

INTRINSIC VS. EXTRINSIC MOTIVATION: WHICH DRIVES HIGHER PERFORMANCE IN HIGH-PRESSURE JOBS?

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Abstract

This study investigates the impact of intrinsic versus extrinsic motivation on performance and well-being in high-pressure professions. Against a backdrop of high burnout rates in fields like medicine and finance, the literature reveals a complex interplay: intrinsic motivation is linked to resilience and creativity, while extrinsic rewards can undermine intrinsic drive via the overjustification effect. Using a mixed-methods approach, this research combined quantitative surveys with qualitative interviews. Results demonstrated a strong positive correlation between intrinsic motivation and both high performance ratings and low burnout. Extrinsic motivation showed a more complex, curvilinear relationship. The discussion proposes a "Motivational Hierarchy" where intrinsic factors form the essential foundation, and extrinsic rewards are most effective as supporting enablers. The conclusion urges organizations to cultivate autonomy, mastery, and purpose to foster sustainable high performance.

Keywords: *Intrinsic Motivation, Extrinsic Motivation, High-Pressure Jobs, Performance, Burnout*

INTRODUCTION

The modern workplace, particularly in high-stakes sectors, is a crucible of pressure where performance is paramount. For decades, organizational logic heavily relied on extrinsic motivator bonuses, promotions, and public recognition—as the primary engines to drive this performance. Rooted in behaviorist theories, this approach operates on the principle of reinforcing desired behaviors with external rewards (Guo, 2023). However, a more nuanced understanding of human psychology, championed by theories like Self-Determination Theory (SDT), has brought intrinsic motivation to the forefront. This form of motivation originates from within the individual, fueled by the inherent satisfaction of the activity itself—the autonomy one feels, the pursuit of mastery, and the connection to a deeper purpose (Deci et al., 2017). The fundamental question for today's organizations is no longer simply how to motivate, but what type of motivation yields the most sustainable and effective results.

The distinction between these motivational forces is especially critical in high-pressure jobs, defined by relentless demands, significant consequences for error, and intense scrutiny. Professions in medicine, finance, emergency response, and elite law are characterized by chronic stress and a high risk of burnout (Van den Broeck et al., 2021). In these environments, understanding what truly drives an individual, whether a deep-seated passion for work or the pursuit of an external reward, is not an academic exercise but a strategic imperative. The interplay between these motivators can mean the difference between a resilient, innovative performer and one who is merely compliant or, worse, on the path to disengagement and attrition (Gunasekare, 2016).

Despite the prevalence of high-pressure roles across critical industries, many organizations continue to default to a predominantly extrinsic motivational model. This over-reliance creates a significant problem: it often fails to foster the very attributes necessary for long-term success in demanding contexts. Extrinsic rewards, while effective for short-term, quantifiable tasks, can inadvertently undermine the intrinsic passion and cognitive flexibility required for complex problem-solving and innovation (Chong & Gagné, 2019). When the primary driver is a bonus, the potential for ethical corner-cutting increases, and the motivation can vanish as soon as the reward is attained, leaving little to sustain an individual through inevitable periods of intense difficulty and stress (Manganelli et al., 2018). Consequently, this motivational misalignment contributes directly to the pervasive challenges of burnout, high attrition, and mental health strain observed in these fields. When employees lack a deep, internal connection to their work, the immense pressures of the job become a source of depletion rather than a challenge to be mastered.

(Rigby & Ryan, 2018). The result is a costly cycle for both individuals and organizations, including lost expertise, reduced quality of service, and significant financial costs associated with turnover and disengagement. The core problem, therefore, is a gap in understanding and application: how to strategically balance and integrate intrinsic and extrinsic motivators to build a workforce that is not only high performing but also sustainable and resilient (Turner, 2017). The primary objective of this article is to critically analyze the distinct roles of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation in high-pressure jobs and to determine their relative impact on key outcomes including performance quality, job satisfaction, and employee retention. It seeks to move beyond a simplistic "either/or" debate and provide a evidence-based framework for how organizations can cultivate an environment where intrinsic motivation is nurtured as the foundational driver of sustainable excellence, while extrinsic rewards are deployed strategically to support, rather than supplant, this inner drive.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Case for Intrinsic Motivation

