MOTIVATION

As a manager who needs to get things done in an organisation, how do you motivate your staff to do what you want them to do?

The short answer is: you can't.

"What?" you say in surprise. "But isn't it part of a manager's job to motivate?"

Psychology students tell the following joke. How many psychologists does it take to change a light bulb? Only one, but the light bulb has got to *want* to change.

Basically, people can only motivate themselves. How do they do it? There are many theories about motivation. We are going to look at a few that have had a strong impact on the practice of management.

Theories X and Y

These are not formal academic theories of motivation, but more like assumptions about people.

Theory X says that people are basically lazy, so they must be motivated by external incentives. People will do what they want, which is often different to what the organisation wants them to do, so they must be controlled. They are not rational and do not exercise self-discipline. The few who are rational, disciplined, and self-motivated have to manage the others.

In contrast, Theory Y says that people seek meaning and a feeling of accomplishment from their work. They want to have independence and be able to think for themselves. Because they are basically controlled and self-motivated, they do not appreciate external controls or incentives. If they are allowed to do so, they will take on the organisation's goals as their own.

Even though Theory X is a cynical way of looking at people, it is the model used in many companies. It assumes that people work just because they have to. But research indicates that many people would actually prefer to keep working, even if they won the lottery and no longer had any financial reason to do so.

Many of today's modern information-based organisations claim to follow the Theory Y paradigm. Does yours? Do you have completely free working hours, or must you be at work at certain times? How much meaning do you and your colleagues get from your work? How much authority and responsibility does the lowest member of your organisation have? Within the scope of the position, there is room for such thinking in all organisational roles. After all, who knows a job better than the person who does it? A Theory Y company would even give independence to the cleaner – to order preferred cleaning products, for example.

Theory Y is difficult in practice, because managers are reluctant to relinquish much of their formal control. They feel that they would be no longer in charge – even if

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evidence shows that delegation will improve the quality and quantity of work produced. And in times of crisis, when an organisation really needs to have more faith in its workers, Theory X often reappears. As soon as profits drop, or there is an economic slump, even "enlightened" organisations often address the issue by redesigning jobs, restructuring the company, and tightening financial control – the very things they claim *not* to do.

Formal Theories of Motivation

Psychologist Abraham Maslow said that people are motivated by attempts to fulfil their personal needs. Here are some examples of how his **Hierarchy of Needs** explains motivation in the workplace. Basic *physiological* needs are met with good ventilation (breathing), toilets (excretion), and a break at the end of the day (sleep). *Safety and security* is covered with security personnel (personal safety), safety equipment like hard hats and goggles in factories (physical safety), and a regular paypacket (financial security). Friendship and a feeling of *belonging* comes from relationships with co-workers. These are all "deficiency needs", without which people cannot work very well. If they have been met at least to some degree, then the "growth needs" of achievement, creativity, and problem-solving can be pursued.

Frederick Herzberg's **two-factor theory** builds on Maslow's ideas, calling his deficiency needs "hygiene factors", which demotivate when absent, but do not inspire when fulfilled. The "motivator factors" are what get people working better: meaningful job content, a sense of responsibility, and recognition for their effort.

Expectancy theory, from Victor Vroom, tries to show how people decide to do things, rather than what they actually do. Let's say a company executive wants to join the management board. The attractiveness of this outcome for him, or *valence*, is very high. He decides to start a new product range: he has a high *expectancy* that he can make it successful. He knows that the board values initiative, so if it is successful, this will give him the credibility he needs to join the board (*instrumentality*). These three concepts are given numerical values and are used to calculate the motivational force. Expectancy theory recognises the relationship between effort, performance and reward.

Most of us have had an annual performance assessment, where we examine what we did in the last year, and get feedback on it. We then set goals for the next twelve months. The goals need to be specific (clear and measurable), challenging (not too easy, but not overly difficult), and justified (we often set them ourselves, in the context of the organisation). This comes straight from Edwin Locke's **goal-setting theory**. Of course the ability must be there before setting goals – asking a human resources specialist to design electrical circuits doesn't make sense. Material incentives to achieve the goals, such as a bonus, may improve commitment.

Goal-setting appears to be very popular and effective, but it has some shortcomings, most notably that quality often suffers in the name of quantity. For example, if I am a salesperson, and my goal is to increase the number of customers I see in a day, then the quality of those interactions will suffer as I need to do things more quickly and

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move on to the next customer. No matter how polite I am, some customers may see a quick discussion as pushy or rude.

Conclusions

This has been a very brief introduction to a few theories of motivation that are popular in organisational psychology and management science. There are several others not mentioned here. The sheer number of theories and their complexity is testament to how difficult it is to define the concept of motivation. It is quite challenging to create a general theory of motivation, although this has been attempted by a number of academics (see Robert Vecchio et al. below).

The theories of motivation have been developed from a combination of clinical cases, experimental research, and the study of people in real work environments. Not even one of the theories indicates that people work solely for money, or are lazy and irrational, or have no self-control – the tenets of Theory X. In fact, they *all* point to what Theory Y suggests: that people want job satisfaction, a feeling of meaning and achievement, and to be able to think for themselves.

Helping your employees to be happy is not the reason your company exists; after all, businesses are there to make money. But overly authoritarian (Theory X) management too often causes high turnover, absenteeism, and in the worst case scenario, sabotage. Getting rid of people who "don't fit in" might be a quick-fix, but ultimately loses a lot of employee talent and is not constructive in the long-term.

Instead, try Theory Y. People who are satisfied with their work motivate themselves: they are more loyal and efficient, and work harder and longer hours without coercion, because they enjoy it. They put in extra effort when times are tough. And they produce more work that is of far better quality than if they were unhappy. Clearly, the motivation of your employees strongly affects your financial results. So do something about it.

Some related links (copy-paste into your browser):

Theories X and Y
http://www.netmba.com/mgmt/ob/motivation/mcgregor/

Abraham Maslow: His life and work
http://webspace.ship.edu/cgboer/maslow.html

Summary of approaches to motivation
http://allpsych.com/psychology101/motivation.html

Next month, we will continue with the motivation theme: why do we tend to believe that we do things in reaction to what happens to us rather than our personality, but we often think that other people behave according to their personality and not the situation around them?

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Statt, D.A. (2004). *Psychology and the world of work* (2nd ed.). New York, N.Y.: Palgrave Macmillan.

Vecchio, R.P., Hearn, G., & Southey, G. (1992). *Organisational behaviour: Life at work in Australia.* Sydney: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.

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