

# LEARNING MOTIVATION aka HOW TO GET EVERYONE ON BOARD ON ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES?

Opening questions for the reader before reading:

- Why aren't some people on board already? Your ideas?
- Do you think it is important to focus on (learning) motivation in your work? Why?
- What do you think is needed to create/support learning motivation?
- Does the learning motivation depend on the learner or the teacher?

This chapter is based on the self-determination theory by E.L. Deci & R. M. Ryan<sup>1</sup>

Motivation is essential for learning – or anything – to happen. Although we can for short term manipulate, force or inspire others, motivation itself is a very internal process. What we can do, however, is to **create conditions** for motivation to emerge.<sup>2</sup> So the good news is that we can actually significantly support the motivation of other people, by actively creating those conditions.

### What could these conditions be?

First, we must separate between two types of motivation: **trash** (controlled) and **quality** (autonomous) **motivation**. And then there is amotivation – the state when there is no motivation at all.

#### Characteristics of trash motivation and quality motivation:

Characteristics	Trash motivation	Quality motivation
<b>Time</b>	Can be created fast, starts to work fast, but also lasts for a short time	Usually can take time to build up, but lasts for a longer time
<b>How it is created</b>	Fear, pressure, control, punishments and prizes, competing, creating guilt and shame, expressing disappointment, giving ready-made solutions	Support, open curiosity, giving a choice and voice, helping to find a meaning in the topic, enabling to think, enabling to offer ideas and solutions
<b>Strength</b>	Doesn't hold in new and challenging situations as other deeper motivations will start to prevail	Can persist even in challenging situations when there is need to make difficult choices
<b>Examples</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Giving a monetary prize for environmentally friendly behaviour (money prevails over the motivation to do the right thing for the environment)</li> <li>• Opposing strict rules on how to behave</li> <li>• Competitions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Having reflective discussions, that help to find deeper personal meaning for environmentally friendly behaviour</li> <li>• Participatory process and explanations on why certain rules are needed</li> <li>• Giving possibility to discuss, define the problem, find and test solutions, analyse them</li> </ul>

<sup>1</sup> This chapter is largely based on the work by Ryan & Deci in self-determination theory (Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2017). *Self-determination theory: Basic psychological needs in motivation, development, and wellness.*)

<sup>2</sup> a concept developed by prof. dr. Johnmarshall Reeve

When speaking about environmental issues, there is often a prevailing sense of urgency and need for things to change fast. **However, we must realise that forcing people to change rapidly/in a short-time, is trash motivation and will only create new problems later on.** Covid-restrictions are a good example here: if the deeper understanding of the rules is not embedded in people, they will only be following them for a short time. Therefore, when it comes to adopting more environmentally friendly practices and behaviors, we need to support quality motivation as this will create the long-term change we want.

## HOW DO WE SUPPORT QUALITY MOTIVATION?

According to the [Self-Determination Theory](#) (SDT), the leading theory in motivational science, the foundation for creating quality motivation are the **three basic psychological needs** that are universal for everyone. Supporting these needs helps to create the environment where motivation can emerge and learning (and behavioural change) can happen. A basic psychological need is defined as a psychological nutrient that is essential for individuals' adjustment, integrity, and growth.<sup>3</sup>

**Exercise:** Look at these small situation descriptions, where the educator/zero waste activist is actually suppressing the basic psychological needs of his/her learners/stakeholders. Can you guess the needs which are not being met?

### First exercise:

- During the lesson, someone trolls the educator. The educator just ignores them.
- During the lesson, someone trolls the educator. The educator makes an elegant and sarcastic joke about the troll to "discipline" them.
- The educator starts the lesson with clearly stating the goals of the lesson and then continues with the content.
- In order to get the municipality to do more on zero waste, a zero waste activist tells the municipality officer in the beginning of a meeting: "It's because of the municipality's wrong decisions that we are creating so much waste, you need to do more!"

**What one basic need of the learners/stakeholders is not being met in all these examples?**

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<sup>3</sup> Ryan, R. M. (1995). Psychological Needs and the Facilitation of Integrative Processes. *Journal of Personality*, 63, 397-427

### Second exercise:

- The educator gives a task for the learners during the lesson. Then some of the learners find the answer and say it out loud. "Thank you, this is right!", says the educator and goes on with the lesson.
- During the lesson, the learner asks, "Why doesn't this plastic bag biodegrade?" The educator answers: "Because this is oxo-degradable".
- The educator does not explain why the homework is given.
- Learner asks a question during the lesson and the educator answers: "Thanks for the question, but this is not important in this context", and continues.

