Death and the Executive:
Encounters with the “Stealth” Motivator
Death and the Executive:
Encounters with the “Stealth” Motivator

Manfred F. R. Kets de Vries*

Accepted for publication at Organizational Dynamics
Death anxiety is a primary motivational force that drives much of our behavior. It puts our defenses on high alert, and we make strenuous efforts to repress or deny the unwelcome truth of our inevitable end. The way each of us denies death not only affects life in its broadest sense but also influences the way we behave in organizations. Death anxiety underlies much executive behavior and action.

However, traditional motivational theories do not acknowledge the influence of death anxiety on our behavior. Although they attempt to help us better understand employee motivation, they are not sufficiently inclusive. This article takes a clinical lens to explore death anxiety as a motivational force, how it affects behavior in organizations, and how we metabolize the feelings death evokes.

In addition, I examine the various ways we deal with our knowledge of death. Some of us go into overdrive in trying to suppress it, while others fall into a state of resignation and depression. To deal with the ultimate narcissistic injury that death represents, we resort to a variety of immortality strategies to create permanent or enduring meaning. Furthermore, from an organizational perspective, three maladaptive responses to death anxiety are explored: the manic defense, succession issues, and the edifice complex.

KEY WORDS: death anxiety; motivation; stealth motivator; narcissistic injury; immortality strategies; manic defense; succession issues; edifice complex.
“The meaning of life is that it stops.”
—Franz Kafka

“One lives in the hope of becoming a memory.”
—Antonio Porchia

“I’m not afraid of death; I just don’t want to be there when it happens.”
—Woody Allen

“The human animal dances wildest on the edge of the grave.”
—Rita Mae Brown

Once, during a leadership team-building intervention, I asked a participant what she would ask for if she could only make one wish. To my surprise, her response was not the usual wish for health, wealth and happiness for herself or her family. Instead, she said, “I want to die easily.” Later, when I asked her to elaborate on her unexpected wish, she told me that her mother had recently died of cancer. She had nursed her during the past year, becoming increasingly distraught at seeing her once vigorous, capable mother waste away. Her mother’s dying ordeal had led her to reflect on what her own life was about. Was she doing anything meaningful? Did her hyperactive way of going through life have any real purpose? She was intensely aware that she was next in line and this, she said, had changed her behavior and actions. Given her greater acceptance of the reality of death, she was no longer so driven to “make it.” It had become much more important to live in the present and create good moments. Her motto now was “carpe diem” (“seize the day”). As she told her story, I felt once more the impact of knowing that we don’t get out of life alive—or, as John Maynard Keynes famously pointed out, “In the long run, we are all dead.”

Humankind faces a terrible experiential burden: we live daily with the half-hidden yet omnipresent terror of the plain, ordinary, but inevitable fact of our death. Death is the shadow that follows us wherever we go. Thanks to the
development of our frontal lobes (the last part of the human brain to develop) we have the ability to conceptualize the future and an inevitable part of that future is our individual death. Our biological architecture means that death anxiety is a universal and exclusively human phenomenon. It’s always lurking beneath the surface of our consciousness. Learning to live and adapt to the reality of our own finiteness is very difficult.

Ironically, it’s due our success in evolutionary terms that death has become such a troublesome companion. Our ability to look ahead is the steep price we pay for our development as a species. Burdened with the cognitive/emotive capacity of knowing about our own inevitable demise makes us fearful of what lies ahead. Among the uncertainties of what’s coming in the future is one dread certainty, and this puts our armory of defenses on high alert. We do whatever we can to push this unacceptable truth aside.

We use our defenses of denial or repression most frequently when our memories or feelings are too painful to accept. While a limited use of these defense mechanisms can be adaptive, excessive use can prove costly. When defenses go into overdrive, we see how people resort to manic distractions, engaging in seemingly meaningless, often mind-numbing activities that may provide a false sense of accomplishment but don’t really add up to something that matters. But notwithstanding these futile attempts to push away thoughts of our impending death, its alarming reality is ever-present and affects every aspect of our life and actions, including the world of work. But despite its omnipresence, death doesn’t feature in mainstream motivational theories. On the contrary—it is conspicuous by its absence.

In this article, I discuss this missing link in motivational theory and suggest that our fear of death could be a “stealth” motivator. While applying a clinical lens to this subject, I also explore the triggers that bring death anxiety into our conscious awareness. I discuss what defensive strategies we use to push away our anxiety about death, how that anxiety returns, and how we metabolize it.
The denial of death

We can get some idea of our human preoccupation with death from the way it is represented in myth, legend, ritual, and literature, all of which are full of examples of people trying to find ways to avoid the one appointment nobody misses. For example, one of the heroes of the Indian epic, *The Mahabharata*, is faced with a riddle, “What is the most perplexing thing in the world?”, which he answers correctly by saying, “Man’s unaltering belief in immortality, ignoring the inevitability and omnipresence of death.” In his essay *Thoughts for the Times on War and Death*, Sigmund Freud noted the psychological imagery associated with death: “It is indeed impossible to imagine our own death; and whenever we attempt to do so we can perceive that we are in fact still present as spectators.” Deep down none of us believes in our own death, or to put the same thing in another way, we are all unconsciously convinced of our immortality.

