

# Self-determination theory and mentorship

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# What is self-determination theory about?

- ❖ Self-determination theory is a psychological perspective on what intrinsically motivates people to do things, especially to achieve their highest potential.
- ❖ So, self-determination theory tries to answer the questions: when managers are wondering, “how do I encourage my staff to do X?” or when teachers are thinking, “why won’t my students engage more with this assignment?”
- ❖ Extrinsic motivation (grades, threat of poverty, familial pressure) is less effective than intrinsic motivation when it comes to things like actual learning (as opposed to grades). Extrinsic motivation is a big factor in why students cheat, for example.
- ❖ The answers to the managers’ and teachers’ questions are pretty intuitive, actually.

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# What motivates people?

## 1. Competence

- a. People need to know how to do what they are being asked to do. This means that people need to have training and support to gain the skills to do the thing, and the goals and expectations of the thing should be crystal clear.
- b. When people understand the relevance of their activities, competence is more likely.
- c. Lack of clear goals? Missing support? The lack of guidelines makes work feel disorienting and impossible.

## 2. Autonomy

- a. People need to feel like they have some choice or autonomy over (at least some of) the things they do.
- b. Micromanaging to the point of font and word choice? Limiting creativity so much that no choices are left up to the doer? The lack of autonomy makes work feel stifling.

## 3. Relatedness

- a. People need to feel like they are seen or known by others in their environment.
- b. Completely dismissing the lived experience of people? Only focused on what people can do for you and not that they are human? The lack of connection makes people feel used.

# Why does self-determination theory underpin my talks on mentorship?

1. SDT is backed by lots of research. This research intersects and overlaps with the work on belonging. Belonging supports motivation. So, when we're thinking about how to mentor others, we are implicitly working to motivate them to be their best selves, and we can do this through promoting belonging.
2. Understanding SDT is key to understanding human nature and supporting individuals to do their best work, including the mentor. By giving mentors tools like SDT, mentors can target their mentorship to evidence-based areas that are most influential, saving mentors time.
3. SDT provides the framework for mentors to tailor their mentorship to individuals without starting each mentorship relationship from scratch.

# How do I maximize my mentorship by using SDT?

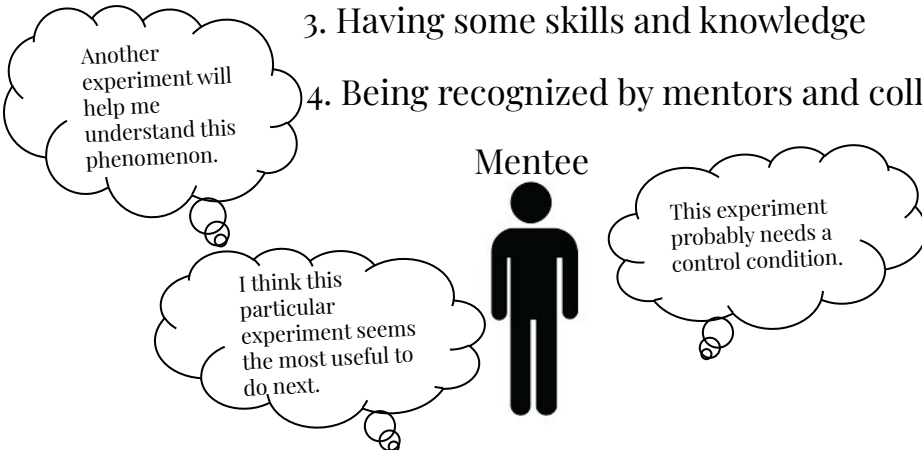
1. Use a communication plan. A communication is some intentional plan for how, when, and why you will communicate with your mentee. This can be super formal, in a typed-up document, or informally chatted about. This plan should be co-created with the mentee, not top-down from the mentor.
2. In that communication plan, explicitly discuss ways that you will address competence, autonomy, and relatedness. Note: you don't need to explicitly use those terms. You can ask about ways to connect about life stuff, or how to make sure mentees feel like they are being heard or given choices.
3. Genuinely consider: why would someone do the thing I'm asking them to do? Is this activity intrinsically motivating, or extrinsically motivating?

# Feelings of belonging can promote student success (especially for minoritized students)

Belonging: a sense of being accepted, valued, included, and encouraged in an academic space or field.

Components of belonging:

1. Understanding relevance of their tasks
2. Feeling a sense of autonomy
3. Having some skills and knowledge
4. Being recognized by mentors and colleagues



A speech bubble containing the text: "That's a really great point, experiments often need controls. That sounds like a useful experiment for our question. How will you know if the experiment worked?"

Mentor



A speech bubble containing the text: "Nice job! Can we share ideas about experiments?"

Colleagues



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# References

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