Perspectives on motivation and employee engagement

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ABSTRACT

This paper provides a conceptual framework exploring the relationship between superior and subordinate perspectives on motivation and employee engagement. Drawing from classic works by Barnard, Herzberg, and McGregor, the author identifies a model to understand individual behavior. Recommendations for improving organization performance are included.

Keywords: Two-factor theory, Theory X, Theory Y, Zone of indifference, Employee engagement

INTRODUCTION

Establishing a conceptual framework from which to explore individual and organization behavior is a valuable step in crafting effective training and interventions to improve performance. By understanding the potential mindset and frame of reference of employees within a hierarchical structure, organizations can focus on improving individual and work-unit[1] productivity and effectiveness. This paper focuses on elements of classic theory to explain the relationship between motivation, the perspective and behavior of superiors and subordinates[2], and resulting employee engagement and performance. Through this process, an emerging model is established that helps guide organization action.

Employee engagement and performance relate to several concepts from organization behavior and human relations theory. As identified in several studies, drivers of employee engagement include issues directly related to personal leadership and the intrinsic value of work (OPM, 2015 and Robinson, Perryman, and Hayday, 2004). An employee who is engaged is more likely to be committed to the mission of the organization and more effective in pursuit of his or her duties. These engagement concepts are closely associated with ideas regarding motivation and organization dynamics.

Examining the perspective of public sector employees is useful given the unique nature of employment and motivation. Considerable research has been conducted on the issues affecting motivation in the public sector (Wright, 2001; Perry and Hondeghem, 2008; and Perry, Hondeghem, and Wise, 2010) and a common factor in much of this research is the concept that public sector employees possess a strong commitment to public service and a mission-focused orientation. This personal perspective helps drive performance and may reflect a greater willingness to accept poor work conditions and may reflect a broader range of behavior that an employee will accept from a superior.

MOTIVATION

Research by Hertzberg (1968) suggests that employee behavior is influenced by two primary factors. In his analysis, Hertzberg identified "hygiene" areas that create the minimum basis for employee satisfaction. While these factors generally will not drive maximum performance, their absence will result in employee dissatisfaction. As seen in figure 1 (Appendix), hygiene factors include items such as pay and benefits, work conditions, organization policies, relationships with other employees, and the nature of supervision. These factors are used by individuals in comparison with their desired work environment and their perceived value at an organization. Without the presence of these factors, employee satisfaction is diminished, productivity is at a minimal level, and the potential for turnover increases.

In contrast to hygiene factors, Hertzberg proposed that individuals are motivated to superior performance through intrinsic factors such as the nature of his or her work, personal achievement, recognition, responsibility, and the potential for advancement and growth.   Once

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[1] The term work-unit is used to denote all constructs within an organization in which more than one employee is involved.

[2] In this paper the term superior and subordinate are used to denote formal hierarchical relationships among individuals in an organization. This includes direct and indirect supervisor and manager responsibility and authority.

hygiene factors are present at a minimally acceptable level, these motivating factors can be used to improve satisfaction and commitment to the organization with a corresponding increase in productivity and employee retention.

While Hertzberg's theory focuses on the behavior of the individual, other theories reflect the beliefs regarding human nature held by individuals in positions of authority (Skinner, 1965; Yukl, 2006). Dating from the 1960s, the work of MacGregor (2006) is notable among these for his conception of Theory X and Theory Y. This theory focuses on the superior's frame of reference in an organization and his or her perspective on employee motivation and the nature of human behavior.

Individuals who favor Theory X believe that employees generally have little ambition and avoid responsibility, working out of necessity. Superiors with this mindset focus on transactions to entice or compel performance. Superiors may demonstrate either a "hard" or "soft" approach to employees but will use extrinsic motivation through monetary and non-monetary reward and punishment.

Individuals who adhere to Theory Y believe that employees want to be productive and are motivated to work through their internal and personal desire to contribute. Theory Y focuses on the intrinsic nature of work and the value inherent in work itself. Within this framework, Theory Y superiors believe that individuals will take responsibility for action and can effectively function without the need for constant close supervision.

The models presented by Herzberg and McGregor can create an environment in which there is conflict between superiors and subordinates based on the superiors assumptions regarding individual motivation. While many leadership theories[3] suggest that superiors can apply a perspective based on the situation and needs of the organization or individual, a superior will often have a pre-disposition towards a particular theory that is reflected in his or her personal frame of reference and both conscious and unconscious bias. As seen in figure 2 (Appendix), it is only in an environment where hygiene factors are met and the superior is committed to concepts of intrinsic motivation that a high performing workplace can emerge.

