Team Pulse by CoastZone — The Deep Dive

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The motivation tax: how managers quietly spend their best people's engagement

Companion read to the podcast. Written for consultants working in a Danish/Nordic context. A single-topic deep dive — one fresh 2026 anchor plus the foundational evidence, honestly labeled (not breaking news). Every claim links to its source so you can dig in.

The big picture

Ask any leadership team what they want more of and "motivated employees" is near the top of the list. Ask them how they *spend* the motivation they already have, and you get silence. That is today's topic — because new research from spring 2026 shows that managers systematically tax their most intrinsically motivated people with the extra work nobody planned for, under the naive assumption that they'll enjoy it. Meanwhile, the science of what motivation actually runs on — self-determination theory — just received a fresh 192-study confirmation. And Denmark happens to have one of the sharpest thinkers on why motivation is never one-size-fits-all: Helle Hedegaard Hein. Three facets, one thread: motivation is not a free resource, and the way you spend it decides whether you keep it.

This deliberately picks up threads from earlier episodes — recognition (June 26) covered how to *celebrate* work, feedback (June 29) how to *steer* it. Today is about the engine underneath both: where motivation comes from, and how leaders unknowingly drain it.

Facet 1 — What's moving: the motivation tax

The finding. In *Are You Overburdening Your Most Engaged Employees?* (HBR, March 27, 2026), **Sangah Bae** (Northeastern University) and **Kaitlin Woolley** (Cornell) report research involving **more than 4,300 managers and employees**, published in Organization Science. The pattern: when unexpected work lands, managers hand it to the employee they perceive as most *intrinsically* motivated — the one who seems to find the work meaningful and fun.

The evidence. In one study, managers with two direct reports were asked to assign tasks outside the job description — filing paperwork, planning an office party, serving on a committee. **55% assigned them to the employee they saw as more intrinsically motivated**, even after accounting for age, gender, work experience, and performance. In a lab study (detailed by Northeastern Global News), teams of three competed on data-entry tasks with a $5 bonus for the best performer. When managers had to assign a disruptive extra task, **74% gave it to the more motivated employee — knowing it would hurt their shot at the bonus.** Only about 30% of those motivated employees ended up winning it.

The mechanism. The authors call it **"motive oversimplification"**: the assumption that someone who loves their core work will also love the add-ons, and that enjoyment will protect them from burnout. It doesn't. Managers estimated the extra work would cost just **0.2 points of job satisfaction; the motivated employees themselves reported a full one-point drop** — five times worse than the boss believed. As Bae puts it: the go-to person "who seems to be engaged and loving their work, might actually be quietly being burned out."

The fixes the researchers propose. Keep a running tally of who gets the extra assignments; use dashboards or task systems that flag overload; and train managers on motivational misperceptions. None of it is sophisticated — the point is making the invisible allocation visible.

The Danish angle. Danish workplaces run on trust and low hierarchy, which makes the tax *easier* to levy: the motivated employee says yes because the culture prizes helpfulness, and the manager asks because asking is frictionless. High trust without allocation discipline just means the tax is collected politely.

What to do Monday. Open a simple log of extra assignments — who, what, when. Distribute the next unexpected task by the log, not by who won't say no.

Facet 2 — The evidence: three needs, and rewards that backfire

The foundation. Motivation science's most robust framework is **self-determination theory (SDT)**, developed by Edward Deci and Richard Ryan. Intrinsic motivation grows when three basic psychological needs are met: **autonomy** (real say over one's work), **competence** (mastery and growth), and **relatedness** (belonging). Their review *Self-Determination Theory in Work Organizations: The State of a Science* (Deci, Olafsen & Ryan) summarizes decades of workplace findings: autonomous motivation predicts performance, satisfaction and wellbeing; controlled motivation — pressure, surveillance, carrot-and-stick — predicts strain.

The fresh confirmation. A meta-analysis in *Stress and Health* (2026) by Martin Hagger and colleagues, spanning **192 studies**, confirms the full SDT model: perceived **need support from workplace leaders** flows through satisfaction of the three needs into autonomous motivation, engagement and job satisfaction — while **need frustration and controlled motivation track with burnout and turnover**. The leader's behavior is the upstream variable; engagement is the downstream readout.