**What one basic need of the learner is not being met in all these examples?**

### Third exercise:

- The educator spends most of the lesson speaking about his/her view on the topic.
- As the time for the lesson is limited, the educator pushes the learners to hurry up with thinking so that the tasks will remain unfinished and not reflected upon.
- In order to motivate learners, the educator clearly states the goal of the lesson.
- A NGO organises a competition between schools on who can reduce their food waste most, with prizes for the student groups who track their food waste most and report the smallest waste amounts.
- A zero waste activist is having a discussion with a person about waste sorting. The person says: "But I don't want to sort, it's yacky!" The zero waste activist replies: "C'mon, you are overreacting, it's not that bad!"
- And this one :)



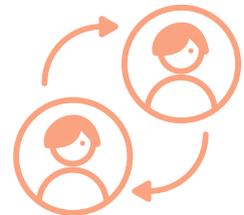
**What one basic need of the learner is not being met in all these examples?**

Write down your guesses and also how you would act instead. To check out our ideas on how you can act in these situations, you can check out page 45. Alternatively, continue from the next page.

## THE THREE BASIC PSYCHOLOGICAL NEEDS<sup>4</sup>

### The first need is the feeling of relatedness (*opposite: coldness*)

This is often the first need that we have to meet, but it also can be the easiest to meet. It can simply be asking the names of the people, looking them in the eye and smiling genuinely, showing warm and open curiosity towards their thoughts and ideas (even if you think they are silly). Even in times when it gets challenging to meet the other two basic needs, this is the one that should always be present, as it talks to the more primal need in us.



#### **Relatedness is feeling:**

- Socially connected
- Cared for by others
- Significant among others
- Being part of social organisations beyond oneself
- Giving or contributing to others.

It's not about making your learners like you, it's more about them feeling that you as the educator like them. It's about allowing them to feel welcome, creating a warm environment where they can learn, ask questions and provide insight. And it should be authentic, humans can easily realise if another person is not genuine.

### The second need is the feeling of competence (*opposite: chaos*)

The need for competence means the need for mastery, to be able to operate effectively within your important fields of life. For learners, this does not relate so much to the skills and knowledge that they have, but rather, that they are able to understand what is being asked from them in the learning activity, what they need to do and feeling that (with some effort) they can handle that.



Feeling competent usually means also having helpful structures in place. For example, knowing why it's important to collect biowaste separately, knowing what to put and what not to put in your biowaste bin, being able to get the most suitable bin, and having access to the service/infrastructure that supports your biowaste collection.

<sup>4</sup> Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2017). *Self-determination theory: Basic psychological needs in motivation, development, and wellness*.

### Competence is feeling and knowing:

- How to do things, solve problems
- What is expected from me
- From where and how to get help when I need it
- The tasks are not too difficult and not too easy for solving
- The choices given are not too few and not too many (suitable for the learner's level, for example small child probably needs less choices than an adult, beginner less choices than the expert)

Competence can mean different feelings, from scientific curiosity towards the world to wanting to get better at a game or skill.

### The third need is the feeling of autonomy (*opposite: control*)

Autonomy means acting with free will upon things that are important to you. It's not quite the same as independence or self-reliance, which are more connected to not relying on others. Autonomy means that we can willingly turn to others for help or guidance. You can be autonomously/willingly independent or dependent. The same way you can be autonomously/willingly individualistic or collectivistic.



### Autonomy is feeling that:

- You choose your own actions
- Your actions are aligned with your values
- Your actions are valuable and meaningful for you
- Your way of thinking, your actions and values are also valued/respected by others.

Giving autonomy to people does not mean anarchy and lack of rules. On the contrary, structure is a precondition of autonomy. This can mean that rules can be created jointly by the educator and learners, or that learners feel that they have a say in what are the boundaries of the learning activity and they understand the need of boundaries. Autonomy means that learners find the learning activity and its goal meaningful and/or valuable for them; it also can be interesting, but does not have to. In practical terms, it can mean small things like giving learners enough time to think at their own pace, letting them solve problems instead of having ready-made solutions, asking what they find important in the topic, respecting those meanings etc.

On the next page there are some recommendations on how to support the basic needs. It's important to point out though that sometimes we might be **pseudo-meeting** the need – thinking we support them, but actually might be suppressing them. Some examples are shown in the exercise answers.

