

E. Scott Geller Shares Four Keys to Self-Motivation and Empowerment in TEDx Talk



Blacksburg, Virginia Aug 18, 2026 ([Issuewire.com](https://www.issuewire.com)) - Virginia Tech behavioral science expert explains how competence, choice, consequences, and community can inspire people to go beyond expectations

What makes people want to go beyond what is expected of them? In his TEDx talk, E. Scott Geller, Ph.D., explores how leaders, teachers, parents, and organizations can create environments where people become self-motivated and genuinely want to do their best.

Drawing on decades of research and experience in behavioral science, Geller explains that true empowerment is not simply about giving people more responsibilities. It is about helping them feel capable, motivated, and connected to the people around them.

Watch the full TEDx Talk here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7sxpKhlbr0E>

What Does It Mean to Feel Empowered?

Geller begins by making an important distinction between management's definition of empowerment and the experience of actually feeling empowered.

For Geller, feeling empowered means being self-motivated. He suggests asking three simple questions

to understand whether a person feels empowered:

Can you do it? Will it work? Is it worth it?

The first question focuses on self-efficacy, or whether someone believes they have the knowledge, skills, training, and ability to complete a task. The second focuses on whether they believe their actions will produce the desired result. The third asks whether the result is meaningful enough to make the effort worthwhile.

When people can answer yes to all three, Geller says they are more likely to feel competent and become self-motivated.

The Power of Competence

One of the central ideas in Geller's talk is the importance of helping people recognize that they are capable.

Leaders and teachers can build this sense of competence by providing useful feedback and recognition. Instead of simply telling people what they need to improve, they can show them what they are already doing well and help them build from there.

Geller's own childhood experience learning to play the drums demonstrates how powerful this can be. At age 10, he became excited about learning the drums and quickly developed confidence as his teacher introduced him to new skills.

That confidence changed when he struggled to learn a drum roll. After repeated attempts, he became frustrated and began to believe he could not do it. A teacher eventually helped him break the skill into smaller, manageable steps. Once Geller understood that the drum roll was essentially a series of simpler movements, he was able to succeed.

Helping People Become Success Seekers

Geller also explores the role of choice in motivation.

When people believe they have some control over what they are doing, they are more likely to feel motivated. He encourages leaders to help people move away from simply trying to avoid failure and instead develop the mindset of a success seeker.

This shift can be influenced by something as simple as how people talk about their responsibilities. A task can feel very different when it is presented as an opportunity rather than an obligation.

For Geller, motivation is often influenced by the way people perceive their circumstances and the way they communicate those perceptions to themselves and others.

Why Consequences Matter

Another important part of Geller's message is understanding why a behavior is worth doing.

People are more likely to stay motivated when they understand the consequences of their actions and believe those consequences are worthwhile. This means leaders cannot simply tell people what to do.

They also need to help them understand why the behavior matters.

Geller connects this idea to his own experience learning the drums. His parents promised that as he improved, they would provide him with better equipment. That vision gave him something meaningful to work toward and helped keep him motivated.

Building a Stronger Sense of Community

Geller's fourth key is community.

While individual ability and choice are important, he argues that people also need connection and social support. A strong sense of relatedness can contribute to both motivation and happiness.

To illustrate this point, Geller tells the story of "The Cookie Thief," a story about a woman who mistakenly believes another passenger is taking cookies from her bag at an airport. She later discovers that the cookies actually belonged to the man, who had been sharing them with her.

The story challenges the audience to consider how quickly people can make assumptions when they view situations only from their own perspective. Geller uses it to encourage a shift from independence toward interdependence.

We Need Each Other to Succeed

Geller believes that people can accomplish more when they recognize that they are part of a community.

Rather than maintaining an "I'll do it myself" mindset, he encourages people to support one another, accept feedback, and speak up when they have something valuable to contribute.

His own experience with the drum teacher provides a powerful example. After finally learning the drum roll, Geller was able to show his teacher how he had broken the skill down into simpler steps. At only 10 years old, he ended up teaching his teacher something in return.

The experience reinforced an important lesson that continues to shape Geller's work: everyone has something to learn, and everyone has something to teach.

A Career Dedicated to Helping People Thrive

Geller's TEDx message reflects more than five decades of work in applied behavioral science.

An Alumni Distinguished Professor at Virginia Tech, Geller has completed 56 years as a faculty member and serves as Director of the Center for Applied Behavior Systems in the Department of Psychology. He has authored, edited, or co-authored 55 books, 105 book chapters, 41 training manuals, 310 magazine articles, and more than 300 research articles focused on behavior change and improving quality of life.

He is also the founder of the charitable Actively Caring for People (AC4P) Foundation and co-founder of GellerAC4P, a training and consulting firm dedicated to spreading the AC4P Movement worldwide.

His latest textbook, *Actively Caring for Safety: The Psychological Science of Injury Prevention*, was published by CRC Press in 2024 and focuses on applying behavioral science to help organizations prevent workplace injuries and fatalities.

Turning Behavioral Science Into Everyday Action

Throughout his career, Geller has focused on bringing behavioral science into real-world settings. His TEDx talk continues that mission by offering a practical approach to motivation that leaders, teachers, parents, and individuals can apply in everyday life.

His message is simple: people are more likely to become self-motivated when they feel capable, understand why their actions matter, have a sense of choice, and feel connected to others.

As Geller concludes, people need to help one another feel self-motivated and recognize that "we're all in this together."

About E. Scott Geller, Ph.D.

- Scott Geller, Ph.D., is an Alumni Distinguished Professor at Virginia Tech and Director of the Center for Applied Behavior Systems in the Department of Psychology. He has completed 56 years as a faculty member at Virginia Tech.

Geller is the founder of the Actively Caring for People (AC4P) Foundation and co-founder of GellerAC4P. His work focuses on developing and evaluating behavior-change interventions designed to improve quality of life on a large scale.

He has authored, edited, or co-authored 55 books, 105 book chapters, 41 training manuals, 310 magazine articles, and more than 300 research articles. He is a Fellow of the American Psychological Association, Association for Psychological Science, Association of Behavior Analysis International, and World Academy of Productivity and Quality Sciences.

Geller has received numerous honors for his teaching, research, and contributions to applied behavioral science, including lifetime achievement awards from the International Organizational Behavior Management Network and the American Psychological Foundation.

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