Nonfiction review: 'Drive'

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We all know, or think we know, that human beings respond to carrots and sticks. And that the best way to increase productivity and encourage excellence is to provide tangible incentives. Like money, a title and a corner office. Or the threat of a pink slip.

These assumptions are wrong, says freelance writer Daniel H. Pink. Psychologists and behavioral economists now believe, he points out, that "if-then" rewards are effective "in only a surprisingly narrow band of circumstances." The secret to high performance in post-industrial workplaces that demand "flexible problem solving, inventiveness, and conceptual understanding," he argues, involves satisfying our deep-seated desire for autonomy, purpose and mastery.

In "Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us," Pink summarizes, repeats and repackages these ideas. Like drugs, he demonstrates, "extrinsic" motivators often provide a pleasing jolt that soon gives way to a need for larger and more frequent doses. Carrots and sticks also tend to narrow our focus, put a premium on short-term results and encourage unethical behavior. By contrast, Wikipedia, the online encyclopedia assembled by volunteers, who are managed by no one, has more than 13 million remarkably accurate articles in 260 languages, because self-directed activity is pleasant and fulfilling. "If you need me to motivate you," a business executive told the author, "I probably don't want to hire you."

Except for its review of the findings of social scientists, alas, "Drive" runs on hot air. Pink exaggerates businesses' resistance to change, and then, in an effort to pull them "into the bright world of Motivation 3.0," he recycles familiar initiatives, like Google's invitation to employees to devote 20 percent of their time at work to any project they choose. In prescribing solutions, Pink doesn't go beyond glib generalizations. Businesses, he proclaims, should ensure fairness in compensation packages. They should involve employees in goal-setting. Each worker should take a 365-day sabbatical every seven years.

Some of his proposals are downright goofy. Pink's "exercises to get you on the right track" include: posing a "single, often inscrutable" question on a card, expressing your principal priority in one sentence and creating your own motivation poster. He wants educators to offer students control over what they learn, how and when to do their work, and an option to issue their own report cards.

In the 21st century, knowledgeable workers will, to a great extent, define their own tasks. But our new-age problems aren't best addressed with New Age nostrums.

Glenn C. Altschuler is the Thomas and Dorothy Litwin Professor of American Studies at Cornell University.

Reading: Pink discusses "Drive" at 7:30 p.m. Sunday, Jan. 17, at Powell's City of Books, 1005 W. Burnside St.

Glenn C. Altschuler

DRIVE Daniel H. Pink  Riverhead Books $26.95, 242 pages