**Table on examples of supporting and suppressing the basic needs in learning situation<sup>5</sup>**

	Relatedness	Competence	Autonomy
<b>Supporting the need in learning situation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Warmth, open curiosity, even if somebody “trolls” – it is not about you, it’s probably their own struggle with something</li> <li>• Look at every situation from their perspective</li> <li>• Nobody should ever feel that they are left out from the “herd”</li> <li>• Find ways for everybody to feel significant and valuable</li> <li>• Make them genuinely feel that they and their contribution is wanted by you</li> <li>• Make them feel that they are respected</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Make them explicitly feel that you are there to help them; that you and them are in the same boat</li> <li>• Be explicit in what you expect from them and how to achieve that; and from where to get help and support if they need it</li> <li>• Give tasks that help them to get better step by step</li> <li>• Follow the rules that you have agreed jointly; from time to time check whether all the rules are still relevant</li> <li>• <i>After action review</i> – reflect (collectively) after every task you do – how did we think and act; why did it work or did not work?</li> <li>• Give informative feedback, that says <i>what they should try next</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Help them to understand why the activities are valuable to them</li> <li>• Give meaning to every activity from their perspective</li> <li>• Let them think, to come out with their ideas and solutions</li> <li>• Follow patiently their pace and rhythm of learning</li> <li>• Accept and welcome negative emotions</li> <li>• If possible, give meaningful choices (meaningful from their perspective)</li> <li>• Take their “I”, their personality into account, if possible – e.g., if somebody have some skill that might be useful, involve them</li> </ul>
<b>Suppressing the need in learning situation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Make them feel as units, not individuals</li> <li>• Make them feel incompetent and shamed – preferably in public!</li> <li>• Bully or let others bully</li> <li>• If someone acts wrongly, let them feel that they are no longer part of the group</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do not say what you expect from them or do it in a way that they do not understand</li> <li>• Threaten with failure, make them anxious</li> <li>• Provide little or no help and support</li> <li>• Keep rules inconsistent</li> <li>• Be not present, when help is required</li> <li>• Give comparative or judgmental feedback or say something about the performance, not process</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Compare, make social comparisons, create rivalry!</li> <li>• Do not let them think, think for them, give solutions</li> <li>• Force your pace upon them</li> <li>• Do not explain, why an activity is needed</li> <li>• Ignore or diminish their negative feelings</li> </ul>

<sup>5</sup> adopted from a lecture by prof. Maarten Vansteenkiste

## Second part of the exercise:

### The first need is relatedness

#### How to act instead:

- During the lesson, someone trolls the lecturer. The educator expresses open curiosity towards the learner in order to understand what need of the learner is not being met.
- The educator starts the lesson with creating a warm relationship with the audience (looking people in the eye, asking their names and interests in the topic). Then s/he first tries to understand what could be the goal from the learners' perspective and unites it with her/his own ideas.
- In order to get the municipality to do more on zero waste and therefore first start to think about it, the zero waste activist starts the meeting with the municipality officer by asking: "How is our municipality doing? What are you proud of and what would you wish would be different?", then after the response asks: "And how are we doing in waste management in your opinion?" and then leads the discussion on anything they need help with.

#### ! Pseudo-meeting the needs:

- The educator asks for learners' names and their interest for the topics, but looks at his/her notes, computer and/or phone while the learners are speaking.
- In order to get the municipality to do more on zero waste, the zero waste activist tells the municipality officer in the beginning of the meeting: "We see that our municipality is having problems with waste management, we are here to help you!"

### The second need is competence

#### How to act instead:

- The educator gives a task for the learners during the lesson. Then some of the learners find the answer and say it out loud. The educator thanks them in a warm manner and also asks for some other ideas. When no new ideas appear, the educator starts the discussion, why this answer is right and what else could be right and why some other option would be wrong.
- During the lesson, the learner asks: "Why doesn't this plastic bag biodegrade?" The educator notes that it is a damn good question and turns the question back to the audience, asking, does anyone know the answer; either way they end up with discussion, that leads to the understanding of the topic (in this case, the composition of the oxo-degradable material and why this material does not biodegrade).

- The educator helps the learners to see how the homework helps to develop the skills they expressed are important to them. This might take some time.
- Learner asks a question during the lesson and the educator answers: "Thanks for the question, but this is not important in this context", and explains why, and from where the learner could get additional information, before s/he continues.

### ! Pseudo-meeting the needs:

- The educator only asks after the presentation: does anyone have any questions?

