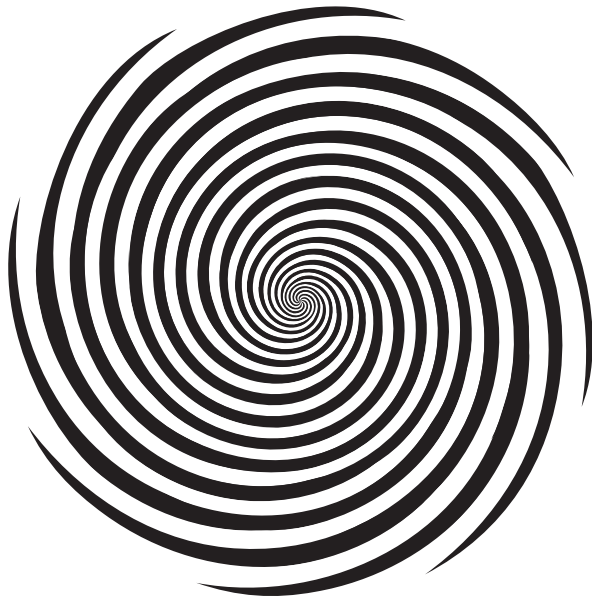


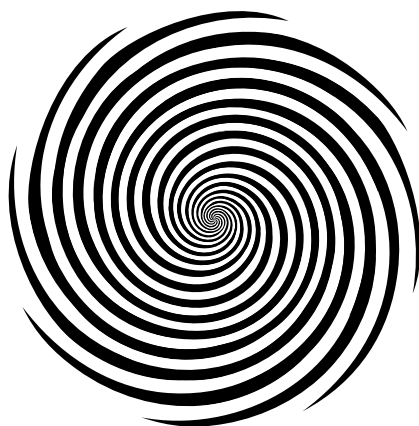
# **How to Get People to Do Stuff**



**Master the art and science of  
persuasion and motivation**

**Susan M. Weinschenk, Ph.D.**

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VOICES THAT MATTER™

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*This book is dedicated to my two children, Guthrie and Maisie,  
who had the sometimes blessing and probably many times  
misfortune of having a psychologist for a mother.  
I got to try out all my theories on you!*

## About the Author



Susan Weinschenk is a Ph.D. behavioral psychologist. She applies research in psychology and neuroscience to business situations. Dr. Weinschenk is the Founder and Principal of the Weinschenk Institute. She consults with Fortune 1000 companies, educational, government, and non-profit organizations. Her clients call her “the brain lady” because she reads and interprets the latest research in neuroscience and how the brain works, and applies that research to business and everyday life. Susan writes a blog for *Psychology Today* called “Brain Wise: Work better, work smarter”, and also has a blog at her website: [www.theteamw.com/blog](http://www.theteamw.com/blog)

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Other books by Susan Weinschenk:

- *100 Things Every Presenter Needs to Know about People* (New Riders, 2012)
- *100 Things Every Designer Needs to Know about People* (New Riders, 2010)
- *Neuro Web Design: What Makes them Click?* (New Riders, 2008)

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# **The Desire for Mastery**

**IF YOU WANT TO UNDERSTAND** the importance of mastery, spend an hour watching a one-year-old. Watch him try to stand up on his own or walk. Watch him play with a puzzle or any other toy. All people—children and adults—have a desire for mastery. It's a universal human drive to want to master a skill or our environment. People are driven to master a sport, a video game, or skills such as welding, performing surgery, or playing the piano.

The wonderful thing about using the drive for mastery to motivate people to do stuff is that this drive is wired into each of us, and it's easy to stimulate the desire. But the tricky thing is that the motivation has to be intrinsic, that is, internal to the person. You can't make someone want to master a particular skill. In order for mastery to be a powerful force, the drive must come from that individual. Luckily it's possible to influence the environment and the situation so the innate desire for mastery emerges.