ORGANIZATION DYNAMICS AND INFLUENCE

Drawing from research on conflict resolution (Barbuto and Wareneke, 2014), influence describes the manner in which the goals and desires of the superior reflect resistance, compliance, or commitment in the subordinate. This is closely related to multiple definitions describing leadership as a process of influencing others to accomplish shared objectives (Yukl, 2006). These ideas of influence can be directly related to the idea of the "zone of indifference" provided by Chester Barnard (1968).

Originally published in 1938, Barnard (1968) offers a useful perspective by suggesting that individuals routinely assess tasks before deciding to comply. This assessment is based on an examination of the perceived advantage that compliance and remaining associated with an organization has for the individual. In this manner, tasks will be judged as either acceptable,

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[3] This paper does not attempt to explore the various theories such as contingency, situational, or transformational leadership. Considerable research is available regarding the efficacy of these concepts. The intent here is to suggest individuals have a personal perspective and frame of reference in approaching situations.

neutral, or unacceptable and can be directly affected by the use of inducements provided by a superior for the performance of a task.

The zone of indifference therefore reflects the area in which an employee will consent to perform a task designated by his or her superior. This zone may expand or contract based on the addition or restriction of extrinsic transactional incentives or changes to the intrinsic value inherent in the task. When a task is unacceptable, it falls outside the zone into an area where the employee will question the authority and legitimacy of the instruction and will either refuse the task or act in a manner deviant from expected organization behavior.

While Barnard discusses the nature of the association of an individual with an organization, this relationship can be refined by examining the congruence of personal values, principles, and beliefs with the values, principles, and beliefs of the organization. While an organization may publish these ideals, an employee will make his or her judgement based on the manner in which these concepts are reflected in the behavior of superiors. These factors help describe the complex environment seen in figure 3 (Appendix).

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION

Theory provides a construct from which to focus action. While the concepts presented in this paper reflect general behavior, they are not absolutes as individuals respond to circumstances and the environment differently based on their personal frame of reference. A critical task for a superior is to understand his or her differences in perspective with a subordinate and the manner in which an employee communicates individual values, principles, and beliefs. In this manner, superiors bear the burden of understanding the perspective of their subordinates in order to maximize employee performance.

In order to achieve the highest levels of performance within an organization, there are several areas in which to focus. These include:

- Emphasizing effective communication skills related to understanding modes, methods, and delivery techniques necessary for ensuring shared meaning. This directly relates to an awareness and understanding differences in how individuals form and communicate complex ideas such as values, principles, and beliefs.
- Improving interpersonal skills with a focus on increasing individual awareness and appreciation of differences. This area includes self-awareness and application of techniques for effective interactions between individuals.
- Increasing critical thinking with an emphasis on understanding personal bias and frame of reference. This includes awareness of alternate methods to improve performance based on another person's desires and perspective.
- Highlighting an appreciation of personal and employee motivation by understanding:
    - The various perspectives on human motivation
    - The importance of hygiene and motivating factors and the manner in which they affect performance
    - Concepts related to Emotional Intelligence and those factors that impact individual perspective.

There are a variety of interventions that can be considered for addressing essential work relationships. First and foremost, actions to gain awareness and understanding of personal perspectives and bias should be undertaken. Through self-discovery and reflection, individuals in leadership positions can identify and articulate their personal beliefs. Coaching, mentoring,

and self-awareness training can aid in this process as can programs related to unconscious bias. It is only when observed behavior, words and deeds, match stated beliefs that trust between superior and subordinate can flourish.

Second, hygiene factors must be identified and, where possible, addressed to reflect the needs of each employee as an individual. Beyond hygiene factors, organizations must be willing to examine the nature of work itself and take reasonable action to change or improve job specifications. Consultations with employees and their superiors can aid in the identification of areas that impede performance. This includes the use of techniques such as job redesign and enrichment, forcefield analysis, and SWOT analysis[4] to provide insights that can be linked to action.