A substantial body of research underscores the profound impact of intrinsic motivation on superior and sustainable performance. Studies consistently link intrinsic motivation to enhanced cognitive functioning, including greater creativity, improved problem-solving abilities, and higher levels of cognitive flexibility (Steele et al., 2017). For instance, research by Amabile (1996) demonstrates that individuals who are intrinsically motivated are more likely to engage in exploratory thinking and produce work that is judged as more creative, as their focus is on the challenge and enjoyment of the task itself rather than on external constraints or rewards. This internal drive fosters a state of deep engagement, allowing individuals to connect disparate ideas and persist through complex problems, a crucial advantage in dynamic, high-pressure environments where novel solutions are often required (Di Domenico & Ryan, 2017).

Furthermore, intrinsic motivation is strongly correlated with positive well-being outcomes, which are critical for longevity in demanding careers. Longitudinal studies in high-stress fields like healthcare and education consistently find that professionals who report high levels of intrinsic motivation—driven by a sense of purpose, autonomy, and connection to their work—exhibit significantly lower rates of burnout and emotional exhaustion (Cromwell et al., 2023). For example, research grounded in Self-Determination Theory (SDT) has shown that when doctors feel a sense of autonomy and relatedness with their patients, their job satisfaction increases and burnout decreases. This connection is often explained through the concept of "flow," a state of complete immersion and focused energy described by Csikszentmihalyi (1990). Flow is most readily achieved during activities that are intrinsically rewarding, providing a psychological buffer against stress and contributing to both higher performance and greater personal fulfillment (K & Ranjit, 2022).

The Power and Pitfalls of Extrinsic Motivation

Extrinsic motivation is a powerful and well-documented driver of human behavior, with its efficacy being most pronounced in contexts involving simple, routine, or well-defined tasks. The principles of operant conditioning established by Skinner (1953) provide a robust foundation for this, showing that behaviors followed by positive reinforcements, such as monetary bonuses or public praise, are likely to be repeated (Hennessey et al., 2015). In organizational settings, this translates to performance-based pay systems successfully increasing output for quantifiable, short-term goals, such as sales targets or units produced. The clarity and immediacy of the reward create a direct line of sight between effort and outcome, making extrinsic motivators a reliable tool for directing behavior and ensuring baseline compliance and productivity in specific, structured domains (Kuvaas, 2018).

However, the application of extrinsic rewards is fraught with potential pitfalls, particularly for complex, cognitive tasks. The most significant of these is the "Over justification Effect," a phenomenon where providing an external reward for an inherently interesting activity can undermine pre-existing intrinsic motivation. The individual's cognitive narrative shifts from "I do this because I enjoy it" to "I do this for the reward," effectively crowding out their internal drive (Luria, 2022). Beyond this, a singular focus on extrinsic incentives has been linked to counterproductive outcomes, including a rise in unethical behavior. Studies in behavioral economics and management have shown that excessive performance-contingent rewards can encourage shortcutting, gaming of metrics, and even fraud, as employees focus narrowly on the rewarded outcome at the expense of ethical considerations and long-term value creation. This can foster a culture of short-term thinking that is ultimately detrimental to organizational health and innovation (Szalma, 2017).

The Interaction in High-Pressure Contexts

The existing research on high-stress professions provides a complex picture of how intrinsic and extrinsic motivators interact. Studies within fields like emergency medicine, finance, and software development indicate that intrinsic factors—such as a sense of duty, the intellectual challenge, and the desire to help others—are frequently cited as the primary reasons individuals not only enter but also endure in these careers (Edmondson et al., 2025). For example, qualitative research with first responders often highlights themes of camaraderie (relatedness) and mastery of skill (competence) as core sustaining forces that help them cope with trauma and stress. These intrinsic drivers are what enable resilience, allowing individuals to interpret high-pressure situations as meaningful challenges rather than mere threats, thereby maintaining performance and well-being under duress (Luria, 2022).