Here's a psychologist's definition of mastery from George Morgan (Morgan 1990):

Mastery motivation is a psychological force that stimulates an individual to attempt independently, in a focused and consistent manner, to solve a problem or master a skill or task which is at least moderately challenging for him or her.

Humans are naturally curious and this curiosity helps us master our environment. The more time children spend mastering their environment, the more successful they are at thinking and learning as an adult.

What happens when children or adults try to master something? They pay attention, focus their concentration, and acquire information. Because this is a basic drive, you can use the desire for mastery to get people to do stuff.

## **Mastery Trumps Rewards**

You've purchased some new technology for your designers, and you want them to learn new skills so that they can make the best possible use of it. You believe that this new way of working will save significant time and money, and result in better designs. But you also know that the learning curve is relatively high.

The management team has suggested that you reward the designers by giving a cash bonus to any of them who create a design using the new technology and the new process. Should you give a cash bonus?

Before we answer that question, let's look back at some research from 1973:

Marianne is an art teacher at an elementary school. She wants to encourage her students to spend more time practicing their drawing. She creates a “Good Drawing Certificate” to give to her students.

If her goal is to have her students spend more time drawing, and to want to draw more over time, how should she give them the certificate? Should she give them one every time they draw, or only sometimes?

Mark Lepper (Lepper 1973) conducted research on this question. He divided the children into three groups:

- Group 1 was the “expected” group: The researchers showed the children the “Good Drawing Certificate” and asked if they wanted to draw in order to get the certificate.
- Group 2 was the “unexpected” group: The researchers asked the children if they wanted to draw, but didn’t mention anything about a certificate. After the children spent time drawing, they received an unexpected drawing certificate.
- Group 3 was the control group: The researchers asked the children if they wanted to draw, but didn’t mention a certificate and didn’t give them one.

The real part of the experiment came two weeks later. During playtime, the drawing tools were put out in the room. The children weren’t asked about drawing, the tools were just made available in the room. So what happened?

Children in Groups 2 (unexpected) and 3 (control) spent the most time drawing. The children in Group 1, those who received an expected reward, spent the least time drawing.

“Contingent” rewards (rewards given based on specific behavior that is spelled out ahead of time) resulted in less of the desired behavior. Later the researchers went on to do more studies like this, with adults as well as children, and found similar results.

## When Rewards Backfire

Let’s go back to the question about whether you should give cash for designers who use the new technology.

The answer is that it would be better to stimulate a desire for mastery than to give cash. It’s not actually the money that dampens the desire for mastery. It’s the contingency aspect of the bonus.

If you give the designers a cash bonus when they’re not expecting one, that won’t necessarily kill the desire to master the technology. But if you tell

them that they'll get a cash bonus every time they use the new technology, that *will* dampen their desire for mastery. The difference is the contingency.

In the first case the designers weren't expecting a reward. In the second they were, and the behavior (use of the new processes and technology) is required in order to get the reward.

Research on mastery shows that if you give a cash bonus that's contingent on use, there will be an initial uptick in trying out the new technology. But that will wane. You need to engage the drive for mastery if you want the designers to embrace the new technology and use it on an ongoing basis.

Instead of offering a cash bonus each time the designers do things the new way, it would be better to engage their curiosity about the new technology. Let them know that these are important new skill sets that will serve them for the rest of their careers.

## **Carrots and Sticks versus Mastery**

In Chapter 5, "Carrots and Sticks," we talked about how to use reinforcements to get people to do stuff. Now we're saying that's a bad idea, and that you should use mastery instead. So, what gives?

The best, although complicated, answer is that, in general, mastery is a better strategy because it uses intrinsic motivation, and, in general, intrinsic motivation works better over the long haul.

However, there are many situations in which reinforcements are powerful. If people don't have intrinsic motivation to do a task, and if it will be hard to get them to apply intrinsic motivation, then reinforcements work well.