Although we may know intellectually that death awaits us, truly acknowledging it is clearly quite a different thing and in fact we are extremely talented at denying it. Our most common strategy is suppression and repression. We bury the anxiety about our inevitable death deep in our unconscious while we busy ourselves with our lives, in the apparent expectation that we will carry on doing whatever we are doing indefinitely.

Death anxiety has been referred to as a fear of nonexistence or nonbeing. Although we may be conscious of the fact of death, and even imagine we are prepared for it, we are always shocked when death threatens us, or someone dear to us dies. Although at a rational level we know that death is part of the cycle of life, at an irrational level, we see it very differently. The idea of disappearing into a void—of having to confront the disintegration and decay of our body—is not easily worked through psychologically. Symbolically, death is the ultimate humiliation, the ultimate signifier of narcissistic injury. We interpret our pending annihilation as a devastating blow to our sense of self. The anticipation of a state of nothingness, in which the self has ceased to exist, is
unacceptable. As the unconscious does not deal with the passage of time, and doesn’t calculate the amount of time we have left in our life, we act as though death will occur to everyone—except ourselves.

Although death anxiety looms behind all of our behavior and actions, it fortunately drifts in and out of our conscious mental processes. However, it is present in many disguised forms, influencing the way we behave. But in spite of our conscious or unconscious subliminal tactics, death anxiety can be considered a major source of motivation, as it is one of the overriding, driving forces that color the way we live. Whatever motivates us, a considerable part of our behavior and actions consists of our attempts to keep death anxiety at bay or defeat death, at least symbolically. We use many defensive maneuvers to ward off death’s threatening imagery. Again and again, however, our preoccupation with death will seep into our consciousness, demonstrating the limited success of this defensive strategy, which affects our motivation at work.

**Where is death anxiety in motivation theory?**

As I mentioned before, we don't like to talk about death. Although repressing death anxiety will influence our behavior, the role it plays in our motivational repertoire is seldom brought out into the open. And as true as this is for our private world, it’s no different in the world of work. As an indication of the denial of death, we only have to look at the existing motivational literature in the field of organizational behavior. As employee motivation has always been one of the key themes in management textbooks, we would expect death anxiety to be included. But, surprisingly, it is nowhere to be found.

There is a wealth of studies in the organizational literature that single out motivators and demotivators. Heroic efforts have been made to understand what makes people tick and to devise techniques that can be used to improve motivation in organizational life. Many schemata have been introduced to clarify motivational forces. But given the exclusion from the motivational literature of
any consideration of death anxiety, the question is how inclusive are these theories?

For example, we can classify existing conceptual models of motivation into content and process theories. *Content* theories deal with the “what” of motivation and are concerned with individual needs and goals. In comparison, *process* theories are concerned with the “how” of motivation and consider individual differences, job characteristics, and organizational practices.

However, the question remains how many of these theoretical conceptualizations are really helpful? How many of these techniques really get the best out of people? And how many of these theories really help us to understand people? Frankly, the closer you look at the content- and process-laden literature on motivation, the more bewildering, contradictory, and conflicting it becomes. It can be an uphill struggle to find communalities among the various propositions. What makes these various theories even more questionable is the frequent assumption that human beings are rational creatures. We need only look at our own behavior to know this isn’t the case. We are not the self-seeking, rational and opportunistic beings that many economists and management scholars would have us believe. The interface between economics, management, and psychology has always been troublesome, as I know very well, because it is where I have chosen to work.

It’s fair to say that, despite the weighty scholarship dedicated to the subject, we still lack a broad-based, integrated theory of motivation that is inclusive of what really drives us. The existing theories deal with a only a small subset of motivational factors and have trouble with intricate, realistic situations that are subject to a multitude of complex, psychological forces, both conscious and unconscious.

When we look closely at the reasons why people work, we find there’s a lot more at play—and at stake—than money or other benefits. The influence of the obvious carrot-and-stick approach is severely circumscribed, even when we add
on external motivators such as salary increases, year-end bonuses, or promotions. None of these provides a complete explanation of what drives us to do what we do. And neither do the intrinsic motivators that are commonly cited: meaningful work (doing something that’s larger than ourselves); having a sense of autonomy; or the desire to get better at something that matters (acquiring a sense of mastery).

The fact is that when we take a long, hard look at human motivation we realize that a great part of whatever we do is intricately tied to our preoccupation with death (despite our effectiveness in suppressing or repressing our death anxiety). This makes death a remarkable stealth motivator—in respect to life in general and also of the world of work. To enter this force into the equation, however, we need to take a more holistic approach to motivation and make an effort to understand better the conscious and unconscious forces that drive our inner theater. We could even go back to basics and examine the supposition that human nature is driven by two archaic instincts, Eros and Thanatos, where Eros is the drive toward attraction, reproduction and survival, and Thanatos the drive toward dissolution and death.