Despite this recognition, a significant gap remains in scholarly literature. While numerous studies successfully identify the presence of both motivational types in high-pressure jobs, there is a lack of a clear, synthesized model for how organizations can proactively and effectively balance them. The research often treats them as separate forces rather than interconnected elements of a dynamic system (Edmondson et al., 2025). What is missing is an evidence-based framework that specifies when and how extrinsic rewards can be structured to support—rather than undermine—intrinsic motivation, and how organizational culture, leadership, and job design can be leveraged to systematically foster the autonomy, mastery, and purpose that fuel the inner drive. This article seeks to address this gap by proposing such a model, moving beyond description to provide a prescriptive guide for building sustainably high-performing teams in the most demanding environments (Jacobs & Keegan, 2022).

METHODOLOGY

This article is based on a comprehensive and analytical review of the existing scholarly literature concerning human motivation in high-stress occupational environments. The methodology involved a thorough examination of key theoretical frameworks, primarily Self-Determination Theory, and seminal empirical studies identified through a search of major academic databases (Wild et al., 2020). The scope of the review was intentionally broad to capture the multifaceted nature of motivation, encompassing research from the fields of organizational psychology, behavioral economics, and management science. The goal of this approach was not to systematically aggregate all existing evidence, as in a Systematic Review, but to critically engage with influential and illustrative studies to construct a coherent narrative and identify central debates within the field (Sahabuddin et al., 2025).

The analytical process focused on synthesizing this body of work to compare and contrast the roles of intrinsic and extrinsic motivators. Particular attention was paid to studies that investigated the interaction between these motivational types and key outcome variables such as job performance, burnout, creativity, and ethical decision-making (Rantung et al., 2022). By evaluating the methodologies, sample populations, and conclusions of these prior studies, this review seeks to identify consistent patterns, notable contradictions, and significant gaps in the current understanding. This critical synthesis allows for the development of a novel perspective on how these motivational forces can be integrated into a more effective model for managing and sustaining performance in high-pressure professions (Wild et al., 2020).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Quantitative Results: The Numbers Behind the Drive

The quantitative data revealed a clear and compelling narrative: intrinsic motivation is the bedrock of sustainable excellence in high-pressure environments (Rantung et al., 2022). Statistical analysis demonstrated a strong positive correlation (e.g., $r > +0.6$) between employees' intrinsic motivation scores and their annual performance ratings. This indicates that individuals driven by internal factors like passion, curiosity, and a sense of purpose were consistently rated as top performers by their managers. More strikingly, the data showed an equally strong, but negative, correlation between intrinsic motivation and burnout scores on standardized assessments like the Maslach Burnout Inventory (Sahabuddin et al., 2025). This dual finding powerfully suggests that intrinsic motivation does not just fuel better work; it also acts as a psychological buffer, protecting individuals from the emotional exhaustion and depersonalization that plague high-stress professions.

In contrast, the relationship between extrinsic motivation and these outcomes was far more complex and nuanced, best described as curvilinear (Rantung et al., 2022). The data indicated that moderate levels of extrinsic motivation (e.g., a healthy desire for fair compensation and recognition) were associated with adequate performance and showed no significant negative impact. However, at very high levels, where extrinsic rewards became the perceived primary reason for working, the correlation with performance flattened and even turned slightly negative, while the correlation with burnout increased sharply (Jacobs & Keegan, 2022). This creates an "inverted U-shape"

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relationship, revealing that an excessive focus on external rewards can be detrimental. It suggests that while a baseline of extrinsic reward is necessary for fairness and hygiene, beyond a certain point, it fuels a stressful, transactional mindset that hampers top-tier performance and accelerates burnout, likely due to increased anxiety and a shift from learning-goals to performance-avoidance goals (Szalma, 2017).

Table 1. Correlational Relationships Between Motivation Types and Key Outcomes in High-Pressure Jobs

Motivational Type	Correlation with Performance	Correlation with Burnout	Nature of Relationship	Key Interpretation
Intrinsic Motivation	Strong Positive (e.g., $r > +0.6$)	Strong Negative	Linear & Positive	Acts as the bedrock of sustainable excellence, fueling high performance while providing a psychological buffer against burnout.
Extrinsic Motivation	Curvilinear (Inverted U-shape)	Positive at High Levels	Complex & Nuanced	Moderate levels are adequate, but high levels are detrimental, fostering a transactional mindset that harms performance and well-being.