## **Routine Tasks versus Complicated Tasks**

Another distinction is what kind of task you want people to do. If you want them to do a routine task that doesn't require a lot of thinking, for example, keep their work space organized and clean, then reinforcements will work as well as, or even better and faster than, mastery.

Mastery implies that there is a skill or knowledge to learn. In a routine task there's a limit to how much mastery is really involved. Without the sense of mastering a challenging skill or developing a new body of knowledge, it's hard to get intrinsic motivation going. So there's still a place for using carrots and sticks.



## STRATEGIES

Strategy 73: When you want people to do something complicated, something that requires learning new skills or gaining a new body of knowledge, use the desire for mastery. If not, then reinforcements may be the better option.

Strategy 74: When you want to get people to do stuff over the long term, engage their desire for mastery—don't just give them cash or other rewards.

## Make People Feel Special

If you're going to stimulate the desire for mastery, then you have to make people feel that they're really mastering a new and important skill.

Have you ever read Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*? Tom has been told to paint a white fence in front of his aunt's house. He wants to get out of the chore, and tries to figure out how to get someone else to do it.

Tom decides to pretend that painting the fence is a special activity that only the skilled can do. When other boys come by, they get the message from Tom that painting the fence is a special and challenging activity. They want to paint the fence too, but Tom is hesitant. He tells them,

"I reckon there ain't one boy in a thousand, maybe two thousand, that can do it the way it's got to be done."

I'm not suggesting that you be as deceptive as Tom Sawyer was. But people do like to feel that they're part of an elite group. We like to feel that we have special talents and skills that set us apart. If you indicate that a particular task requires special talents, skills, or knowledge, then people are more likely to want to do it. You will stimulate the desire for mastery.



## STRATEGIES

Strategy 75: When you make people feel that only members of an elite group can do a certain task, they'll be more motivated to master the task.

## Challenge Is Motivating

Mastery is not just about feeling special. We like challenges. Challenges motivate us.

Mark Twain captures this in that same passage from *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*:

He had discovered a great law of human action, without knowing it—namely, that in order to make a man or a boy covet a thing, it is only necessary to make the thing difficult to attain.

When something is hard to achieve, when it is challenging, people want to do it. Making a task challenging is another way to energize the desire for mastery. If you make it too easy, then the desire for mastery won't be stimulated. Of course, if you make it *too* challenging then it will seem impossible, and the desire for mastery will be quashed.

You have to find the right amount of challenge for the people you're trying to motivate. This sometimes comes down to finding the right amount of challenge for a particular individual at a particular moment.

For example, several years ago my husband suggested that I learn to play jazz piano. He was learning jazz guitar, and he thought that if I learned piano we could then play together. I've played a little bit of piano over the years, but never much, and certainly never jazz.

The idea of mastering jazz piano was appealing, and it certainly was a challenge. So I started. I attended some jazz workshops, tried to find a piano teacher that could teach me jazz, and bought instructional books and audio courses. The idea of the challenge was motivating.

But the challenge proved to be too much. I learned a lot about jazz and music theory. I mastered some of the fundamentals of jazz, jazz theory, and even some fundamentals about piano. I reached a point, however, where going beyond a few fundamentals seemed daunting. I didn't feel that I'd be able to achieve a level of mastery that would allow me to comfortably sit in and play tunes with other amateurs.

When we don't feel that we're making progress, and when we don't feel that we can achieve at least some level of mastery, then challenge is not motivating anymore.

What I did instead was switch to jazz singing. I thought that, for me, singing jazz would be something I could achieve a more passable level at than playing jazz piano. I'm not saying that mastering jazz vocals is inherently easier than mastering jazz piano. But for me the challenge of learning to sing jazz was the right amount of challenge. I felt it was challenging, but that I could get to a passable level of proficiency. I was motivated by that desire for mastery. It proved to be the right level of challenge, and many years later I'm still learning and challenging myself with singing jazz. I enjoy the



challenge and I enjoy the level of mastery I've been able to achieve. I'm no Ella Fitzgerald, Janet Planet, or Diana Krall, but I'm able to sit in with other amateurs and sing a jazz tune.

