

Self-Motivation for Professional Practitioners

*Strategies for Maximizing
One's Productivity and
Work Enjoyment in
Human Services*

Dennis H. Reid

**SELF-MOTIVATION FOR
PROFESSIONAL PRACTITIONERS**

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dennis H. Reid, Ph.D., BCBA-D, has over 45 years of experience as a professional practitioner in the human services. He has worked in educational, residential, vocational, and community agencies supporting individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities including autism. During his tenure as a human service practitioner Denny has published over 140 journal articles and book chapters as well as 14 books. He has also consulted with human service agencies in the majority of states across the United States and in New Zealand, Australia, and Canada. His practitioner work and research have resulted in numerous awards and honors, including from the Association for Behavior Analysis International, American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities, Organization for Autism Research, North Carolina Foundation for Mental Health Research, North Carolina Department of Human Resources, North Carolina Association for Behavior Analysis, and the J. Iverson Riddle Center. He is the founder and current director of the Carolina Behavior Analysis and Support Center in Morganton, North Carolina.

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By

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*In memory of Dennis J. "Doc" Parker, a wonderful friend,
brother-in-law, and inspirational, self-made man.*

PREFACE

For professional practitioners in the human services to successfully fulfill their important job roles they must be highly motivated. In many human service agencies, however, practitioners encounter situations that can seriously impede their motivation to work diligently as well as reduce their enjoyment on the job. For example, working with limited resources, unrealistic caseloads, problematic supervision, or interfering events beyond an agency's control (e.g., the COVID-19 pandemic) can all reduce practitioner motivation and work enjoyment.

This book describes how human service practitioners can achieve and maintain self-motivation to be professionally productive and experience enjoyment on the job during both the best and worst of times. Self-motivation is presented in terms of practitioners actively using strategies developed through research and application in behavior analysis and therapy to promote their work productivity and enjoyment. Self-motivation strategies presented are likewise based on the specific advice of highly successful practitioners in the human services.

Some strategies presented are robust in nature in that they can be applied across varying situations to promote self-motivation and enhance overall quality of work life. Other strategies are more situation-specific, being tailored to overcoming particular obstacles to motivation that practitioners often face in human service agencies. The intent is to provide practical information that effectively equips practitioners *to be in control of their work motivation* and thereby work consistently in a manner that is professionally productive and personally enjoyable.

D.R.

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**SELF-MOTIVATION FOR
PROFESSIONAL PRACTITIONERS**

Section I

INTRODUCTION TO SELF-MOTIVATION

Chapter 1

SELF-MOTIVATION: THE ESSENCE OF ENSURING QUALITY OF WORK LIFE FOR HUMAN SERVICE PRACTITIONERS

One of the most important occupations in all of society is that of a professional practitioner in the human services. Whether fulfilling an educational, clinical, or supervisory role in a human service agency, a practitioner's work has a major impact on the quality of the agency's supports and services. In particular, critical aspects of quality of life among people with disabilities or special needs who are consumers of an agency's services are heavily dependent on the work of professional practitioners.

To adequately fulfill their important roles within human service agencies, practitioners must be motivated to work diligently and proficiently. In this regard, there is a general perception that what motivates human service practitioners is a basic desire to help people with significant life challenges. Such a perception is generally accurate. The desire to help people with disabilities or special needs is what often leads individuals to seek a job as a professional practitioner in the human services. However, as many seasoned practitioners have experienced, a desire to help others frequently is not enough to maintain consistent diligence and productivity on the job—there are often obstacles to working within human service agencies that must be overcome to sustain work motivation and productivity over time.

Obstacles within human service agencies that can impede work motivation of professional practitioners are numerous and varied. Some of the obstacles are due to limited agency funding. For example, many human service agencies, and especially certain government-

operated agencies, are not sufficiently funded to employ the number of staff necessary to adequately address the needs of all clients served by the agencies. Lack of sufficient staff can result in unrealistic case-loads for clinical practitioners that prohibit the practitioners from providing their treatment services at an optimal level for all clients. As practitioners become aware that they cannot use their professional skills to the degree necessary to help all clients for whom they are responsible, the practitioners' work motivation can seriously erode. The practitioners can begin to believe that much of their work effort is essentially in vain and question the value of continuing such effort.

Insufficient numbers of staff can also require practitioners to spend time performing duties other than the therapeutic services that they expected to perform when initially employed. To illustrate, clinicians in residential agencies may be required to spend considerable amounts of time working in a direct support capacity with clients because of a frequent lack of available direct support staff to provide basic client care. Although the clinicians are usually aware of the importance of helping with direct support duties, excessive time spent in such activities can become demoralizing because it reduces the ability to provide their specialized treatment services.

Other obstacles that can erode work motivation of practitioners relate to how certain human service agencies are managed by senior personnel. Various agency executives may provide inconsistent or competing directives that make it difficult for practitioners to perform their professional duties in a consistently proficient manner. Executives may also espouse a philosophy or approach to service delivery that is contradictory to a practitioner's professional training with regard to how client services should be provided. Relatedly, executive personnel may fail to support aspects of a practitioner's work and not provide sufficient resources for the practitioner to perform job duties in a quality manner. A common outcome in these situations is practitioner frustration over repeated impediments to providing desired treatment services for agency clients. As the frustration persists, practitioner work motivation tends to diminish.

In other cases the "consulting" nature of certain practitioner duties can lead to reductions in practitioner work motivation. Many clinical practitioners such as behavior analysts and psychologists, for example, must rely on direct support staff in human service agencies to

carry out their treatment recommendations with individual clients. The practitioners often have no supervisory authority over the staff and therefore must work with the staff on a consulting basis. Although many direct support staff readily comply with the clinician's consultative recommendations, others do not. Most practitioners in this type of role have had the experience of working diligently to develop a sound treatment plan for an agency client but then for any number of reasons, front-line staff do not implement the plan appropriately. In such cases the clinicians become acutely aware that their work efforts are having minimal impact from a client-treatment perspective. The resulting awareness can seriously impede the clinicians' motivation to continue their work efforts.

Another set of obstacles to practitioners maintaining motivation to work diligently and proficiently pertains to unexpected events that seriously affect ongoing agency operations and correspondingly, the practitioners' ability to adequately do their jobs. A prime example is events associated with the COVID-19 pandemic that began in early 2020. The pandemic resulted in major disruptions in the operations of many human service agencies, including staff layoffs and significant increases in staff absenteeism. The pandemic likewise seriously altered the degree to which professional practitioners could provide their services. In particular, many practitioners had to determine ways to provide services indirectly from a distance such as through telehealth in lieu of their usual in-person service provision. A number of such practitioners experienced serious discouragement regarding the ultimate effectiveness of the distance-treatment efforts.

In addition to impeding a practitioner's diligence and work proficiency, the types of situations just illustrated often have a detrimental effect on motivation in another important way. Specifically, the situations negatively affect the amount of work enjoyment a practitioner experiences. Having to work with limited staff resources, unrealistic caseloads, unpredictable or interfering executive actions, nonresponsive staff, or major external events that disrupt agency services are usually unpleasant for practitioners. The unpleasantness reduces practitioner enjoyment with the daily job. As will be emphasized later, enjoyment with work is integrally associated with motivation to work diligently and proficiently.