, and I continue to refine my habits over time. They’ve helped me grow my company, JotForm, to 4.2 million users.

Two types of motivation.

In “Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us,” Daniel Pink explained motivation’s different forms: extrinsic and intrinsic.

Extrinsic motivation depends on outward rewards such as money, praise, landing a corner office or winning a 5K race. Intrinsic motivation comes purely from within. If you run that 5K because the movement itself feels good or you experience a

sense of personal accomplishment, the medal becomes a shiny afterthought.

In his book, Pink suggests that extrinsic motivation — the carrot on a stick — is ineffective. He proposes that humans can achieve higher performance and lasting satisfaction by tapping into "the deeply human need to direct our own lives, to learn and create new things, and to do better by ourselves and the world."

Yet even intrinsic motivation fades if you overtax it. Starting a business takes grit and determination, but you still might have moments when it's difficult to move forward. Maybe you feel afraid or the task is dull. That's precisely the moment when systems can take you over the finish line.

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Three strategies to create reliable systems.

1. Focus only on true priorities.

Focus and motivation are remarkably connected. Imagine you have three business priorities this year: expanding your team, developing a social-media marketing strategy and overhauling an important product feature.

These priorities should inform everything else you do. If a project or opportunity doesn't match one of these goals, it hits the chopping block. Distractions will slip away and you'll be better equipped to make meaningful progress.

I reaffirm my priorities by spending my first 30 to 90 minutes at the office doing morning pages. This daily practice begins as stream-of-consciousness writing and inevitably turns into a tangible plan, email or presentation. It's a routine that stimulates creativity and strategic thinking.

If I arrive at work feeling foggy, I allow myself to do something else that advances my own focus areas. I can meet with a team member or read about a related topic. My mind soon begins to engage, and the flow of new ideas inspires me to keep going. Before I know it, 90 minutes have passed – and so has the fog.

Motivation flows from focus. Once you get started, a powerful feedback loop almost always kicks in to help you engage, even on days when motivation is in short supply.

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2. Understand that motivation is optional.

Motivation and enthusiasm don't always show up for work when you do. Journalist Melissa Dahl shared some deceptively simple advice in a 2016 piece for The Cut: "You don't have to feel like getting something done in order to actually get it done."

Her point is surprisingly brilliant. People often think "getting motivated" means generating inspiration or excitement before starting an activity. But feelings don't need to align with actions. You can lack motivation and still move forward. For example, finishing that presentation deck instead of binge-watching Netflix.

Another journalist, Oliver Burkeman, tackled the topic of motivation in his book, "The Antidote: Happiness for People Who Can't Stand Positive Thinking." "Who says you need to wait until you 'feel like' doing something in order to start doing it?" Burkeman wrote. "The problem, from this perspective, isn't that you don't feel motivated; it's that you imagine you need to feel motivated."

Routines can outsmart feelings because they don't consider your interest level. If you follow the routine, you'll engage in the task. It's that simple. There's no need to take your

emotional temperature because it doesn’t matter. Results accumulate when you repeat the system without stopping to gauge your feelings.

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3. Learn how to delegate.

The other day, I had a lightbulb moment during my morning workout. I even asked my trainer if I could drop the kettlebell to jot it down. As I drove to the office, however, I realized my breakthrough had nothing to do with my three priority areas. I really wanted to chase this idea myself, but I asked JotForm’s COO to take the reins instead.

Clearly, delegation isn’t always an option, especially if the business just launched or budgets are tight. Delegating when you’re able — even if it means hiring a consultant or calling in a favor — can pay real dividends. Tasks are best offloaded to someone else when you can redirect that time, focus or energy to high-level activities only you can carry out.

As a founder, your job is to work on the business, not in it. According to author Ray Silverstein, “There is a bridge every entrepreneur must cross in order to grow a business beyond a certain point, a point where they must transition from ‘doing’ to ‘leading.’ It means stepping back from day-to-day operations and slipping into the role of overseer.”

Delegation also makes sense when someone else is better equipped for the task. If you hire marketers, designers, developers, managers and researchers for their professional expertise, it’s important to lean on those skills. Most companies and products gain complexity as they grow, and there’s usually someone who can achieve better results in less time. That enables you to remain focused on your top priorities.

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Remember to enjoy the ride.

Routines can override the need for everyday motivation. But how do you maintain drive and focus for the long run? While there's no simple, universal answer, it is true that nearly everyone craves joy and meaning.

In 2010, Buddhist teacher Susan Piver wrote a fascinating blog post about her battles with personal motivation. After struggling to meet daily goals and cursing a "lack of discipline," she decided to try a new approach. She stopped putting motivation behind the wheel and focused instead on the pleasure of her work.

"Once I remembered that my motivation is rooted in genuine curiosity and my tasks are in complete alignment with who I am and want to be," Piver wrote, "my office suddenly seemed like a playground rather than a labor camp."

She slashed her aggressive schedule and prioritized work activities that sounded fun. Piver soon realized that her days looked much the same, but the experience felt almost effortless.

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Unfortunately, you can't eliminate all forms of daily drudgery. Someone has to scoop the cat litter and pay the bills. "But I suggest that instead of being disciplined about hating on yourself to get things done," Piver wrote, "try being disciplined about remaining close to what brings you joy."

Prioritizing the pleasure of work is an interesting perspective shift. There may certainly be times when joy isn't easy to access. But if your intrinsic motivation aligns with your external path, it's a power source you can mine to great

effect. Focus on what matters, create systems to support your mission, and motivation soon will fall into step alongside you.

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