If I'd found the right teacher to work with on a regular basis from the start, I might have stuck with jazz piano. A good teacher knows how to take a body of knowledge or skill set and break it down into smaller chunks. A good teacher is a master of mastery. Knowing how to chunk skills and information into the right-size bites for a particular individual is what a good teacher does. And that's the key to motivating people with mastery. You need to find the right amount of challenge to spark the desire for mastery, but not overwhelm it.



### STRATEGIES

Strategy 76: When you make a task seem challenging (but not impossible), people will be motivated to pursue it.

## Autonomy Encourages Mastery

Since the desire for mastery is an intrinsic motivation, this means the individual has to set the goal and decide on the pace of achievement. Autonomy, or the ability to govern oneself and one's work, is important to mastery.

We like to do things the way we want to do them, and when we want to do them. We like autonomy. Autonomy motivates us because it makes us feel in control.

For example, Curtis manages a team of programmers. He'd like his team to become skilled with some new programming technology. Instead of telling his team how to learn the skill, which training course to attend, and so on, Curtis will better stimulate the desire for mastery if he points his staff to some resources but lets them make the decisions. He might discuss options of how they can master the new skill, but if he lets them do the research on their own about how to learn the new skill, whether to take a course, what course to take, and when to take it, the autonomy will make them more motivated to learn the skill.



### STRATEGIES

Strategy 77: When you provide people with autonomy, they feel a stronger desire for mastery and thus are more motivated.

## When Struggling Is a Good Thing

If you grew up in Asia, then the idea of struggling as a good thing may strike you as common sense. But if you grew up the US or in other Western countries, then this idea may seem counterintuitive.

Many of us in the West assume that struggling is humiliating and will prevent people from being motivated. According to James Stigler from UCLA, Western cultures think that struggle shows that you're not smart enough; it's a sign of not having the ability to do the work.

In contrast, in many Asian cultures and classrooms, struggle is assumed to be something that everyone must go through in order to learn. Many Asian cultures see struggle as an opportunity, not a problem. It's seen as part of the learning process. And when you finally do break through to a resolution of a problem you've been struggling with, it shows that you have persistence.

Indeed, research shows that people learn from making mistakes. Mastery involves persisting in the face of struggle, and triumphing over the struggle to master the information.

Think about video games. If a video game is so easy that you seldom make a mistake, then the game won't be very interesting. Making mistakes and struggling to master the game are part of why the game is compelling and fun. That degree of challenge stimulates our desire to keep playing.



### STRATEGIES

Strategy 78: When you make people struggle, at least a little bit, it increases their sense of mastery and thereby increases their level of motivation.

Strategy 79: Provide people with opportunities to make mistakes.

## Give Feedback to Keep Motivation Going

Along with allowing people to make mistakes, you can give them feedback on their mistakes to help them learn and adjust what they're doing. The right kind of feedback at the right time can increase the desire for mastery.

Use caution, however: the wrong type of feedback at the wrong time can hinder the desire for mastery. Valerie Shute (Shute 2007) analyzed hundreds of studies on feedback. Here are a few ideas to keep in mind if you want to use feedback to keep people motivated to continue the desire for mastery.

## Correct or Not?

The first piece of information to give is whether someone is doing things correctly or not. Be very clear. It's all too easy to be vague.

Let's say that Jerome is training Kathleen, a new barista at the coffee shop he manages. Kathleen makes a practice cup of espresso, and Jerome says, "That's a good first try. But perhaps you can make it a little better." Is Jerome saying that Kathleen did it correctly or not? It's hard to tell from that statement. When you're giving feedback make sure it's clear.

Jerome could have said, "You didn't clean out the filter thoroughly enough. All the residue needs to be flushed out. Let's give that another try." Now Kathleen will have no doubt that what she did was not correct.

