



MOTIVATING BY THE PAIN PLEASURE PRINCIPLE

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By Tara Carr, Small Business Development Director at UW-Green Bay

The pain pleasure principle, developed by Sigmund Freud, suggests that people make choices to avoid or decrease pain or make choices that create or increase pleasure. The pain pleasure principle is the core of all the decisions we make. Beliefs, values, actions and decisions are built upon this principle. The principle is the foundation of who we are due to how pain and pleasure are interpreted based on personal past experiences. We seek pleasure to reward ourselves with immediate gratification. The pain pleasure principle suggests that while seeking pleasure, people will also seek to avoid pain. For those individuals where conflict is painful, they will do anything to avoid conflict. Allowing a negative situation to continue might be unhealthy and painful, but the thought of dealing with the conflict is far more painful.

The more we understand human behavior, the more we understand how to motivate or demotivate employees and satisfy customer needs. People make decisions that gravitate towards pleasure while seeking to avoid pain. The intensity of an individual's motivation can work against goals and objectives that are trying to be achieved and it can drive a person to make decisions and choices they normally would not. All decisions have an impact on short-term pain, short-term pleasure, long-term pain and long-term pleasure. The intensity and consequence of these choices will determine how an individual will make a decision. The level of discomfort and the level of pain or pleasure, will be the driving force behind each decision.

We all have experienced the co-worker that has the longest tenure of the company and is immensely unsatisfied with their job. The employee is very comfortable with their duties and responsibilities, yet clearly unhappy. The fear of the unknown, the application process and different job duties, is far too painful despite their intense work dissatisfaction. The disgruntled employee will not seek other employment, but continues to be vocal with their negative employment experience. This employee is motivated by pain because no matter how painful is it to continue to stay status quo, it is even more painful to take a chance and make a change.

Pleasure seekers can be motivated if they perceive that they are making a good investment, they have growth opportunities, possible future increase in salary, or if they feel good about themselves. People will take action that drives pleasure now, even if it causes havoc in the future. Not all pleasure seeking choices can be positive.



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Take the time to learn about your employees and what motivates each one. If the job task is too painful, then the outcome or timeliness of the project getting completed most likely will not be successful. Avoidance and procrastination will occur, which will delay the positive outcome of the goal. Awareness of what demotivates employees is an important factor of an organizations success. If employees are motivated primarily by pain, then their actions will be indicative of such. For many employees, creating expense reports, dealing with bureaucracy, balancing the budget or public speaking can be very painful. As a result, these employees will avoid these tasks as long as possible. The thought of having to complete the work causes so much anticipated pain, the employee procrastinates completion of the task. The employee is hopeful that the more the task is delayed, the lesser the chance they will have to complete it. Realistically they know the task will eventually have to be completed and they may be disciplined or reprimanded for the lateness. The consequence of being reprimanded is less painful than completing the dreaded task.

If managers align employees with the wrong job duties, according to motivation perceptions, then productivity decreases and the business becomes reactionary. How a manager responds to an employee can be motivating or demotivating. Open lines of communication can be deterred if an employee anticipates a specific pain response, which ultimately negatively impacts the organization. Strict company policies or lengthy bureaucratic processes can also decrease motivation.

Much of today's marketing is driven by the pain and pleasure principle. Marketing by pain is implemented by intimidating, scaring or creating fear to make a change, stop a behavior and feel the result of a certain choice. Society has seen these fear building marketing tactics in the election campaign. Conversely, pleasure based marketing creates a 'wow', 'cool' or 'fun' factor. There is a sense of inspiration or even a possible 'halo' effect from using these marketed products. Marketing by using the pleasure principle makes the consumer feel good about their purchase.

Each individual's perception of the anticipated pain or possible pleasure is a driving factor in the process. Ambiguity and fear of the unknown creates the distress that certain actions or choices will lead to pain. There are many theories about motivation, but keep in mind that pain and pleasure are two factors that exist in all of us. Remember, an individual's perception is their reality. Are you motivating or demotivating your employees and customers by pain or pleasure?

The Wisconsin Small Business Development Center (SBDC) at the University of Wisconsin Green Bay is part of a statewide network of SBDCs working with business owners and entrepreneurs to facilitate business growth and improvement, and to launch successful new companies. The Small Business Development Center offers a variety of services: no-cost business consulting, customized business solutions, financial management, growth & strategic planning, and professional development training.

