

# The Path Before You

By Leanne Hoagland-Smith, M.S.

**H**ave you ever considered each day starts a new path filled with new opportunities? What would happen if you embraced that forward thinking mindset regarding not only each day, but each week, each month, and each year?

During the end and beginning of every year, many people envision new paths for their professional and personal lives. These envisioned paths are also known as resolutions or goals. Unfortunately, these new envisioned paths are quickly abandoned, according to most research, within six weeks because the thought of walking a new path is not supposed by existing knowledge, attitudes, skills, and habits.

So what needs to change inside each of us to maintain that momentum in walking a new path or staying on an already predetermined path?

Possibly, the answer to this question lies within a theory about human motivation. I read about this theory years ago when earning my Masters of Science. At that time, learning was like drinking from the fire hydrant. I remembered the theory enough to be tested on it, and then it fell into the back recesses of my long term memory.

Recently, that theory of Self Determination resurfaced when I was rereading *Drive* by Daniel Pink. Sometimes where we are in our own professional development and our search for understanding has a way of bringing certain known concepts to the forefront of our minds. We make mental connections that we had not made in the past.

The Theory of Self Determination was proposed by Edward L. Deci and Richard M. Ryan in the 1980s. They suggested that human beings have innate psychological motivational needs. These needs can be grouped into three basic areas:

- Mastery
- Autonomy
- Purpose (Relatedness)

When we link this theory to walking a new path or maintaining walking an existing path, we have a better understanding of how to stay motivated. This is essential, for lack of motivation is why people do not stay the course.

The word resolution comes from the verb *resolute*, which is the past participle of the Latin verb *resolvere*. Therefore, resolute means to be determined or absolute.

What weakens our resolution is our own internal motivation. We become embroiled in other aspects of our lives. We are motivated to maintain the status quo because change is not easy. Actually, our brains work against us because they are hot-wired to reserve energy.

Mastery allows us to strengthen the status quo while providing new opportunities to expand it. Human beings have an innate drive to be better. This is evident with today's technology moving at what seems like the speed of light.

I read we experience more change in one year than our grandparents experienced in a lifetime. Just look at your smart phone. Each version becomes faster and has more capabilities.

Now travel back in time just 10 years ago and flip phones were quite popular. If we travel back 20 years, the phones were much bigger, and going back 30 years, we had bag phones. Our grandparents had rotary phones for most of their lives.

The question to be asked is "How will this path strengthen or expand my mastery?"

Walking a particular path is a matter of choice, and this is the definition of autonomy within the Self Determination Theory. Here is where we must be completely honest with ourselves, which is quite difficult.

My father was diagnosed with lung cancer in his mid 60s. He underwent removal of one-third of his left lower lung. As soon as he received the diagnosis, he stopped smoking. My father had been smoking since he was 15 years old. He did this without any medical help. He decided to act with choice.

Several years ago, a business colleague and close friend visited the doctor and realized he needed to change his lifestyle. Again, my friend acted with choice.

For the last 25 years, I have been married to a very smart man. My husband has always acted with choice. He has said countless times,

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**We are motivated to maintain the status quo because change is not easy. Actually, our brains work against us because they are hot-wired to reserve energy for potential fight or flight moments.**

"The question is not do I know it, but do I want to do it?"

Within the Self Determination Theory, autonomy, acting with choice, is the strongest of the internal psychological needs or drivers. If we as individuals truly do not want to change, we won't change. Of course, we can lay a plethora of excuses as to why we can't change or walk the

new path. These excuses become like our favorite baby blanket that wraps us up and keeps us warm in memories of the past and turn into excuses for the present.

Finally, there is this idea of purpose or relatedness. How do we relate to others and care for others? Is our purpose for walking the path about us or about others?

When working with clients, the second exercise we engage in is writing a purpose statement or what I call understanding "why we are here at this moment in time?" What falls out from this activity is always some connection to others with words such as help or support.

Human beings are social creatures. Although there are always exceptions, we live in communities. We work together, and we play together.

Social media is one of the best examples of play. Just look around any public place; almost everyone is on their smart devices, talking and interacting with others. In years gone by, barn raisings and church gatherings within agricultural communities reflected that intrinsic motivation of relatedness.

One of my favorite cable programs is *Alaska, The Last Frontier*. This is a reality TV show about what people do to eke out livelihoods homesteading in Alaska. Throughout the various episodes, the viewers hear about how these homesteaders help each other out even when they have other tasks or paths to be completed during the very short summer months.

The theory of self-determination can support us as we walk a new path or continue walking a difficult path. We may wish to ask ourselves three questions as we start mapping our paths to set our resolutions or plan our goals.

1. How will this new path further develop my mastery of \_\_\_\_\_ (fill in the blank)?
2. How will this new path provide a way for me to act with choice (autonomy)?
3. How will this new path deepen my purpose as it relates to others?

By answering these questions, we have strengthened our own internal motivation. When we understand how to maintain our intrinsic motivation, we now have a fighting chance to stay on that new path or continue along an existing one.

Walking a new path is not easy, especially when it is one we have attempted to walk before and stopped. Yet there had to be some reason for wanting to walk that path. Possibly, we had some internal desire that had not fully manifested itself. Although the desire could have been external, such as, "Everyone else is doing it," whatever the motivating factor, we do have free will. We can exercise that free will to move forward, stay where we are, or, worse yet, retreat to our comfort zone. The choice is ours and ours alone.

As in any aspect of life, crystal clear awareness is the first step to walking any path. As you probably are aware, you have the opportunity to not let those new resolutions or goals drop to the wayside of your path. You can do it, provided you are truly motivated to make that resolution or goal a reality.

Remember that each step you take as you walk that path brings you one step closer to what you want. Just make sure you really want what you want and are absolutely resolute in making it so. **N**

*Leanne Hoagland-Smith is THE People and Process Problem Solver. As a thought leader who challenges the status quo, her thousands of articles and active social media presence earned Leanne the position of judge for the 1st 2015 North American Women in Sales Awards. Follow her on Twitter @CoachLee.*