### The third need is autonomy

#### How to act instead:

- The educator first asks for the learners' views and thoughts on the topic, listens to them and then integrates his/her views into the discussion, asking for additions and feedback.
- Although the time for the lesson is limited, the educator never pushes the learners to hurry up with thinking. So there may be less topics, but every one will be worked through deeply.
- In order to motivate learners, the educator tries to see the perspective of the learners and link the lesson's goal to their meaningful and valuable goals.
- A NGO creates a collaborative project between schools, where students get to know how food is produced, they can investigate, discuss and build their own understanding on the value of food and the importance of not wasting it
- A zero waste activist is having a discussion with a person on waste sorting. The person says: "But I don't want to sort, it's yacky!" The zero waste activist replies: "Yes, I know sometimes waste can seem quite yacky and many people have had a similar feeling first, myself included. Then I discovered that its possible to do it in a quite clean way."
- And new design for the bag:



### ! Pseudo-meeting the needs:

- The educator asks for learners' expectations for the lesson, but then carries on with her/his content without connecting the gathered input with his/her plan and ideas.

## FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Before reading the answers, think to yourself: **how would you answer them?**

1. Why are these needs so important for learning? What happens when they are not met?
2. Is it even possible to meet all these needs all the time?
3. What about trolls and interrupters who make it hard to relate to?
4. But what if I try to meet the needs of one learner and with that suppress the needs of several other learners?
5. How can I avoid chaos in the learning activity without suppressing the basic needs?
6. How do I support the basic needs of different age groups or settings (formal, not formal, children, elderly...)?
7. What about the psychological basic needs of the educator?
8. What about the environmental regulations in terms of these basic needs? There has been a lot of improvements on environmental work in general and we cannot imagine having discussions with everyone on the need of those regulations.
9. The learning motivation theory says that competitions are part of the trash motivation. But competitions are used quite a lot in environmental education activities, for example between schools, as it gets students involved. Does this mean we shouldn't do competitions? It's quite hard to stop doing them...

### 1. Why are these needs so important for learning? What happens when they are not met?

In order to learn, people need to feel psychologically safe. If there is fear of not feeling accepted, the brain can switch to survival mode, and learning, which happens in the "higher parts" of the brain, cannot happen. Also, as humans we cannot truly thrive and contribute to our community if our psychological needs are not met.

### 2. Is it even possible to meet all these needs all the time?

It is not always easy and it takes practice to even start noticing when we might be suppressing these needs for learners. There are situations when not all of them can be met, for example when a child wants to run on the busy street, then we need to suppress his/her need for autonomy, just to protect him/her. But while doing so we can still keep the relatedness with the child, hugging him/her, explaining warmly why she/he cannot run to the street. So what we should aim for is that even if we struggle to meet all the three needs, we should always, at the least, keep the relatedness. This can be difficult when we ourselves feel attacked by the learner, are irritated by them or we are meeting with them only for a very short time. Although deep learning cannot be achieved in a short-term period, a simple one-hour meeting can also

support motivation, by showing curiosity towards the thoughts and ideas of our listeners/learners, therefore, already supporting their need for competence and autonomy.

### **3. What about trolls and interrupters who make it hard to relate to?**

Zero waste and circular economy, like many other complex issues, come with their critics – people who have contra arguments. Sometimes these arguments make sense, sometimes they have no solid logic behind them. A troll is a person who is troubled with something, and feels that their identity is somehow “attacked” by our teaching, or perhaps they feel lonely and rejected by other people.

Trolling and interruptions are usually a symptom of some need not being met in that person. If our aim is to teach people, then somehow, we need to get the trolls on board as well. If their troubles run deeper, we of course cannot be their therapists, but we can show that we care about them as humans and we treat them as thinking beings. Experience has shown that people who at first are hostile and interruptive, can shift to contribute to the discussion in a meaningful way, if the educator keeps the relatedness with them. This means welcoming their thoughts, politely correcting those ideas which are false, explaining why they are false and pointing out positively those ideas which are correct.

### **4. But what if I try to meet the needs of one learner and with that suppress the needs of several other learners?**

This is also why structure and some rules are needed. If one person starts to take too much space, then the educator can suggest that perhaps there is a need to create a rule for how much time each person takes for talking. This can be done while still keeping a warm attitude towards the person talking too much.

### **5. How can I avoid chaos in the learning activity without suppressing the basic needs?**

Supporting relatedness, competence and autonomy does not mean there is no structure or rules. In fact, they should be present in order to support the three basic needs. Structure gives a feeling of safety, the educator can give choices and freedom within this structure, and rules on how to act can be agreed upon together with learners. If the discussion starts to go off topic, the educator can point out that this is not the topic for today, give an explanation on why it is not so and give either a source or some other option when and how to tackle the other topic.

