

RISE UP:

Building Intrinsic Motivation

Designing systems and processes
to foster self-validation

By Lauris Rigdon, PT

WITH A SHORTAGE OF PHYSICAL THERAPISTS IN OUR current market, creating systems and strategies to motivate and energize our team is critical for the sustainability of our practices. We must understand what is important to our team and how we can provide that if we truly want to be successful. This is important not only for recruiting new staff, but also for retaining the current members of our team. With resumes few and far between for many clinics and many therapists changing jobs more frequently, now couldn't be a better time to learn more about how to use intrinsic motivation to help us build and grow our teams.

UNDERSTANDING INTRINSIC VS. EXTRINSIC MOTIVATION

Before we dig into strategies, we must define and be sure we understand the differences between extrinsic and intrinsic motivation.

Intrinsic Motivation

Intrinsic motivation is the innate desire to engage in activities for personal fulfillment and enjoyment, rather than for external rewards or incentives. This is why many of us play games or participate in recreational sports — for the fun of it without expecting anything in return. We see similar behaviors manifest in our clinicians. The feeling you get when you know you were able to help Joe return to the baseball field or when you know your treatment plan and persistence allowed Jeanette to dance at her daughter's wedding. We also find this intrinsic motivation in clinicians who spend their free time combing through articles or spending weekends to become certified — an innate desire to be the best they can be. Others selflessly take students because giving back feels good and they know we are helping to create future clinicians. It is also the smaller things like staying late or coming in early to help another patient, walking a patient to their car, or just giving a patient a little more time one day. We do these things because we truly care about others and have their best interest in our hearts and don't expect anything in return.

Extrinsic Motivation

Extrinsic motivation, on the other hand, involves engaging in activities to earn external rewards or avoid punishments. This traditional "carrot and stick" approach to motivation has been around for centuries. This approach is very simple, easy to understand, and easy to implement. It is how many of us create bonus and incentive programs for our practices to drive visits, pay our staff more, and reward them for their hard work. Sign-on bonuses are another form of extrinsic motivation that we use to incentivize new staff to join our team. We feel this reward is what it will take to motivate someone to accept our offer.

While both intrinsic and extrinsic motivators play roles in shaping behavior and performance, intrinsic motivation is more often associated with longer-term commitment, creativity, and a deeper sense of purpose. This is especially true with Millennials and our Gen Z workforce that seek purpose and meaning in their work. They are more motivated by opportunities that allow them to make a positive impact on society or contribute to causes they care about, rather than purely financial rewards.

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CHALLENGES IN MOTIVATING PHYSICAL THERAPY STAFF

Before we talk about how to better motivate our team for long term success, we should discuss some of the challenges we are likely to encounter. Considering these areas will offer clues to areas that may need to be addressed.

1. **High Emotional Demand:** Physical therapy can be exhausting. We are constantly motivating our patients, encouraging them to complete their HEPs, and offering positive feedback to keep working through their plan of care. This can be very emotionally taxing, especially when at times, we sometimes seem to care more about progress than the patient does.
2. **Workload and Burnout:** Heavy caseloads with high productivity expectations, often with hours extending into the early evening, make our jobs harder than many. Couple that with the physical demands on our bodies and it is no wonder why staff burn out.
3. **Career Advancement:** Limited opportunities for career advancement or professional growth within the organization can lead to feelings of stagnation and decreased motivation. This is especially true in smaller clinics where the owner is responsible for most aspects of running a practice.
4. **Financial Compensation:** There is no doubt we are underpaid as a profession for the services we provide and the education we endure to become licensed. Many clinicians have chosen to leave clinical practice for better paying non-clinical roles, and we expect this trend to continue.

5. **Administrative and Documentation Burdens:** Collecting copays and scheduling appointments, as well as documentation after hours, all take away from patient care and contribute to frustration and demotivation for our staff.

DESIGNING SYSTEMS AND PROCESSES TO FOSTER INTRINSIC MOTIVATION

While it may seem that the cards are stacked against us, we have an amazing profession and must do everything in our power to keep our clinicians engaged and motivated. Let's discuss a few strategies that you can implement to help your team feel more engaged and valued.

1. **Create Clear Career Paths:** Creating clear pathways of growth allows your staff to envision their future with your company. They will see both clinical and non — clinical pathways and will appreciate how much you value their personal growth and development.
2. **Practice within a practice:** Listen to your team and to their interests. Help them find what excites them and unleashes their passion. Then foster this interest and let them create this new opportunity for your company. Whether it is a new specialty, a cash-based service, or even a wellness program, they will work harder and be happier when it is something they truly desire.
3. **Provide Regular Feedback and Recognition:** Establish a culture of feedback where therapists and all staff receive constructive feedback on their performance. Recognize their achievements and milestones, both individually and as a team. Encourage a 360-degree approach where everyone offers this type of feedback to each other. Consider an online app that allows you to track and reward those who are recognized.
4. **Foster a Collaborative Environment:** Facilitate regular meetings where therapists can discuss cases, share insights, and learn from each other's experiences. Consider a journal or breakfast club, hands-on clinical practice as well as advanced manual training seminars for your team. Develop a team of lifelong learners, and support their desire to grow.
5. **Enhance Communication Channels:** Ensure open and transparent communication exists within the team and between therapists and management. Seek feedback from your staff and meet with them regularly in a one-on-one format to learn what is keeping them up at night. It is important that they see you care about them as a clinician and as a person.

6. **Promote Work-Life Balance:** Offer flexible schedules that allow your team to be their best. Maybe a summer schedule or reduced evening hours can help promote overall job satisfaction. Explore technology and AI to assist with the most dreaded aspect of our jobs — documentation.
7. **Align Values with Organizational Mission:** Connect your therapists' work to the broader mission and goals of your company. Help them see how what they do ties into the company goals. Knowing their work has meaning in the overall success of the company will make them feel more valued and aligned.
8. **Celebrate Successes:** Celebrate more. Too often, we take our success and growth for granted. We must all do a better job celebrating staff milestones, educational achievements, or even Google reviews. Showing your team this support gives them more meaning in their jobs and an increased sense of pride in the company they work for.

By implementing some of these processes and even making some minor changes, your clinic can cultivate a work environment where physical therapists are motivated intrinsically, leading to higher job satisfaction, improved patient care outcomes, and lower turnover rates. **I**

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