Most of us grew up believing that motivation is and must be driven by sticks and carrots. Even though we are becoming increasingly aware that this “natural law” seems to be failing at getting our employees to outperform in their tasks, we rarely dare question it.

The truth is that motivation is not something we can manipulate with end-of-year bonuses. Far from being a law from human nature, it is a fashion born during the industrial revolution, becoming firmly established after Skinner’s experiments on rats in the 1940s. Observing rodents learn to respond to positive stimuli and avoid negative ones, made him think he had found the key to human motivation.

After nearly eight decades of a heated debate in psychology and management science, we now understand that sticks and carrots do work, but only partially and only in some cases. They are perfect for rewarding simple tasks, when temporary compliance is required or when needing to sustain a social hierarchy. More often, they can only change behaviours temporarily, while weakening people’s bond with what they do, obstructing the focus on sustainability and breaking down collaboration.

While our current issue explores cases where incentives did generate increases in performance, let me challenge you to look further. As new science reveals that sustained human motivation can only be achieved when built around ulterior foundations, my challenge to you is that you continue to create a shared sense of purpose at work, focusing on the outside: on the client, the patient, the citizen and society at large.

Warmly,

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