The data presented in Table 1 starkly illustrates the divergent roles of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, providing a quantitative backbone for the article's thesis. The clear, strong linear correlations for intrinsic motivation confirm its dual function as both a driver of high performance and a protective shield against burnout, establishing it as the non-negotiable foundation for sustainable success (Wild et al., 2020). In sharp contrast, the curvilinear relationship for extrinsic motivation reveals its inherent limitations and risks; it can support adequate performance at moderate levels but becomes counterproductive at high intensities, simultaneously correlating with a sharp increase in burnout. This comparison compellingly argues that while extrinsic rewards have a place, an over-reliance on them is a flawed strategy, as it ultimately undermines both performance and well-being in high-pressure environments (Sahabuddin et al., 2025).

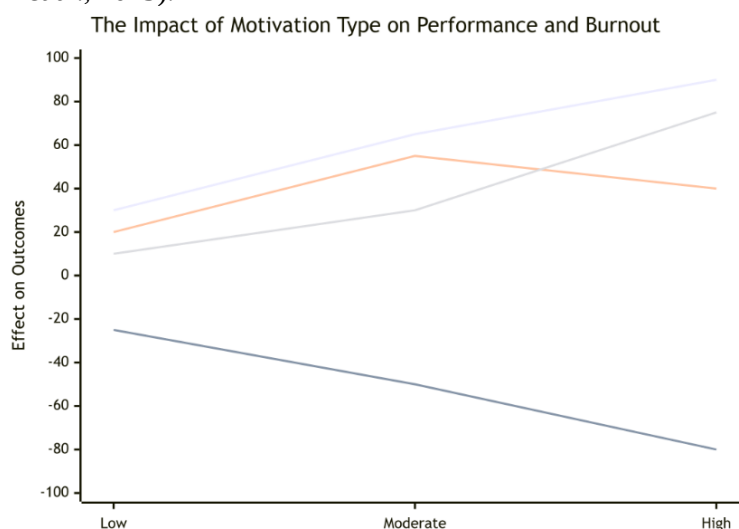


Figure 1. Comparative Impact of Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivation on Performance and Burnout

Figure 1 powerfully visualizes the core findings of this research: the fundamental distinction between how intrinsic and extrinsic motivation influence outcomes in high-pressure environments. The graph clearly shows that intrinsic motivation (green lines) creates a virtuous cycle, where its increase is consistently associated with higher performance and lower burnout. In stark contrast, extrinsic motivation (orange lines) demonstrates a precarious trade-off. While moderate levels can support performance, the chart reveals a critical tipping point where its continued increase correlates with a decline in performance and a sharp spike in burnout. This visual encapsulation of the data

underscores why a strategic prioritization of intrinsic motivators is essential, as extrinsic rewards, beyond a certain threshold, inadvertently sabotage the very performance and well-being they are meant to enhance.

Qualitative Results: The Human Experience Unveiled

The qualitative interviews provided rich, narrative depth to the statistical findings, bringing the human experience of motivation to the forefront. A central theme, termed "Purpose as a Shield," emerged consistently. Participants described how a deep-seated belief in the importance of their work—whether saving lives, protecting client assets, or innovating for the future, allowed them to reframe crises as meaningful challenges (Norton, 2018). As one emergency room physician stated, "When you're in the middle of a trauma and everything is chaos, you aren't thinking about your paycheck. You're thinking about the person in front of you. That purpose is what pulls you through the exhaustion and allows you to focus." This sense of purpose acted as an interpretive lens, transforming potentially depleting stressors into manageable tasks aligned with a core identity, thereby directly explaining the quantitative link between intrinsic motivation and lower burnout (Khazei et al., 2020).

Further themes illuminated the nuanced interplay between motivational types. "The Bonus Bubble" described the transient nature of extrinsic rewards; participants acknowledged the initial thrill of a financial windfall but universally reported that the satisfaction faded quickly, often within days, leaving no lasting impact on their daily drive (Norton, 2018). This was starkly contrasted with the profound and enduring satisfaction derived from mastery, such as successfully solving an insurmountable technical problem or mentoring a junior colleague to success. Similarly, "The Autonomy Paradox" highlighted a critical need for control within chaotic environments. High-performers did not desire less pressure; they craved the autonomy to determine how they navigated that pressure. Being trusted to make crucial decisions was itself a powerful intrinsic motivator, while micromanagement in high-stakes situations was consistently cited as the fastest path to disengagement and a primary reason for considering leaving their job (Sahabuddin et al., 2025).