## Provide a Short Elaboration

The previous feedback, "You didn't clean out the filter thoroughly enough. All the residue needs to be flushed out. Let's give that another try," includes what is called *elaboration*. If Jerome had only said, "You didn't clean out the filter thoroughly enough," then he'd be telling Kathleen that what she did was incorrect, but not giving an explanation. The short explanation ("All the residue needs to be flushed out") is the elaboration.

Providing elaboration gives Kathleen the details she needs to know to correct what she did wrong. Without elaboration, it would be hard for Kathleen to improve the next time she tries the task.

Elaboration should be short. What if Jerome's feedback was, "Every time that you brew an espresso you need to dump out the spent grounds, of course, and then rinse the filter with hot water. Make sure you check the filter basket for residue and make sure it's entirely clear before you replace it. Run water through the screen and scrub it with a brush. Don't forget to empty the drop tray several times a day, and you also have to wipe off the frothing wand after each cup."

This might be important information, but it's way too long as an elaboration for feedback on one step.

## Decide on the Best Time for Feedback

You might think that giving feedback right away is the best thing, but that may not be the case. If a task involves several small steps, then it might be

best to wait until the person has completed all the steps and then give feedback on the entire task.

If you give feedback on every little step, then you risk interrupting the normal flow of the task and you make it hard for the person to correct mistakes on her own. On the other hand, if you wait too long then she might not even remember what it was she did that you're giving feedback on.

A good rule of thumb is to break up the task into smaller steps. Give feedback when the person has completed three to four steps, or after the person has made two to three errors, whichever comes first.

## Don't Combine Praise with Feedback

Keep feedback objective. Remember that mastery has to do with intrinsic motivation, not reinforcement. People don't need your praise to keep going, and switching to praise takes the focus off of intrinsic motivation and puts it on extrinsic motivation. This may actually decrease the desire for mastery.

Also, feedback is often about what needs to change. Combining feedback on what the person did incorrectly and what needs to change with praise is often confusing. For example, Jerome said to Kathleen, "You didn't clean out the filter thoroughly enough. All the residue needs to be flushed out. Let's give that another try."

His feedback was objective and did not include praise. What if Jerome had said, "You didn't clean out the filter thoroughly enough. All the residue needs to be flushed out. Great job, though, for your first time. You're really getting the hang of it! Let's give that another try."

The second way combines feedback and praise. It might make Jerome feel better, but it probably confuses Kathleen. Did she do the cleaning correctly or not?

Knowing when to give feedback is one of the distinguishing factors between a great teacher or mentor and a not-so-great teacher.



### STRATEGIES

Strategy 80: Give feedback to help people learn from their mistakes, but don't interrupt their work in order to do so.

Strategy 81: When you give feedback, provide a short elaboration.

Strategy 82: Pick the right time to give feedback.

Strategy 83: When you use feedback to increase the desire for mastery, keep the feedback objective and don't include praise.

## Go with the Flow

Say you're totally engrossed in an activity, totally in the moment. Everything else falls away, your sense of time changes, and you almost forget who you are and where you are. This is called a flow state.

When you can encourage a flow state, you can get people to stay focused and do an activity at peak ability for a long time. When you encourage a flow state, you're encouraging the desire for mastery.

### The Flow State

The man who wrote the book (literally) on flow is Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (Csikszentmihalyi 2008). He's been studying the flow state around the world for many years. Let's look at some facts about the flow state, the conditions that make it occur, and what it feels like.

#### There Is Focused Attention on a Task

The ability to control and focus attention is critical. When we get distracted by anything outside of the activity we're engaged in, the flow state dissipates.

#### There Is a Specific, Clear, and Achievable Goal

No matter what the activity is, the flow state comes about when there is a specific goal. When we're intensely focused on a task, we let in only information that fits with the goal.

