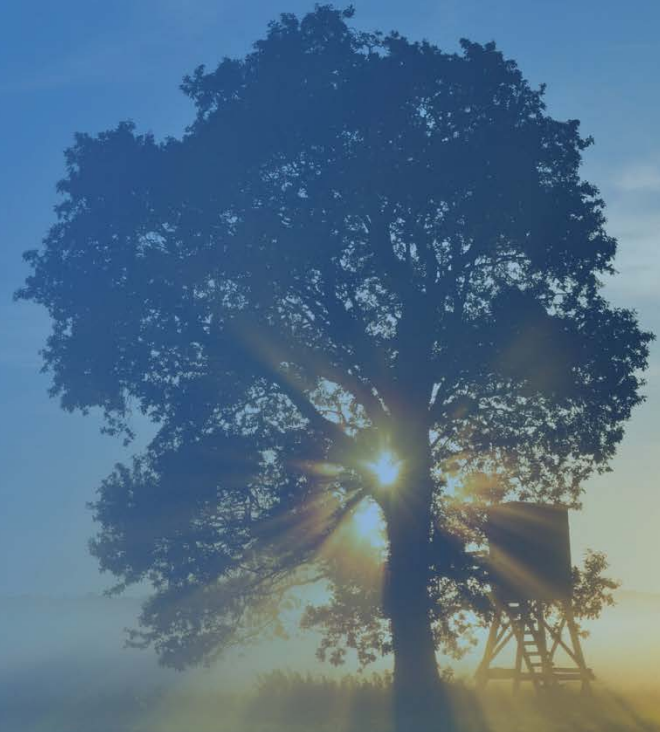# No Free Lunches: Debunking Myths on Feeling Valued at Work

Lauri Alpern, PhD

BUSINESS PSYCHOLOGIST AND
PRESIDENT, OPEN DOOR ADVISORS

Pop quiz: as a leader, what is the best way to show your team members you value them?

   A. **Food truck Fridays.**

   B. **Company backpacks.**

   C. **Bring your dog to work day.**

   D. **A-C are fun, but what employees really need to feel valued at work is self-determination.**

If you're smiling because options A-C sound all too familiar, but you know D is the right answer, we're on the same page.

But what is self-determination, exactly, and why does it matter?

What does *self-determination theory* have to do with people feeling valued at work?

If the word "theory" just made your eyes glaze over– bear with me. Understanding self-determination theory will make you a better leader.

Self-determination theory shows you how to value people at work.

It feels good to be valued.

People who are valued at work are more positive, engaged, and motivated. Having ownership over their work lives, they are less stressed and more creative. These facts are supported by self-determination theory.

Self-determination theory says that if people are *autonomous, competent,* and *connected* at work, they are more likely to be motivated, engaged, and to experience well-being. This can lead to feeling valued at work. Once individuals feel valued, their organizations become more effective change-makers.

Researchers Richard Ryan and Edward Deci coined three elements of self-determination theory. For this article, I focus on the first two: autonomy and competence.

The first key to showing value: Advance autonomy.

What is autonomy?

Autonomy at work signifies our ability to have agency over our work lives. People feel autonomous when they are:
- Allowed and encouraged to make important decisions
- Trusted to do their jobs
- Afforded guidance without control

Why does autonomy matter?

Autonomy creates opportunities for self-direction, which enhances intrinsic motivation and confidence.

It's simple– when you know what to do, and you can do it well, you feel good about yourself! Satisfied and motivated, your good work multiplies.

How to diminish your employees' autonomy

Micromanage them. Micromanagement is an autonomy killer. It's a vicious cycle that implies:
- the employee is not trustworthy enough to act independently
- the leader believes the employee is incapable of doing the job
- the employee is disposable

There's no feeling valued when you feel disposable. In fact, it's the antithesis of feeling valued.

Make a habit of second-guessing them. When employees feel the weight of responsibility but are second-guessed, criticized, or redirected, autonomy takes a nosedive. Their sense of control over their contributions at work plummets.

Five ways to advance your employees' autonomy

1. **Start with yourself.** Hold yourself accountable for showing value. As a leader at any level, you can promote autonomy in your own work by implementing the following.

2. **Hold regular "sync-ups."** It may seem contradictory, but to increase our team members' autonomy, we need to check in with them frequently. During the sync-up, help your employee see the connections between their current assignments and the organization's mission. Practice active listening around shared priorities, responsibilities, and expectations. Show you value your team member's input and ideas. This exchange will build trust, which nurtures autonomy. Regular check-ins routinize open communication, and over time, the free exchange of ideas at work becomes the norm, not the exception.