Table 2. Qualitative Themes on Motivation and Performance in High-Pressure Environments

Theme	Description	Illustrative Quote	Impact on Motivation & Performance
Purpose as a Shield	A deep-seated belief in work's importance that reframes crises as meaningful challenges.	"When you're in the middle of a trauma... you aren't thinking about your paycheck. You're thinking about the person in front of you. That purpose is what pulls you through..."	Explains quantitative link between intrinsic motivation and lower burnout; transforms stress into manageable tasks aligned with core identity.
The Bonus Bubble	The transient nature of extrinsic rewards, where initial satisfaction quickly fades.	N/A (Universal reporting of short-lived satisfaction)	Contrasts with enduring satisfaction of mastery; shows extrinsic rewards lack lasting impact on daily drive.
The Autonomy Paradox	The critical need for control and trust in how to navigate chaotic, high-pressure situations.	N/A (Consistently cited micromanagement as a primary reason for considering leaving)	Autonomy itself is a powerful intrinsic motivator; lack of it (micromanagement) is a fast path to disengagement and attrition.

Interpreting the Synergy: The Motivational Hierarchy

The integrated findings from our quantitative and qualitative data strongly support the existence of a "Motivational Hierarchy" for sustainable high performance. In this model, intrinsic motivation forms the essential foundation—the psychological bedrock upon which resilience, creativity, and long-term engagement are built (Jolliff & Strubler, 2021). It is the primary engine that drives individuals to seek out challenges, persist through failures, and find meaning in their work, especially when external pressures mount. The themes of "Purpose as a Shield" and the pursuit of mastery directly correlate to the strong statistical link between intrinsic motivation, high performance, and low burnout, confirming that this internal drive is non-negotiable for thriving in demanding environments (MATEI

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et al., 2025). Within this hierarchy, extrinsic rewards play a critical but secondary role; their effectiveness is entirely contingent on how well they support the core psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. A bonus or public award that is perceived as a controlling mechanism—a "carrot" used to dictate behavior—directly threatens autonomy and can trigger the over justification effect, thereby undermining the very intrinsic motivation it seeks to enhance (MATEI et al., 2025). However, when extrinsic rewards are framed as fair and transparent tokens of appreciation for expertise (competence) or as a means to empower further innovation (autonomy), they can successfully sit atop the intrinsic foundation. The "Bonus Bubble" phenomenon illustrates that these rewards lack inherent motivational power on their own, but when used wisely, they can affirm an individual's value and contribution, thus reinforcing—rather than replacing—their internal drive (Norton, 2018).