In many ways, this is a fundamental feature of life. An analogy with Eros and Thanatos can be found in the metabolic processes active in all cells, which have both constructive (anabolic) and destructive (catabolic) functions. For example, the process of respiration breaks down glucose into the carbon dioxide and water needed for photosynthesis. Taking this point to the extreme would suggest that the goal of all life is death. But life goes on because these processes work together; they are opposing but not adversarial. All living forms function and feel at their best when their metabolism is balanced.

The same could be said for the Eros-Thanatos duality. Although it has remained controversial, it doesn’t detract from the inference that our anxiety about death can be viewed as one of Homo sapiens major motivational forces. However, death motivates us in a strange way. It operates stealthily, as we are driven by avoidance. We go out of our way to shake off reminders of our foreseeable death.
Obviously, we are demonstrably good at that, given the absence of death from the motivational literature. But this is exactly where the problem lies, as existing motivational theories do not deal with how our reluctance to face our own death affects the way we work. These theories only touch the surface.

This neglect means that traditional motivational theories present an inadequate explanation of why people do what they do. Scholars of motivation seem to have found it more convenient (or perhaps less threatening) to ignore the influence of our knowledge of our own mortality. Yet death anxiety influences how we behave and act in general, and in organizations in particular. What’s more, death anxiety also affects how we construct theoretical frameworks.

**The inevitability of death**

From a motivational point of view we should be cognizant of the fact that we live our entire lives with the knowledge that we are going to die. Every moment of our life is another step toward death, which is probably the only certainty we have in life. It makes death anxiety a most profound source of misery. In the words of the famous psychologist William James, it is “the worm at the core” of our existence, as the first breath we take sets us on the path to death.

This knowledge about our impending death creates a conundrum whereby some people are so afraid of dying that they never really have the motivation to live. It is as if they tiptoe through life carefully, to arrive safely at death. They would not understand Socrates’ admonition that “the unexplored life is not worth living.” After all, spending all your time worrying about dying takes the pleasure out of living. Our greatest tragedy is that we are motivated to find ways to suppress our fear of death, total annihilation, and definitive separation, but as this form of anxiety is caused by our wish to live, it makes it difficult for many of us to live our life to the fullest. We are motivated in the wrong way.
Reminders of our mortality

Once a year, I run a yearlong workshop for a group of very senior executives, a seminar that has a strong existential, systemic-psychodynamic foundation. The objective is to deal with meaningful and at times life-changing issues. In my experience, people don’t come from places as far away as New Zealand, Singapore, Canada, Brazil, or Russia to talk about the weather, sport, or politics. Apart from more immediately pressing organizational dilemmas, the seminar gives participants the opportunity to deal with major life and career issues that trouble them. It helps them to decipher what motivates them. Very frequently, this seminar creates tipping points for change. And as the seminar demonstrates every year, thoughts of death lurk not that far behind all the “chatter” about career challenges and what motivates them.

The workshop is designed so that discussions become increasingly helical, as participants delve deeper and deeper into the issues that really motivate them. They come to realize that the moment we stop the manic activity of our daily life, we become increasingly aware of our mortality. And it is during these reflective moments that the fact of death is most deeply felt. In daily life, typical reminders are the death of a loved one or a public figure, war, natural disasters, or physical illness—all foreshadowing things to come. So what are the catalysts that make us think about death as a motivational force? When do we see death anxiety at work? Let’s put these forces in plain sight.

1. Losing a loved one is a very strong reminder of the transitory nature of our life. We truly come to understand the place of death in our lives when someone whom we dearly love dies—this is a recurrent theme during the workshop I run. The announcement of someone’s death brings home the fact of our own mortality. It reminds us of the fragility of life. And whatever defenses we put up, we are all included in death’s embrace. At some point, all of us will lose someone we feel especially close to, frequently turning their death into a life-changing, motivational experience for us. From personal experience, and the experience of others, I know this can become a tipping point for changing someone’s motivational outlook.
The death may be of a grandparent, parent, child, spouse, other family member, close friend, or even a beloved companion animal. The loss gives rise to many intense and frightening emotions, including feelings of depression, anger, shame, and guilt, which do not easily go away. We all grieve differently. For some, a wound will take a short time to heal; it will preoccupy others forever. But in whatever way we deal with bereavement, it is always a powerful reminder of our own mortality. It colors the way we look at the world. Consciously or unconsciously, it motivates us to look at our lives differently. It drives us to do certain things in certain ways that don’t fit the caricature image of homo economicus—that fictional optimizer of pleasure and pain.

2. A life-threatening illness or accident is another way to make us realize that our days are numbered. Lying in a hospital bed—away from the familiarity of home—can be an extremely bewildering, and even frightening experience. Being connected to a large number of monitoring devices (a visible reminder of our physical frailty) can elicit anguish, sadness, despair, and fear, but especially death anxiety. Coming to terms with such an experience will be very challenging (especially for those of us who resort to manic-like behavior to push the thought of death away). Our physical vulnerability is often accompanied by a reassessment of what is important in life and may become the trigger that prompts us to lead our lives differently.

