LEADERSHIP THAT MOVES PEOPLE:

MOTIVATION, POSITIVE DISRUPTION & THE STRETCH OF CHANGE

KEY LEARNING

- This article explores the relationship between leadership and motivation, drawing on key leadership and motivation theories.
- It explains how leaders motivate people through purpose, relationship, challenge, support and positive disruption.
- It gives examples from different sectors to show how disruption can become developmental rather than destructive.

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Leadership and motivation are deeply connected within organisational life. Leadership refers to the ability to influence, guide and support individuals or teams towards shared aims, while motivation refers to the psychological processes that stimulate, direct and sustain goal-focused behaviour. In practice, the two cannot be separated. A leader may set direction, design strategy and clarify expectations, but people rarely give their best simply because they have been told what to do. They are more likely to engage when they understand the purpose of the work, feel recognised, experience enough support and are stretched in ways that help them grow. This reflects the central argument in Benson's article on leadership and motivation: leadership theory has developed over time, and motivation has become a major part of the leadership construct.

The history of leadership theory shows a movement away from control and towards relationship, context and development. Early leadership theories, such as the Great Man Theory and trait-based approaches, focused heavily on the qualities of the individual leader. Leadership was often viewed as something a person possessed because of personality, heredity or natural authority. Scientific management then placed emphasis on efficiency, productivity, control and the separation between the manager who made decisions and the worker who completed tasks. While this helped organisations think more systematically about work, it also risked treating people as tools of production rather than as complex human beings with needs, values and potential. Benson's overview shows how later theories moved beyond this limited view by paying closer attention to behaviour, relationships, situations and motivation.

The behavioural era shifted the focus from what leaders are to what leaders do. This was important because it opened the possibility that leadership could be learned, developed and practised. Leadership was no longer only about traits; it was also about behaviour, communication, task focus, relationship focus and the ability to work with groups. Theories from this period helped move leadership away from one-dimensional thinking and towards a more dynamic understanding of how leaders affect people and performance. This matters because motivation is not created through authority alone. It is shaped through the daily behaviours of leaders: how they listen, how they give feedback, how they create trust, how they notice effort and how they respond when people are struggling.

Situational, contingency and transformational theories developed this thinking further. These approaches recognised that no single leadership style works in every situation. Leaders need to adapt according to the context, the readiness of the person or team, the task, the level of uncertainty and the wider organisational environment. This is where leadership becomes more relational and more responsive. The leader is not simply the person at the top giving instructions. The leader is someone who reads the system, understands the people within it and adjusts their approach to support performance and development. Kotter's distinction between management and leadership is useful here: management helps organisations deal with complexity, while leadership helps organisations deal with change.

Transformational leadership brings motivation even more clearly into the centre of leadership practice. Transformational leaders do not rely only on compliance, reward or punishment. They seek to inspire people, build commitment and connect individual effort to a wider purpose. This kind of leadership includes inspiration, intellectual stimulation, individual consideration and idealised influence. In other words, people are motivated when they are invited to think, contribute, develop and connect with something bigger than the immediate task. This does not mean that transactional leadership has no place. Clear roles, expectations and accountability still matter. The strongest leadership often combines transactional clarity with transformational energy.

Motivation theories help explain why this matters. Maslow's hierarchy of needs suggests that people are motivated by different layers of need, including safety, belonging, esteem and self-actualisation. In an organisation, this means that people need more than pay and basic conditions. They also need psychological safety, relationships, recognition, respect and opportunities to grow. McClelland's theory adds that people differ in their need for achievement, affiliation and power. Some are motivated by difficult goals, some by relationships and belonging, and others by influence or responsibility. Herzberg's hygiene theory makes another useful distinction: some factors reduce dissatisfaction, such as working conditions, salary and policies, while other factors create deeper motivation, such as recognition, responsibility, learning and meaningful work. Benson's article places these theories within leadership because effective leaders need to understand what motivates different people in different circumstances.

This is where positive disruption becomes important. Positive disruption is not chaos, conflict or change for the sake of change. It is the purposeful interruption of patterns, habits or assumptions that are limiting people, teams or organisations. It asks: what is no longer serving us? What are we protecting that now needs questioning? What pattern has become comfortable but unhelpful? What new possibility is being avoided because the current system rewards the familiar? Positive disruption becomes a leadership act when it is ethical, purposeful and connected to growth.

Positive disruption also needs to be held with care. If a leader disrupts without support, people may feel unsafe, criticised or overwhelmed. If a leader supports without challenge, people may feel comfortable but remain stuck. Development usually requires both. This links closely to Sanford's challenge and support theory, which argues that growth happens when people experience enough challenge to develop and enough support to respond well to that challenge. Too much challenge without support can create anxiety or resistance. Too much support without challenge can create stagnation.

Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development also helps explain the leadership task. The ZPD is the space between what someone can do independently and what they can achieve with guidance, support or scaffolding. Applied to leadership, it suggests that people grow when they are stretched just beyond their current level of capability, while still being supported enough to succeed. The leader's role is therefore not to remove all difficulty. It is to help people work at the edge of their learning without leaving them alone there. Scaffolding may include coaching, feedback, mentoring, modelling, resources, psychological safety, clearer expectations or time to practise.

Positive disruption works best when it sits inside this developmental zone. If the disruption is too small, nothing changes. If it is too large, people shut down or defend the old system. If it is well judged, disruption becomes developmental. It stretches thinking, opens possibility and invites people into new levels of performance. This is why leadership is not only about encouragement. It is also about well-timed challenge. Leaders motivate people by helping them see what they are capable of becoming, while giving them the support to move towards it.

In healthcare, positive disruption can be seen in the movement towards virtual wards and hospital-at-home models. Rather than assuming that acute care must always happen inside hospital walls, virtual wards allow some patients to receive care safely in the place they usually live. This disrupts traditional assumptions about where care takes place, while still requiring careful clinical judgement, technology, communication and support. The positive disruption is not simply "digital care"; it is a rethinking of how patient-centred care can be delivered safely and conveniently. NHS England describes virtual wards as a way for people to receive care at home rather than in hospital where appropriate.

In financial services, open banking is another example. Traditional banking placed the bank at the centre of the customer's financial data. Open banking disrupts this by allowing people and businesses to securely share access to payment account data with trusted apps and services. This can increase competition, innovation and customer choice. The leadership challenge in this sector is to disrupt old models without losing trust, security or regulatory responsibility. The positive disruption is the shift from closed ownership of data to more open, customer-enabled financial ecosystems. The FCA describes open banking as a secure and regulated way for consumers and businesses to share account data with trusted services.

In education, positive disruption appears in the move towards digital learning, blended learning, adaptive learning and new approaches to assessment. This does not mean replacing teachers with technology. It means questioning whether traditional classroom models always meet the needs of all learners. When used well, digital education can support access, personalisation and new forms of collaboration. The OECD's work on digital transformation in education highlights the need for policy, governance, pedagogy, infrastructure and professional learning to be considered together, which shows that disruption must be systemic rather than superficial.

In manufacturing, positive disruption can be seen through Industry 4.0, automation, digital twins, robotics and data-led production. These changes disrupt traditional production models and require new skills, new forms of collaboration and new relationships between people and machines. The risk is that disruption is experienced as threat: job loss, deskilling or loss of control. The opportunity is that leaders use challenge and support together by involving workers, investing in upskilling and creating safe spaces to practise new capabilities. The World Economic Forum has highlighted the importance of equipping future leaders and workers with skills for industrial intelligence and digital transformation.

In energy, the transition towards renewable power is a major example of positive disruption at system level. It challenges long-standing dependence on fossil fuels, changes investment patterns, reshapes infrastructure and demands new skills. This is not easy disruption. It affects jobs, communities, supply chains, policy and national economies. Yet it is positive when it is connected to sustainability, energy security and long-term social value. The International Energy Agency forecasts a major expansion of renewable power capacity between 2025 and 2030, showing that the energy sector is not simply adjusting but being reshaped.

In professional services, including coaching, consulting, law, accountancy and education, positive disruption may look less technological but can be just as significant. It may involve challenging expert-led models, making services more inclusive, using evidence more rigorously, questioning outdated hierarchies, or inviting clients and stakeholders into more collaborative ways of working. For example, a coaching school or consultancy may positively disrupt the field by raising standards around ethics, supervision, credentialing and evidence-based practice. This challenges the unregulated parts of the profession while supporting greater clarity and trust for clients.

Across all these sectors, the same leadership question appears: how do we challenge what needs to change while supporting people through the change? Positive disruption without motivation can become resistance. Motivation without disruption can become comfort. Challenge without support can become fear. Support without challenge can become drift. The leader's work is to hold these tensions skilfully.

This is also why leadership must be connected to learning. Senge's idea of the learning organisation is relevant because organisations need to keep adapting, reflecting and improving. Positive disruption requires people to learn their way into the future rather than simply implement instructions from the past. Leaders who create learning cultures help people ask better questions, test assumptions, share knowledge and adapt. Motivation is strengthened when people feel that learning is not a punishment for failure but a normal part of growth.

The link between leadership and motivation is therefore not only theoretical. It is practical and human. Leaders motivate when they understand people's needs, create meaningful work, recognise contribution, provide challenge, offer support and connect effort to purpose. They also motivate when they disrupt patterns that are limiting potential. The best leaders do not simply keep people comfortable, nor do they push people beyond what they can hold. They work in the space between safety and stretch.

Leadership today requires more than control, charisma or technical competence. It requires the ability to create conditions in which people can move, learn and contribute. It requires sensitivity to motivation, courage to challenge, and wisdom to support. Positive disruption, the Zone of Proximal Development and challenge/support theory all point to the same idea: people grow when they are stretched with care. Organisations grow in the same way.

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