3. **Pause and ask yourself: can I ask my team member's opinion on this?** Next time you're beginning a new project, prioritizing tasks, or solving a problem, ask your employee how they would approach it. Do this before giving directives. Throughout the project, offer guidance and support, but avoid micromanagement. This is empowerment in action.

4. **Trust your employees by letting them do things their own way.** Does your organization use stale, unnecessarily rigid, or bureaucratic processes? Question them. If you suspect they're spoiling morale and dragging your team members down, they probably are. The opposite of control is trust. Trust your employees to do their work in their own way– not "because that's how it's always been done." As long as their methods align with organizational goals, they'll do better work. If the methods are unsuccessful, use your culture of open communication to course correct and move on.

5. **Offer flexible work arrangements.** In many industries, flexible work is here to stay. Are remote work or flex hours an option for your employees? If so, unlock the potential! Flexing unleashes motivation, reverses burnout, and ignites work-life balance. Picture a workplace– virtual, hybrid, or any form that makes sense -- that fosters well-being and fulfillment, attracting and retaining top talent. How much would this enrich each team member and contribute to long-term success?

The second key to showing value: Cultivate competence.

What is competence?

Take a moment to think about the last time you said "I've got this!" at work. How did you feel?

At that moment, most people describe feeling competent. Competence is work know-how– the ability to apply your expertise, skill and experience.

Why does competence matter?

When you feel competent, you know your talents, abilities, skills, or gifts are important. You have what it takes to fulfill the promise of your role. You joined the organization to achieve a purpose, and you're doing it!

How to diminish competence

Use language that is soul-crushing.
Yes, people still say unthinkable things to each other at work, and it is never okay. Shouting, using combative words, making negative statements related to identity or appearance -- or any form of unwelcome contact– does more than corrode competency. It destroys aspiration, decreases productivity, and can potentially lead to legal action.

Quash their self-worth.
Self-worth is a cornerstone of competency. Put-downs, belittling, comparing, and criticism that gets personal damage self-worth and impair an individual's ability to do their job well. No one can do any work, let alone their best work, in a dysfunctional environment.

Negativity at work takes a tremendous toll on employee health. Stress and anxiety show up as headaches, stomachaches, missed days, and more. Rather than focusing on work, team members are forced to focus on how to cope.

Three ways to boost your employees' competency

1. **Budget for lifelong learning at work**— and make sure the funds get spent! Learning via training programs, workshops, or conferences enriches our minds and our souls. The continuous intellectual growth of your team members will translate into exciting new skills, a commitment to their own advancement, and improved self-confidence. And these factors— even if the employee moves on— will contribute to your company's success.

2. **Use organizational strategy**– it's the gift that keeps on giving! Organizational strategy– it's not just for mission's sake. When people clearly understand their role in the company's plans, directions, and future, their competency skyrockets. Enable your employees to participate in developing your organization's strategy. They are there to actualize it. It

should come as no surprise that they do their best work when they have a say in its direction and content.

Together, develop clear, specific, and measurable goals that align with the objectives of the organization. This clarity enables team members to understand how their contributions contribute to the bigger picture of the organization's success and impact.

Bonus tip: Address organizational strategy year-round. When you provide ongoing updates on the organization's progress, you keep each person's efforts top-of-mind.

3. **Money matters. Be generous.** Fairly compensate employees for their work and provide competitive benefits packages. Stretch if you need to (regardless of size, industry, or sector). Regularly review salaries to stay aligned with industry standards, but attempt to go beyond. Recognize, incentivize, and celebrate work that meets and exceeds strategic milestones.

The big picture: a call for evolution

As humans, we have a basic psychological need to feel valued. We can all agree it's important to feel important. In our interpersonal relationships– with families, friends, and communities– we need to know our loved ones think we're indispensable. That we simply cannot be replaced.

If feeling valued is so important to humans in their personal lives, it cannot be ignored in their work lives.

It bears repeating: increasing value starts with a laser-focus on the individual. No matter the mission of your organization, it cannot thrive if people are undervalued. Above all else, we must learn how to show value at work in the meaningful ways outlined above. This is the key to the evolution of our workplaces.

It's also a revolutionary act. Taking this step – assigning importance to human value– is bucking decades of corporate and organizational behavior that assigns values not to individuals, but to corporate and organizational self-interest and competition, just to start.

This article is a call to action: People's needs at work have evolved and continue to evolve. Let's express value in how we work, manage, and lead. Only then can our organizations realize their full potential, and make the positive changes in the world they are uniquely positioned to make.

If you'd like to learn more about how to foster a workplace that soars, please check us out at opendooradvisorsinc.com