3. Dealing with the breakup of an intimate relationship also evokes strong thoughts of death and sets a kind of grieving process into motion. In fact, every time we feel a loss (even when is not death involved), we pass through various stages of grief. Paradoxically, grieving for a failed relationship can be more complicated than bereavement, as there is no “clean break,” or definitive closure. Breakups are often followed by periods of fatigue, loss of interest in things that were once enjoyable, changes in sleeping and eating patterns, confusion, preoccupation, and loss of concentration—all of which will overrule whatever theoretical motivational conceptualizations (extrinsic, intrinsic, or otherwise) are to be found in management textbooks.
4. Situations of dramatic trauma, can shatter our world, destroy the once familiar, and upset our normal sense of safety and stability, whether they are natural (hurricanes, fires, earthquakes, tsunamis, tornadoes, floods) or inflicted (war, robbery, physical or sexual assault, acts of terrorism). Traumatic events have an enormous motivational impact, not only on those who are directly affected, but also on people who witness them indirectly, through the media.

For some of us, the distress generated by traumatic events may continue, preventing our brains from processing the memories to a level where they cause less discomfort. It is not uncommon for people to relive the experience over and over again with the same intense feelings of fear that was evoked by the original incident. These flashbacks can be triggered by sounds, colors, or smells associated with the original trauma. One of the causes of post-traumatic stress disorders is that our deluded belief that we are going to live forever is stripped violently away from us. Once this has happened, it is hard to retrieve peace of mind. Debilitating panic attacks, generalized anxiety, and a morbid and obsessional fear of our own death may linger. How do these experiences influence our motivational behavior patterns? How do these associations with death affect our motivation at work and otherwise?

5. Surprisingly, another common theme in the workshop that evokes associations with death is the empty-nest syndrome. This is a specific psychological condition, signified by subliminal feelings of grief and sadness, which affects parents (often mothers more than fathers) around the time their children leave home to go to college or university. For many women this coincides with the menopause, another significant life event.

Although the empty nest signals a new beginning for the child, it can feel like an ending for many parents. The sudden silence might be hard to take. People prone to this syndrome may suffer from a loss of purpose, generalized anxiety, depressive reactions, and even suicidal thoughts. It's hard to deal with the new reality that we are no longer needed. Again, these negative associations have a
great motivational impact and, as we might expect, looming behind all these symptoms is death anxiety.

6. Another major stressor is losing a job. Associating with colleagues, earning a living, having a daily routine, as well as having a sense of achievement at getting a job well done, are all factors that contribute to our mental health and equilibrium. If we lose this kind of security, morbid thoughts of death and dying can easily come to the fore. Most executives identify themselves with what they do for a living, and unemployment may make them anxious and depressed. This is not merely an anecdotal observation. There is a wealth of data that demonstrates a strong association between unemployment and signs of psychological and psychiatric morbidity. Furthermore, research on unemployment has shown that there is also a significant association with job loss and suicide. The impact of sudden unemployment on people makes the traditional conceptions of executive motivation themselves pretty redundant.

7. Anniversary reactions and other major life milestones like big birthdays can also trigger death anxiety. Anniversary reactions are reminders of an unresolved grieving process. They are often unpleasant emotional responses to a particular day or significant time of the year. Feelings of grief may emerge on the anniversary of a loved one’s death, birthday, or other special dates. We may react similarly to the anniversary of when we lost someone due to divorce, imprisonment, or abandonment. While some of these moments can be anticipated, others can catch us out: reminders may not just be tied to specific dates on the calendar but sights, sounds, or smells can also trigger them. And our feelings can range from acute twinges of sadness to deep, reawakened grief, all reminders of a loved one’s absence and the tragic transience of life.

Major personal milestones, such as a reaching fortieth, fiftieth, sixtieth, seventieth birthday, or a special wedding anniversary, also remind us that life is finite. Getting older brings the inevitability of death to the surface. When we enter the final decades of the life cycle, it becomes increasingly harder to push away the knowledge that our life will end.
One of the most important milestones is retirement, which stimulates paradoxical feelings. Throughout our working life, many of us yearn for the freedom that retirement represents. But when that day arrives we may find our feelings are very different. For example, a recent study\(^2\) has found that retirement increases the risk of clinical depression by 40%, for both men and women. We grieve when we retire, because the loss of identity and employment represents a huge life transition.

These various anniversaries and reminders make it harder to deny the fact of death and affect our motivational attitude in a way that relatively simplistic motivational theories—such as need hierarchies, ERG (existence, relatedness, and growth), achievement motivation, the two-factor theory, expectancy, goal, or equity theory—fail to explain.

8. Finally, while we may be able to push away thoughts of death during daylight hours, we aren't always so fortunate at night. Vivid, disturbing dreams can be another “awakening” experience. When we dream about death, we worry that it foreshadows our own death. Some death dreams can be extremely graphic, or feature people we know and love, and their motivational impact can be very influential.

Death dreams also suggest attempts made by our unconscious to bring death anxiety to consciousness. We can view these dreams as ways of facing up to the fear of death without having to confront it in waking life. In these dreams we may try to unravel what will happen when we die, whether dying will hurt, and what will happen after our death.