Research shows that we need to feel that we have a good chance of reaching the goal in order to get into, and hold onto, the flow state. If we think we have a good chance of *failing* at the goal, then the flow state will not be induced. Conversely, if the activity is not challenging enough, then it won't hold our attention and the flow state will end.

#### There Is Feedback

In order to stay in the flow state, we need feedback as to the achievement of the goal (see the previous section on the right type of feedback). Some of the most valuable feedback comes from the task itself.

For example, if I'm playing piano in a flow state, I'm getting constant feedback by listening to the sounds coming from the piano. I don't necessarily need feedback from a piano teacher all the time.

#### There Is Control

Control is an important condition for the flow state. We don't necessarily have to be in control, or even feel like we're in control of the entire situation,

but we do have to feel that we're exercising significant control over our own actions in a challenging situation.

### **Time Changes**

For some of us, time speeds up—we look up and hours have gone by. For others, time slows down.

### **The Self Does Not Feel Threatened**

In order to enter a flow state, our sense of self and survival must not feel threatened. We have to be relaxed enough to engage all of our attention in the task at hand. In fact, most of us lose our sense of self when we're absorbed in a task.

### **The Flow State Is Personal**

All of us have different activities that put us in a flow state. What triggers a flow state for you is different from others.

### **The Flow State Crosses Cultures**

So far the flow state seems to be a common human experience, with the exception of people with some mental illnesses. Those who have schizophrenia, for example, have a hard time inducing or staying in a flow state, probably because they have a hard time with some of the other items above, such as focused attention, control, or the self not feeling threatened.

### **The Flow State Is Pleasurable**

Simply put, we like being in the flow state.

### **The Prefrontal Cortex and Basal Ganglia Are Both Involved**

The prefrontal cortex is responsible for focused attention, and the basal ganglia are involved in dopamine production, which produces the pleasurable feeling as well as the drive to keep going.

## **How to Encourage a Flow State**

We can go into a flow state for a wide variety of tasks. For example, we can be in a flow state when we're playing a musical instrument, cooking a meal, writing a report, or giving a presentation. The flow state isn't limited to particular kinds of tasks. We don't have to be doing something creative in order to be in a flow state.

Flow states occur because of the *way* we're doing a task, not because of the type of task we are doing. When we're in a flow state, we're motivated to

continue with what we're doing. We also want to do the task again in order to get back into a flow state.

Here's an example. Let's say you ask Jeff, one of the people on your team, to write a white paper on a particular topic. You want him to figure out what research he may need to do, whom he might need to interview, and so on. You want him to write the white paper and present a summary of it to the team. You want him to like doing this, because you'd like him to take the initiative in suggesting and writing additional white papers in the future.

Here are some ideas of how to encourage people to go into and stay in a flow state, using Jeff as an example:

- Give people a specific task to do, with an achievable goal.  
Tell Jeff what you want to accomplish: you want a white paper and a presentation for the team. Tell him that you know he hasn't done this kind of writing before, and that it might be challenging, but that you believe he's up to the task. Tell him specifics about the white paper, for example, the length, and when you want it done by.
- Let people have as much autonomy as possible, for example, how they do the task, where, when, and with whom.  
You can point Jeff to some initial resources, or tell him to come to you if he gets stuck, but let him know that it's up to him how he goes about doing his research.
- Don't interrupt them while they're doing the task.  
Refrain from asking Jeff whenever you see him how the white paper is coming along.
- Build in the opportunity for feedback, preferably from the task itself.  
Jeff can tell whether he's making progress on the white paper or not, so there's some feedback that will come while he's doing the task.

If you set up the task in this way, Jeff may go into a flow state while writing the white paper. If he does, he'll enjoy the task and be more motivated to keep at it and do more white papers in the future.



## STRATEGIES

Strategy 84: When you induce a flow state, people will work longer and harder.

Strategy 85: To keep a flow state going, give people control over their actions during the activity.

Strategy 86: To keep a flow state going, don't interrupt people.

Strategy 87: To keep the flow state going, make sure the task is challenging but not impossible.