

The Great Migration From Extrinsic to Intrinsic Motivation

Lessons from Health Coaching

What animal comes to mind when mentioning the long trek from the Serengeti Plains north to Kenya's Masai Mara Reserve? It's the 1.5 million wildebeest banding together as they brave a cruel climate and treacherous river crossings in search of food and water. Each year, more than 250,000 don't survive. But without the 300,000 zebra who join this spectacular journey, success rates would be far worse. It is the zebras, with their great memories of successful routes and sharp ears for predators, who lead the massive wildebeest herds to their destination.

This image comes to mind when I consider the value we bring to encounters that begin because the

participant is seeking an extrinsic reward. With companies' increased use of financial incentives to motivate at-risk employees, it's more common for coaches to have clients wanting the shortest possible route. As behavioral economists have shown, motivation will likely diminish as participation feels less voluntary, and it's sometimes the coach who bears the brunt of the resulting resentment.

Following is a call that 10-year veteran health coach Mary had with a participant we'll call Lucy. Lucy's enrollment in a stress management program, in order to earn an incentive, led not only to re-establishing a relationship with her doctor (a referral that followed our standard depression



...by Paul Terry and Mary Oothoudt

Paul Terry, PhD

Mary Oothoudt, RD, Health Coach

assessment) but also to re-evaluating her personal self-care and examining why the path she was on had left her depleted and angry.



Lucy: One of your ideas I've internalized, Mary, is that moms need some positive time-outs, and I plan to keep scheduling my mini-recovery times throughout the week. I'm also committing to stay with my goal of making time for breakfast every day.



Mary: I love that, Lucy, and I'm so pleased you also plan time with other adults as a way to better cope with your busy life. I've sensed that you're noticing these basic self-care steps can help with, and I'll quote you directly here: "the little things that used to make my head pop off."



Lucy: (laughing) Well, you're being diplomatic; I expect you remember our first call all too well. Lucky we were on the phone, because I was fighting mad about needing to add this coaching requirement on top of my insane schedule. I'm sure you felt I was trying to take *your* head off.



Mary: I'll admit I was bracing myself for the next call, but once we decided we might as well make the best of this, you kept coming back for more even after your incentive calls were over. Can you share what you feel has been the true incentive for working on your self-care goals?



Lucy: (*serious and reflective*) Yes. I'm glad we've talked about this together and it bears repeating. I was snapping at my kids and husband just the way I was with you. It's a sad irony that what I felt was the noble sacrifice of putting my kids' needs ahead of mine was actually making me less able to be a good mom! I want to be a supportive wife and a great mom. Getting better at self-care makes me a better caregiver.

So many of those we have the privilege to coach are embarking on an arduous journey — one that demands tapping into something much deeper than is found on the path of least resistance. During their first call, as Mary reminded Lucy that she had options other than health coaching to earn her incentive, Lucy snapped back with, “Let’s just get started. You’ve already wasted 10 minutes of my time.” Mary could have counseled Lucy on relaxation and meditation as ways to manage her anger.

While these techniques are plenty helpful short term, the symptom relief route can leave the whole herd starving longer term.

Great coaches feel bound to steer toward paths that, while sometimes harder to take, offer the greatest hope for sustained nourishment. That Lucy and Mary could navigate around some big barriers at the start of their trek underscores their capacity to trust and forgive. This led to discovering an approach that tapped into Lucy’s own values and beliefs.

Here’s another beautiful fact. While the zebra is wonderfully wired for finding the best crossings, the wildebeest, because of needing water every other day, has an overdeveloped ability to smell water ahead. In the end, Mary’s expertise to help Lucy manage stress was linked to Lucy’s ability to know when they were coming close to what really mattered. With Mary’s help, Lucy moved from “I need this damned incentive” to “I want to be a great mom.” That is an awesome migration indeed. 🦓

Creating Demand for Wellness

For years wellness manager and vendors have been designing interventions to solve problems — poor fitness, overweight, high cholesterol, blood pressure, or other chronic conditions. While well intentioned, most services tend to attract only a fraction of the desired audience; although people may need solutions, they:

- Don't want to learn or be told they have a problem
- Will deny the problem exists even when presented with the “facts”
- Aren't willing to make the required changes.

The answer? Stop trying to solve problems. Instead, create opportunities to:

- Enjoy life more
- Have fun
- Increase energy
- Enhance mood.

Feel the difference? You're providing essentially the same services, with the same skills and resources, but framing them within messages of hope.

We're so convinced that people have tired of the traditional “do this to solve your problem” mentality that we go way out on a limb designing fun programs that happen to have a health benefit. It's why we won't create a wellness campaign if people can't have fun doing it — watch a couple of our 2-minute promo videos at <http://healthenhancementsystems.com/blog/videos> to see what we mean.

Does everyone get it? No. In fact, an early pilot participant for *Get Fit on Route 66* called the program “a bit hokey.” If you don't get it, that's okay. But as you read this, thousands of people are having fun participating in those programs while improving their health — not because they wanted to solve some problem, but because they saw possibilities.

What to Do

Creating demand for wellness services involves finding out what people want and offering them a solution that engages, uplifts, inspires. That almost always means downplaying the problem-solving aspect of your services and highlighting how to get more out of life, not less. 🦓