Dreams of death, however, can also represent the end of something old and the start of something new, so that death dreams can also signify what our unconscious is telling us about change. Death in dreams can represent the

symbolic “death” of aspects of our life that no longer function—things that are coming to a close. Again, this kind of death dream may motivate us to do things differently.

Creating immortality systems

Interestingly enough, these important markers that affect our motivational outlook are never mentioned in the organizational behavior literature, which (as I said before) is preoccupied with more simplistic extrinsic or intrinsic motivators. The literature does not address how such fundamental existential conflicts, and the negative emotions evoked by our awareness of death, influence our motivational outlook. Given our morbid preoccupations, both conscious and unconscious, symbolically defeating death becomes a major factor in getting the best out of us.

To understand Homo sapiens’ search for meaning, we need to remind ourselves that we live in two worlds: the natural and the symbolic. Clearly, from the sociobiological perspective, our central drive is to pass on our genetic code. (This resonates, albeit in another form, with the Eros/Thanatos dichotomy mentioned earlier.) Similarly, to counter our fear of death, and the challenges death poses to the meaning of our existence, we have a psychobiological need to leave our mark and a psychological need to feel that there is something indestructible within us—something that transcends us. Obviously, from an evolutionary point of view, Homo sapiens has worked out that constant morbidity is bad for morale, an ineffective survival strategy, and hinders evolutionary progress. Consequently, we are driven to pursue numerous ways to metabolize these morbid thoughts, some more effective than others. But although these efforts at suppression and repression can have a beneficial effect, lingering associations of death will remain, just below the surface.

Going from the natural to the symbolic world, our perception of symbolic immortality is essential to our mental health and our ability to maintain a vital
and enduring self. The pursuit of symbolic immortality gives meaning to our existence by preserving our material connection to others. Without this ability, we would be unlikely to be able to withstand depression, we would have no motivation, and we would see only an existential resolution—suicide.

Our attempts to defeat death can take many different forms and reveal a remarkable amount of ingenuity. However, all our attempts at suppression create a constant supply of repressed psychic energy, which—shaped by cultural and historical forces—can transform itself into a rich kaleidoscope of human creativity and resourcefulness.

Our preoccupation with death also changes with age. It gets stronger as we get older. It can be said that under forty, we are immortal; over forty, our perception changes and we start to think in terms of time-left-to-live. To the young, death is merely a distant rumor; no young people truly believe they will ever die. But death becomes more real as age and infirmity brings it nearer.

**Coping with the ultimate narcissistic injury**

Our narcissistic disposition—our need to be recognized as important, our wish to be part of a greater scheme of things—is essential to understanding our struggle to deal with the fear of death. We want to be able to say that we made a difference; that our life on Earth has had meaning. We become aware of wanting to find something that will outlive us. To reaffirm our existence and ward off the notion of death (the ultimate narcissistic injury) we go to great lengths to invent immortality systems, ingenious ways to overcome our fear of our own insignificance in the greater scheme of things. We need to find meaning in order to defeat death. This is the driving force that motivates us. If we can find some meaning to put at the center of our lives, even the worst kinds of suffering will become more bearable. Finding meaning in what we do will bolster our sense of self-esteem as it affirms our existence.

**Nature and immortality**

The natural world, and our need to find our part in it, is a major immortality
system. Everything that lives comes from the body of the Earth, and everything goes back into it. Our ancient ancestors never lost sight of this truth, which is expressed in the literature of many religions: the Quran tells us that humankind was created “from dust and water”; in Hindu scriptures we were formed from dust and ash; while the first book in the Old Testament of the Bible reminds us, “Dust thou art and to dust thou shalt return.” In many primitive cultures, life and death, body and soul, earth and underworld, were all interwoven with the cycles of the seasons. Some of these cultures honored Gaia, the goddess of the Earth. Gaia sustained the crops but she also generated terrible forces—earthquakes, floods, typhoons, and volcanic eruptions. Offerings of grain, milk, wine, and blood would be made to her in gratitude and to appease her violence. Remnants of these traditions still survive, even in modern societies. Earth is also where we put our dead.

Symbolically, our perceptions of nature and immortality are intimately connected. Setting out into mountains, valleys, forests, rivers, and oceans is a very basic human urge and a form of communion with life and death for many of us. Nature provides imagery that both repels and attracts. Thunder, lightning, storms, winds, and floods command our fear and respect for the elements but we also experience comfort and security in the daily cycle of night and day, the changing of the seasons, the growth of plants, and leaf fall. Every night that enfolds us in darkness has associations with death but with the first light of dawn, life seems to be renewed. The earth may be where we put our dead but is also a place of resurrection. Returning to nature in death symbolizes our part in an eternal cycle of life. Decay only masks regeneration and life.

Many people feel they have a special bond with nature and view death as a transition rather than the end. They may even experience “unica mystica,” an “oceanic feeling” of out-of-body boundlessness in which they merge with the universe. For them, threats to the natural world, like global warming, the by-products of manufacturing, and atomic weapons, represent a particularly terrifying eschatological possibility.
**Belief systems and immortality**

Death anxiety can be managed, but it is never entirely resolved and dispensed with. Identifying with a religious, political, or cultural immortality system has always been the most common way to assure us of continuity. These belief systems represent our most ingenious solutions for dealing with death.

