

FEELINGS MAKE THE WORLD GO ROUND

An Introduction to the Horsepower Motivation Response Tool

Paul Herr

Feelings as Currency

Running a business is too often thought of as a left-brain, rational exercise where cool-headed planning and analysis rule. We all know that this is a harmful fallacy that potentially reduces productivity and profits, discourages innovation, harms strategy execution, and generally penalises employees, managers, customers and shareholders. Feelings, rather than rationality, rule in business and in life – this is the premise for neuroeconomics¹.

Consider that advertising is premised upon the received wisdom that businesses need to stimulate rewarding feelings in the minds of customers in order to motivate them into buying goods and services. Likewise, employers understand the need to stimulate rewarding feelings in the minds of employees in order to motivate them to work hard.

In fact, all economic activity boils down to the exchange of rewarding feelings back-and-forth; the provision of valuable consideration in exchange for the satisfaction of needs and wants, which are emotional in nature. The accumulation of wealth is only rewarding because money can be converted into a variety of rewarding goods and services, like an exotic vacation, a much sought-after new car, or a memorable night out. Feelings are not irrelevant, rather, they are the primary form of currency that makes the world go round because they are the underlying forces that move people.

Research has shown that human beings are primarily emotional, and secondarily rational. Feelings are central to human existence because they indicate what it is that we need to survive; the rational mind then takes over and dutifully attempts to satisfy these vital needs.

A simple example of the primacy of feelings in human affairs is hunger. Hunger is the body's way of communicating the simple message, 'feed me'. During the course of a hectic day with a major report due, one well might ignore the initial pangs of hunger and continue with work. However, when the hunger signal escalates to an urgent, insistent, possibly painful 'FEED ME', it becomes inevitable and imperative that the signal be obeyed and a logical path to food is found.

Thus, the fundamental dynamic behind all feelings is that they are proxies for basic human survival needs; if ignored, humans perish and become extinct. Seen in this light, the propensity for managers to refer to feelings and emotions as soft and irrelevant is troubling. Extreme emotions are often clearly disruptive and harmful; however, subtle everyday emotional incentives are the foundation of human survival and the global economy.

The Case Against Rationality

Further evidence of the central nature of feelings lies in the fact that they cannot be simply 'turned off'. Between the 1930s to the 1950s, experiments were conducted on 13,000 lobotomy patients in an

attempt to achieve this goalⁱⁱ. Hospitals at that time had few options for dealing with mentally ill patients with extreme emotions, so doctors tried a variety of surgical procedures in a desperate attempt to turn off the patients' harmful emotions. Surgeons eventually discovered that they could calm these patients, and reduce their violent emotions, by damaging a brain area located just behind the eyes. These operations succeeded in calming patients' violent emotions, but they also turned off the subtle everyday emotions that motivated people to get out of bed in the morning, to care about friends and family, and to work. By turning off emotions, surgeons created smart 'cats' – people who were content to sit in their chairs all day staring out the windowⁱⁱⁱ. The lobotomy patients scored surprisingly well on IQ tests, so their rational minds were intact - but the rational mind without emotional incentives was incapable of functioning.

Every action therefore involves an emotional cost/benefit analysis. If there are three potential actions under consideration, the rational mind selects the action with the highest emotional reward, the highest gain. The lobotomy operation, by turning off the reward component of the cost/benefit analysis, skewed the calculation. Every action still involved effort (pain), but this effort was not compensated by rewarding feelings anymore because the brain's reward-processing center had been damaged. Lobotomy patients would formulate plans for the future but would not execute them because every path into the future was a losing proposition — emotional effort uncompensated by emotional gain. These patients therefore did the rational thing — nothing^{iv}.

Clearly, the human engine is fueled by feelings; turn those feelings off, and human beings come to a screeching halt. Furthermore, it can be demonstrated that there are 10 different primary feelings that govern motivation — five regulate biologic survival, and five regulate social survival. Humans are often unaware of these regulatory feelings because they are subtle and operate on the edge of conscious awareness. Taken as a whole, human motivation is an elegantly-designed survival system that has allowed a simple primate to thrive in every ecosystem on the planet. As such, it is vital for business leaders to rethink how emotions impact business success.



Human motivation is regulated by an elegantly designed survival engine built into our brains

Emotional Returns

One helpful construct is to consider the return on emotions. Companies measure monetary benefits to the nearest penny but then proceed to ignore the intrinsic rewards that are every bit as motivating to human beings as money. The Horsepower Motivation Response Tool captures emotional returns by measuring the five areas that motivate productive human behaviour. This is a master metric that drives everything happening inside a business — if companies can get their employees' emotional returns up, then every desirable financial, operational and HR metric will go up as well. The logic is simple: 'rewarding feelings' drive behaviour — and behaviour determines organisational success. How rewarded people feel in their work is the key; we know that money is only one part of that reward package.

Working with human nature to maximise business returns begins with rejecting the simplistic money-and-fear approach to employee motivation. The traditional approach is coercive and only taps into 30%

of the potential energy of the workforce. Tapping into the other 70% to create a company that gets the people-part right by aligning harmoniously with the human engine can yield spectacular business results.

ⁱ A. G. Sanfey, "Social Decision-Making: Insights from Game Theory and Neuroscience," *Science* 318 (October 26, 2007): 598–602.

ⁱⁱ Elliot S. Valenstein, *Great and Desperate Cures* (New York: Basic Books, 1986)

ⁱⁱⁱ Walter Freeman and James Watts, *Psychosurgery in the Treatment of Mental Disorders and Intractable Pain*, 2nd ed. (Springfield, IL: Charles C. Thomas, 1950), 190.

^{iv} Antonio Damasio proposes that sense of self, or what he calls "autobiographical self," resides in the ventromedial prefrontal region. See Antonio Damasio, *The Feeling of What Happens, Body and Emotion in the Making of Consciousness* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1999), 17.