The classic warning. The field's most famous result still stings: Deci, Koestner & Ryan's meta-analysis of 128 experiments (*Psychological Bulletin*, 1999) found that **expected, tangible rewards undermine the intrinsic motivation they are meant to boost** — engagement-contingent, completion-contingent and performance-contingent rewards all significantly reduced free-choice motivation (effect sizes −0.40, −0.36 and −0.28). The encouraging flip side: **positive feedback *enhanced* intrinsic motivation.** The cheapest tool works; the expensive one backfires.

Why this connects to Facet 1. The motivation tax is controlled motivation in disguise: the motivated employee's autonomy shrinks (extra tasks arrive unchosen), competence stalls (the add-ons are paperwork, not craft), and relatedness sours (fairness erodes when the tally is invisible). The manager isn't spending a surplus — they're dismantling the engine.

What to do Monday. Audit your current motivation initiatives against the three needs: does each one add autonomy, mastery, or belonging? If it only adds control or cash, expect short-term activity and long-term drain.

Facet 3 — The Danish angle: Hein's archetypes, or why motivation is plural

The researcher. Helle Hedegaard Hein (PhD, formerly Copenhagen Business School) spent years doing field studies among highly specialized employees — most famously at the Royal Danish Theatre — and built a motivation theory around **four archetypes**: the **primadonna** (driven by a calling, by making a difference for something greater than themselves), the **performance-tripper** (driven by achievement — the kick or the recognition), the **pragmatist** (driven by work-life balance), and the **wage-earner** (driven by what the job funds outside work).

The point. In *Primadonnaledelse*, "primadonna" is not an insult — it names the employee with the *strongest* engagement, who treats work as a calling and willingly sacrifices for it. Hein's twin insight: **there is no single motivation button** — the lever that lights up one archetype switches off another (the bonus that delights the pragmatist can insult the primadonna, who wanted to be heard on professional substance); and the primadonna is precisely the person most vulnerable when leadership treats a calling as spare capacity.

The loop back to Facet 1. Bae and Woolley's overloaded "go-to person" and Hein's primadonna are the same employee seen from two continents. Both bodies of work end at the same warning: the people who care most are the easiest to tax and the costliest to lose.

What to do Monday. Quietly map your team against the four archetypes: who is driven by calling, achievement, balance, or pay? Differentiate your levers accordingly — and be especially careful not to make the primadonna's engagement the team's shock absorber.

Books & tools to watch

- **Sangah Bae & Kaitlin Woolley** — the HBR article and the underlying Organization Science paper; their proposed fix (a visible tally of extra assignments) is directly implementable in any task system.
- **Hagger et al., *Stress and Health* (2026)** — the 192-study meta-analysis is the citation to bring when a client asks "is this self-determination stuff actually evidence-based?"
- **Helle Hedegaard Hein** — *Primadonnaledelse* and *Når talent forpligter* (overview at hellehein.dk); the short introduction PDF is a free client-ready primer in Danish.

The three things to remember

1. **Your most motivated employee is your biggest burnout risk** — not despite their motivation, but because of how you spend it. Allocate extra work by a visible tally, not by enthusiasm.
2. **Motivation isn't something you install — it's three needs you either feed or starve:** autonomy, competence, relatedness. Control and cash-only levers starve them; positive feedback feeds them for free.
3. **Motivation is plural.** The lever that lights one archetype switches off another — lead the archetype, not the average.

Who on your team is "the one who always says yes" — and when did you last check what it costs them?

Sources & dig deeper

International research & media - Harvard Business Review — Bae & Woolley, Are You Overburdening Your Most Engaged Employees? (March 27, 2026) - Organization Science — the underlying study - Northeastern Global News — Motivated employees get tasked with more work, study finds (March 18, 2026) - Hagger et al. — Self-Determination Theory and Workplace Outcomes: A Meta-Analysis, *Stress and Health* (2026) - Deci, Olafsen & Ryan — Self-Determination Theory in Work Organizations: The State of a Science - Deci, Koestner & Ryan — A Meta-Analytic Review of Experiments Examining the Effects of Extrinsic Rewards on Intrinsic Motivation, *Psychological Bulletin* (1999)

Danish sources & voices - Helle Hedegaard Hein — hellehein.dk; Primadonnaledelse — en kort introduktion - Lederweb / Væksthus for Ledelse — Sådan forløser du de fire arketypers talent