Religion has always been our most resourceful ally in alleviating our fear of death and the annihilation of the self. All the major world religions hold out the promise of an afterlife; they also provide a consoling function, and play an integrative role in society. Religious/spiritual conceptions of immortality range from the Judeo-Christian beliefs in the afterlife and resurrection, to the cycles of rebirth described in Buddhism, Hinduism, and Islam. Moreover, with heaven as the ultimate destination, religions provide an obvious incentive for living a virtuous life, even if that means more melancholy and less fun.

Yet all too often religious conviction leads to violence directed at others. Is the need to passionately defend one belief system over another driven by a lingering doubt about whether we have made the right choice? What if we are wrong? What if there is no promised heaven or afterlife? Religious belief systems can evoke powerful defensive and offensive reactions. We are motivated to attack and degrade—preferably kill—the disciples of different immortality systems. We see time and time again how religious leaders incite aggression, fanaticism, hate, and xenophobia—and even inspire and legitimize violent and bloody conflict, driven by a mindset that limits eligibility for immortality to the true believers. The French mathematician-philosopher Blaise Pascal wrote, “Men never do evil so completely and cheerfully as when they do it from religious conviction.” All the major religions are guilty of atrocities committed against each other, while the various sects within those religions fight among themselves. Nevertheless, discord or no discord, religious belief systems play a major role in human motivation.

**Procreation and immortality**

Modern science has added new ways for us—or part of us—to biologically
transcend death, through organ donorship, sperm banks, and cloning. But children are our major immortality project. The philosopher John Whitehead said, “Children are the living messages we send to a time we will not see.” We project our own aspirations and achievements on our children, hoping they will perpetuate our beliefs and values. Children help us to see death as a transition that we can “survive” through others’ memories. After all, the dead are never dead to us until we have forgotten them.

There is a Moroccan proverb that says, “If a man leaves children behind him, it is as if he did not die.” Procreation is a natural immortality system in many societies. Children will carry not only our genes but also our memory. We tell ourselves that the passing of memories from generation to generation makes for continuity. Our symbolic immortality continues after our death as our spirit lives on through our children, grandchildren and family, emphasizing history, memories, stories, and our philosophy of life.

Creativity and immortality

When we are creative—through art, literature, scientific discovery, or doing a kind act for someone in need—we also create some kind of symbolic immortality. In this way, we not only deal with our death anxiety but also “escape” death by living on through our actions and accomplishments, which may be remembered for generations or possibly centuries.

Legacy creation is a major motivating force. Artists hope that their works will live on after their death, that they will live on through their work, and that art will transcend death. Creation gives them meaning in life. Through their work, they may benefit future generations. Scientists are motivated to build cumulative knowledge. They hope that someone else will carry their research work forward—another expression of creative immortality.

Creativity as a way of combatting death anxiety can become an integral part of the search for meaning. In a similar way, actors and athletes can make history through extraordinary performances or by breaking longstanding records, a
unique opportunity to “leave one’s mark.” All these symbolic immortality activities are a means to transcend death and live on in the memory of others.

**Death at work**

For some executives, work becomes their immortality system, again a theme left untouched in traditional theories of motivation. They may be more afraid of a meaningless existence than of death itself, their fear of death originating from the fear of not being able to complete their mission in life. But this mission is not always clear. What seems to provide meaning at one point can ultimately turn out to be rather meaningless. Again, we see death, the stealth motivator, at work. The fear of annihilation is hovering in the background.

**The manic defense**

“Workaholism” is a dysfunctional way of transforming death anxiety at work. Again, traditional motivational theories fall short when trying to explain this type of hyperactive behavior. Workaholics use incessant activity as a way to avoid depressive thoughts and push away the lingering, out-of-awareness fact of death. Typically, they spend all of time rushing from one task to the next and are unable to tolerate even short periods of inactivity. For workaholics even leisure time may consist of a series of “shoulds” and “have tos” that have to be ticked off an actual or mental to-do list. Driven by a fear of having to deal head on with death anxiety, workaholics lack the ability to control their frantic work activities. To them, life is unimaginable without the continuous deflective function supplied by work. Work wards off depressive thoughts, props up a fragile sense of self-esteem, and becomes a means of self-affirmation. Workaholics try to find meaning in the structure and pace of their work life, and if that disappears they experience a sense of loss and devastation.

But for workaholics, no degree of activity is ever enough. And unfortunately, in contemporary organizations, work addicts are highly encouraged, supported, and compensated for their unhealthy behavior patterns. Often, the insidious
The development of workaholism is difficult to counter because many organizations welcome behavior that can be useful to the bottom line. Yet a workaholic environment can contribute to serious organizational problems, ranging from low morale, depression, substance abuse, workplace harassment, personal problems (e.g. divorce), and above-average absenteeism to out-and-out chaos in the workplace.

