



Please, **Go Practice**

Read this story aloud or make copies for your group or team members.

99-Word Story

When we tell our daughter it's time to practice the clarinet, she reluctantly makes several trips to bring her music, instrument, music stand, and chair all the way down from her room to the living room where her mother and I are sitting. I couldn't figure out this behavior. Why not practice in her room?

When I read the work of psychologist Edward Deci I finally got it. Who wants to be all alone while doing something they didn't choose and can't do well? The three keys to intrinsic motivation had been missing: relationships, autonomy, competence!

You can build upon the theme of this 99-Word Story by using some of the following questions for your own reflection or to spark a discussion within your team or organization.

Discussion Questions

- Describe a time you learned a difficult skill. Who helped you and how did you eventually become successful?
- How does the relationship between teacher and student impact the learning process?
- Why is autonomy, or the opportunity to make choices, important for learning?
- How would you respond to someone who says, "I'll never become competent in this task. I don't even have enough skill to begin learning!"?

There are many ways to understand this story as the discussion questions suggest. If you or your group would like to compare or contrast your interpretation with an outside viewpoint, consider this analysis.

Interpretation

Whether playing the clarinet, mastering tennis, coding a computer, or assessing a financial spreadsheet, learning any

new skill is difficult for many reasons. It's not just the knowledge base that must be established. There is muscle memory to engrain, procedures and best practices to navigate, and the ability to respond to contextual situations in real time. No wonder it takes a reported 10,000 hours of practice to master a skill!

What does it take to begin that long road toward mastery?

Intrinsic motivation is critical. No amount of carrots and sticks will compel a young person to become the next star jazz clarinetist or Wimbledon champion. There must be an inner drive, an intrinsic satisfaction.

[Matt Richter](#), leadership consultant and motivation specialist with the Thiagi Group, once told me that competence was probably the most critical intrinsic motivator. He explained that it's difficult to take the second step – and any future steps – in a learning process if one hasn't experienced at least a smidgen of competence in one's first step.

Somehow, the individual must receive enough feedback about their performance to feel good about what they have done. Perhaps that takes the form of a sense of delight in hearing the notes they played. Perhaps they are surprised at their ability to hit the ball over the net and in bounds. Maybe their instructor shared an insightful observation about their technique. Maybe a coach compared their serve to that of a star player.

Because much of this sense of competence is internal, we may never know exactly what's going on for the learner. But that makes the role of the teacher, trainer, or coach that much more critical. The instructor must establish a positive *relationship* with the learner. The two need to care about each other, at least a bit, but, more importantly, they need to trust one another. The instructor trusts that their student takes the lessons seriously. The student trusts that the instructor wants them to succeed.

I believe this trust can be established by instructors when they emphasize the other two intrinsic motivators.

When instructors focus on *autonomy* by offering choices about a lesson, students gain a modicum of control in an uncertain situation. Certainly there are best practices about how to teach anything. We all live with constraints but there also are always alternatives about when, how, where, or how long a lesson is taught. Perhaps the student can make some of those choices.

When instructors focus on *competence* by offering feedback that is specific, and identifies a positive outcome, students gain insight about what they can improve. Certainly students will take actions that are wrong and must be corrected to avoid creating bad habits or even injuring themselves. But when instructors help students identify and augment what they are doing well, students see their own progress. They become motivated to discover and improve their weak points later.

You may be an instructor, team leader, or parent but as long as you are interested in the development of other people, as long as you want to see them fulfill their potential for productivity, you can take advantage of the intrinsic motivators – relationships, autonomy, and competence – to boost their skill level.

But don't wait for them to drag all their paraphernalia into your "living space". Build trust, offer choices, give meaningful feedback.

For More Information:

Why We Do What We Do by Richard Deci and Richard Flaste, G.P. Putnam's Sons, © 1995, ISBN 0-339-14047-6.

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Reprinted from *99's on the 9th*

A newsletter of 99-Word Stories available on the 9th of every month. See more at www.99-Words.com.

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