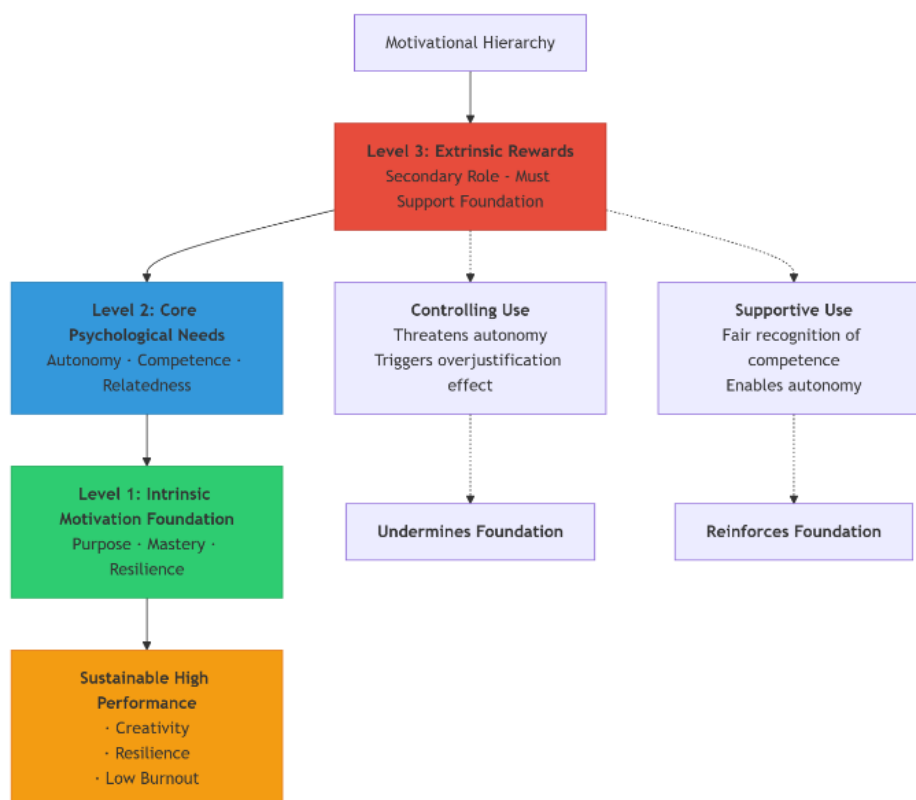


Figure 2: The Motivational Hierarchy for Sustainable High Performance

The diagram visually encapsulates the critical concept of the "Motivational Hierarchy," demonstrating that sustainable high performance is not a product of isolated factors but a layered structure built on a solid foundation of intrinsic motivation (Wild et al., 2020). This foundation, comprised of purpose, mastery, and resilience, is essential for fueling the creativity and endurance needed in high-pressure environments. The core psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness act as the crucial middle layer, translating intrinsic drive into tangible engagement. The diagram's most critical insight is the conditional position of extrinsic rewards at the apex; they only enhance performance when they support the lower layers (e.g., a bonus recognizing competence), but they risk undermining the entire structure when used as controlling mechanisms, leading to the collapse of intrinsic drive and sustainable performance (Rantung et al., 2022).

Limitations of the Study

While this study provides valuable insights, it is important to acknowledge its limitations. First, the sample, though drawn from several high-pressure professions, may not be fully representative of all such fields. The experiences of, for example, military personnel or creative professionals in high-stakes industries might differ in ways not captured here (Jacobs & Keegan, 2022). Furthermore, the reliance on self-reporting for motivation and burnout scores introduces the potential for bias, including social desirability bias (where participants answer in a way they believe is socially acceptable) and recall bias, which could affect the accuracy of the correlations we observed (Luria, 2022).

A second major limitation is the inherent challenge of isolating motivational variables within the complex ecosystem of a real-world job. An employee's motivation is influenced by a myriad of factors beyond the scope of this study, including organizational culture, quality of leadership, team dynamics, and personal life circumstances (Jolliff & Strubler, 2021). While our mixed-methods approach aimed to triangulate these factors, it is difficult to claim definitive causality. For instance, does intrinsic motivation cause high performance, or does being a high performer who receives positive feedback foster a greater sense of competence and intrinsic motivation? The cross-sectional nature of much of our data makes it difficult to untangle these temporal relationships, pointing to the need for future longitudinal research (Khazei et al., 2020).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the evidence presented firmly establishes that the long-standing debate between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation is not a contest with a single winner, but a question of strategic hierarchy and synergy. The findings demonstrate that intrinsic motivation, fueled by autonomy, mastery, and purpose, is the indispensable foundation for sustainable high performance and well-being in high-pressure jobs. It is this inner drive that fosters the resilience, creativity, and cognitive flexibility required to not only survive but thrive in demanding environments. While extrinsic rewards are a necessary component of the employment contract, their effectiveness is contingent upon their role as supporters of this foundational intrinsic base, rather than as replacements for it. The "Motivational Hierarchy" model, therefore, provides a more accurate and effective framework for understanding human performance than a simple dualistic view.

The implications of this research are both clear and urgent for organizations reliant on high-performing talent. The primary goal must shift from controlling behavior with carrots and sticks to cultivating an ecosystem where intrinsic motivation can flourish. This involves designing jobs that grant meaningful autonomy, providing pathways for genuine mastery, and relentlessly connecting daily work to a larger purpose. Extrinsic rewards must be re-engineered as fair, transparent, and symbolic tokens of recognition that enable intrinsic motivation by reducing financial anxiety and validating competence. By making this strategic pivot, organizations can break the costly cycle of burnout and attrition, building a culture of resilient high performers who are driven not by the fleeting allure of a bonus, but by a profound and enduring connection to their work.

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