Workaholic behavior patterns are a “manic defense,” the tendency to distract the conscious mind from feelings of helplessness and despair with a flurry of activity that generates remedial feelings of euphoria, purposefulness, and the illusion of control. But this type of denial only works for a limited amount of time. As the saying goes, what we push out through the door may come back in through the window. Despite all their efforts to the contrary, death anxiety will reemerge. This leads to escalating anxiety and feelings of failure.

Of course, we all use the manic defense to some degree but workaholics go several steps too far. They find it difficult to cope with even short periods of unstructured time.

For example, matters came to a head for Zara, an operations executive in an energy-supply company, when her husband Bruce found her hyperventilating in the kitchen of their Minnesota home at 6 a.m. on Christmas morning. “She was this far away from total collapse. She’d got everything ready for the family get-together the previous night, after she got back from work. This was the day she’d get to take things easy while her mom and I took over. She had nothing to do but walk the dog and she was in pieces.”

It turned out that down time was a perpetual problem for Zara, although this was the first time she’d experienced a full-blown anxiety attack. Bruce realized that she was always more stressed as their vacations approached, ratty on weekends, and usually worked through public holidays. “The night she came to bed with her cell and her tablet, I said, ‘Would you like me to move your bed into your study?’
That’s all it took. She turned them off but she couldn’t rest and in the end she got up and went back to her study with them.”

Zara’s manic obsession with work had put a damaging strain on their marriage but with her near-collapse, Bruce realized he’d failed to see more worrying signs of how it was damaging her health. Although Zara always insisted she felt “great,” she had lost weight, looked strained, and—as now became clear—was physically and mentally exhausted.

When Bruce called her boss the following day to say that Zara would be taking some time out and getting medical advice, her boss said how relieved everyone in the office would be. They had been concerned about her health and behavior for some time and while her own performance had been as satisfactory as ever, others in her department had found it difficult to function, as Zara took so much on herself. Her boss agreed it was time for Zara to take a break and reflect on what had got her into this state—she would have said as much to Zara in her upcoming appraisal. She added that the company was prepared to help Zara with an executive coach or therapist to guide her towards more satisfactory work practices.

Somewhat reluctantly, Zara accepted her boss’s offer, which turned out to be a very happy decision. She immediately clicked with her coach. Once they had established a trust relationship, Zara’s coach managed over time to tone down the spiraling nature of Zara’s workaholism and level of stress. She helped Zara devise what could be considered a realistic working week and also helped her recognize that getting there would involve a considerable amount of “unlearning.” Zara had to learn to become better at delegation and priority setting, to scale back her working hours to more reasonable amounts, and to develop the capacity to disconnect from work when on vacation or away from the office. The coach advised her to take baby steps in that direction; for example, eating meals without answering her cell phone, having no laptop at the table or in bed, and doing no e-mail on weekends. The coach also encouraged Zara to think about the underlying causes of her workaholism. Over time, Zara
came to realize the role her extremely demanding parents had played in making her the person she was. Exploring this theme with her coach, she figured out that in her internal world she had always interpreted any failure to please them as a catastrophe—a form of death, from the perspective of her highly depressive thoughts. Zara's growing awareness of the effects of her behavior on her own children was another eye-opener. Did she want them to be haunted by the same inner demons? Naturally not—and this realization was a great motivator for Zara to change her behavior. Zara came to realize that incessant work had become an anti-depressant—a way of dealing with feelings of nothingness and death anxiety.

People like Zara are sometimes called “Sunday neurotics”—they hate weekends, vacations, and any other sort of unscheduled free time. They take their work with them wherever they go and don’t seem to be able to function without their cell phone, Ipad, or laptop. They may even get physically sick on weekends and vacations as they stop working and try, in vain, to relax. They are masterful multi-taskers—a habit that irritates others tremendously and is also largely ineffective.

As Zara’s coaching intervention taught her, she had relied on the structure of work to ward off her inner demons of depression and death anxiety. The manic defense and death anxiety are like unrecognized twins. Increased anxiety leads to increased activity, which offers only temporary respite, prompting even more activity, and making the person a slave to specific metrics. The pace cannot be maintained and ultimately manic behavior will fail to repress the unacknowledged feelings that stimulate it.

Zara also realized that there is a difference between fearing that life is short and wanting to live it to the full, and wasting life by engaging in as many things as we can, so we don’t “miss out.” She recognized she had been “missing out” on the things that really mattered and that her collapse had come just in time to save her health, her marriage, and her relationships with her children from collapse.
Like it or not, mental anguish is just as intricate a part of the human condition as joy, and the manic defense in effect removes an essential part of life. But do traditional motivational theories go any way toward explaining dysfunctional work behavior like Zara’s?

**Denial of succession**

The same motivational theories also fall short of explaining another response to unacknowledged death anxiety—failures in succession planning. Thinking and talking about succession often appear taboo to some senior executives. They determinedly resist dealing with the big question of “life after me” because it is too anxiety provoking. Meanwhile, the organization suffers and stagnates because of their failure to let go and allow others to move on.