### **6. How do I support the basic needs of different age groups or settings (formal, not formal, children, elderly...)?**

The three basic needs are universal and the same for everyone. It doesn't matter if you are a 3rd grade student or an adult politician – both have the same needs of relatedness, competence and autonomy. It's just the words and teaching tasks we use that can be different.

The competence level of a child is different from that of an adult expert. But we still need to adopt ourselves to their level of competence. Therefore getting to know the pre-existing knowledge and skill level of our learners is very important. You can read more about that from the *Main principles of teaching* chapter. But showing relatedness by being warm, looking people in the eye, smiling and being interested in their thoughts works the same for all the people in all ages and all settings.

## **7. What about the psychological basic needs of the educator?**

This is a valid question and concern. It can happen that as educators we suppress our own needs in order to meet the needs of our learners. But we have to remember that once we are aware of the needs of our learners, we can consciously choose to put our needs aside for a short while, because learners are probably suppressing our basic needs subconsciously and often not on purpose. Of course we cannot ignore our needs in the long term and have to strive towards creating learning environments where we also feel safe, competent and autonomous, but for the learners, deep learning will not happen without us as educators supporting their needs.

In addition, when we talk about respecting and accepting all the different emotions and opinions of our learners in order to support their basic needs, it doesn't mean that we will just let them "run over us". We can (and should) still keep structure and boundaries in place. When people are starting to feel over-emotional or aggressive, then we can still respond to them kindly that we see there is something hurtful going on for them and it's better for them to step away from the current activity, and we can try to address it privately later. In the end there are things in our learners' lives that we cannot help them with and it's also not our job.

We as educators should support our learners' basic needs by acknowledging them as feeling and thinking human beings, but we are not their therapists. We are also allowed to say if the situation becomes uncomfortable for us.

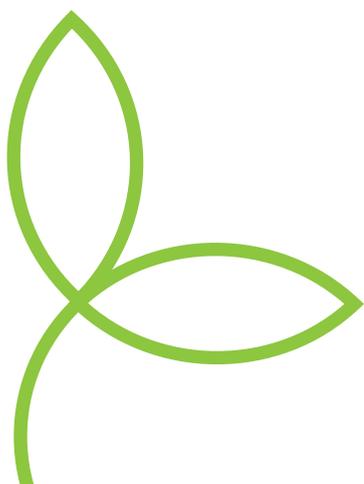
## **8. What about the environmental regulations in terms of these basic needs? There has been a lot of improvements on environmental work in general and we cannot imagine having discussions with everyone on the need of those regulations.**

Of course we need rules and structures in our society. With some regulations people probably don't even notice that they are in place (like regulating harmful substances in products). We also need to realise that debating on every rule and regulation can go against the need for competence, as people are not experts in these fields. It's more about having the meaning of environmental laws and rules in general internalised for people. Of course for those who the regulation or law impacts directly, they should be explained and with a possibility to ask additional questions, which in turn will be given to them at their competence level.

**9. The learning motivation theory says that competitions are part of the trash motivation. But competitions are used quite a lot in environmental education activities, for example between schools, as it gets students involved. Does this mean we shouldn't do competitions? It's quite hard to stop doing them...**

Competitions are tricky in the sense that yes, it's easy to get people to participate, if you offer them prizes or fame. But then that will be the essence of their motivation, not the topic you want them to know or care about. They will have much less (if any) attentional capacity for the more complex questions and issues of the topic that might need deep thinking in order to internalize the behavior for a longer time. The enjoyment of the prize or fame goes away fast. In human psychology, once the competition element is added, that will prevail over other motivations. There's a real life story of competition for kids who would collect the most aluminum tea candle holders (because collecting them separately is the easiest way to send them to recycling), which ended up with kids asking their parents to buy more and more tea candles, just so they could win the competition. In this case, therefore, the initial purpose was hindered.

Competition is suitable, if there are skillful people wanting to get better at their skill level and test themselves, because then it's connected to their need for competence. But in other cases, competition works against the need for autonomy, because it's a form of control. So in the end the question is how much do we actually want long term change or short term excitement. If it's the first, then yes, we should stop doing competitions.



## Ending questions for the reader to reflect upon:

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- What parts in this chapter were most confusing or difficult for you to understand? Why do you think it was so?
- If and where have you noticed your basic needs being supported or suppressed?
- If and where have you noticed supporting or suppressing others' basic needs?
- What do you think are the best ways to get better at supporting others' basic needs?
- What do you want to take with you from this chapter?
- If and what next steps do you want to take in your work regarding this topic?
- What do you want to know more about?