Frank had been heading up the PR agency he founded for 13 years, during nine of which the company had continued to grow, although the rate of growth had slowed toward the end of that period and now, in the company’s 14th year, there were alarming signs that there might be an end-of-year decline. For over three years, both the board and outside advisers had been attempting to get Frank to address their concerns that the company’s declining performance was related to his stubborn retention of his post as CEO. They wanted him to start considering a successor but Frank reacted to the idea with fury. It was his company, he argued; he had started it and no one would ever know how to do the job as well as he did.

Although the company was relatively young, Frank was now in his late 60s. He had set up the agency after a long career in organizational PR and his seemingly indefatigable energy and excellent contacts had made it an instant and solid success. His ability to win clients, his reputation, and his high and visible profile had brought him admiration both inside and outside the company, including attention from the media. Now, however, Frank seemed unaware that, despite his continued high level of activity, his performance had stalled, and brought the company to a standstill with him. His externally directed efforts had absorbed so much of his attention that he had lost touch with his key constituents within the agency. The clapping he continued to get from his chief cronies and top clients,
and the noise his own manic activity created, had deafened him to the internal discontent.

Eventually, the general level of internal dissatisfaction and dismal third-quarter results pushed the board into drastic action and in an emergency board meeting Frank was voted out of the company he had made and built.

The edifice complex
Some executives attempt to confront the reminders of mortality by creating a tangible legacy—an organization, building, award, and so on. Creating a business that will be continued by family members is an obvious way of ensuring some form of immortality. This conscious or unconscious wish lies at the core of many family business dynasties, informed by the illusion that people are not really dead while their names are still spoken. Another way is to build large buildings or stadiums to be named after them, literally concrete representations of their enduring existence.

This impulse is known as the edifice complex, a play on words that echoes Freud's famous “Oedipus complex.” This in turn evokes Sophocles' play Oedipus Rex, the tragic story of a man whose journey to kingship is brought down by hubris and involves patricide, incest, and self-blinding. The edifice complex is similar, in that it also refers to the human arrogance and folly that motivates leaders to erect grand, even grotesque, monuments to their own vanity. There are innumerable examples, from the pharaohs' pyramids to Ceausescu's palace in Bucharest, the Taj Mahal to Saddam Hussein's Mother of All Battles mosque in Iraq (which contained a copy of the Quran allegedly written in Saddam's blood and a water feature based on his thumbprint).

The edifice complex is not limited to political rulers. Many corporate leaders are motivated by the semblance of immortality it provides. There is a psychological parallel between making a mark on the landscape with a building and the exercise of power. However, as well as giving a false sense of permanence, impressive buildings can also be signs of corporate pathology—a signal that the
organization may be on its way towards decline. Again, traditional motivational theories are at a loss to explain this kind of behavior.

**Arriving at closure**

Whatever we do, it is hard for us to overcome our greatest weakness: our psychological reluctance to accept the idea of our personal disintegration and decay. Humans are said to be unique in that we adapt and run our lives in full knowledge not only of beginnings but also of endings. But our anxiety about death causes a great degree of (conscious or unconscious) discomfort that manifests itself in a wide variety of affective, cognitive, developmental, and sociocultural reactions. Unresolved death anxiety can result in heightened stress and even psychological burnout. Every human society has designed structures, symbols, narratives, and rituals to deal with this prevailing form of anxiety. Many of the things that motivate us derive from our death anxiety. This implies that many prevailing motivation theories are simply inadequate, as they pay no attention to this major underlying motivational driver.

How we (psychologically) metabolize our anxiety about death determines whether we experience work as meaningful or meaningless. In this article, I have discussed the manic defense, succession issues, and the edifice complex as examples of relatively meaningless activities that may squander effort and lose any significance. But we can find many examples of creative, meaningful work. Creative work is not just the preserve of artists, writers, musicians, and scientists. As Henry Ford maintained, “There is joy in work. There is no happiness except in the realization that we have accomplished something.” Any innovative work that deviates from routine activities, or that the creator, spectator, or consumer values as something special, has meaning.

Our drive to defeat death is sustained by the hope and belief that the things we create are of lasting worth and meaning, that they will outlive or outshine death and decay. Of course, this is easier said than done. For many, it remains hard to
accept Socrates' insightful statement: “[F]ear of death ... is nothing other than to think oneself wise when one is not; for it is to think one knows what one doesn’t know. No man knows whether death may not turn out to be the greatest of blessings for a human being.” In recent times, much the same philosophy was expressed by a similarly iconic figure, Apple founder Steve Jobs, who was coming to terms with his own terminal illness: “No one wants to die. Even people who want to go to heaven don’t want to die to get there. And yet death is the destination we all share. No one has ever escaped it. And that is as it should be, because death is very likely the single best invention of life. It is life’s change agent. It clears out the old to make way for the new.”
Europe Campus
Boulevard de Constance
77305 Fontainebleau Cedex, France
Tel: +33 (0)1 60 72 40 00
Fax: +33 (0)1 60 74 55 00/01

Asia Campus
1 Ayer Rajah Avenue, Singapore 138676
Tel: +65 67 99 53 88
Fax: +65 67 99 53 99

Abu Dhabi Campus
Muroor Road - Street No 4
P.O. Box 48049
Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates
Tel: +971 2 651 5200
Fax: +971 2 443 9461

www.insead.edu