Finally, interventions that focus on team interactions can aid in developing a high-performing, mission focused work-unit. These activities should emphasize collective training related to interpersonal skills, communication, critical thinking, and problem solving and must include both superiors and subordinates in the same training sessions. As suggested by Cherniss, Goleman, Emmerling, Cowan, and Adler (1998), because change in these areas require a change in social behavior, focusing on a long-term approach that includes multiple engagements over time is necessary to ensure improved productivity and performance.

CONCLUSION

This paper established a model to integrate motivation, behavior, and performance within the context of individual and organization values, principles, and beliefs. In addition, types of interventions were identified that focus on improving individual awareness and understanding of the relationships between these concepts. Additional research should focus on these interactions and demonstrating improved performance of individuals and work-units.

The behavior of individuals as part of an organization is directly related to the perspective of the superior towards factors that motivate a subordinate. An essential element of this perspective is grounded in the basic critical thinking concepts of frame of reference and bias, and an acceptance that everyone does not think the same way nor is motivated by identical factors. The mindset of the superior directly influences the manner in which he or she will engage subordinates and the degree of success that will be achieved by a work-unit. In all of these areas an understanding of motivation concepts, effective communication, and interpersonal skills are essential.

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[4] Numerous techniques associated with the consulting process can be used for this purpose. An essential task is establishing a clear understanding and shared meaning between superior, subordinate, and those tasked with crafting training and other interventions.

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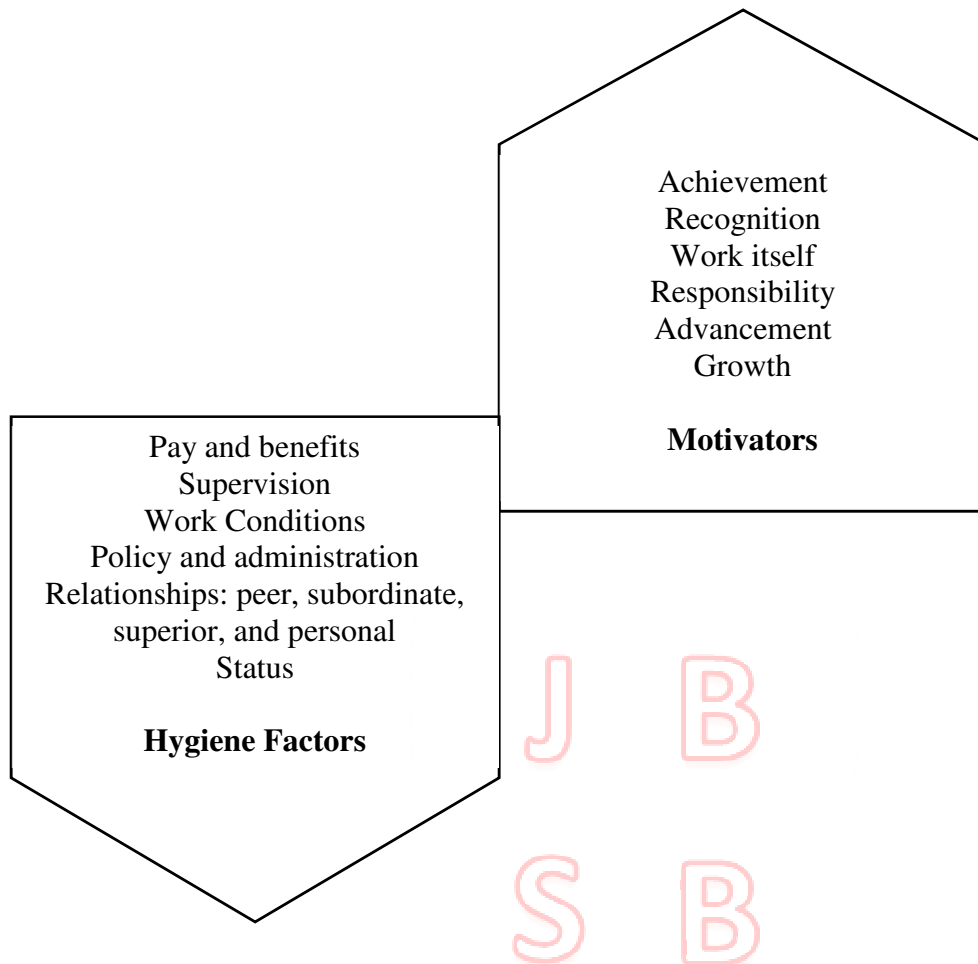
APPENDIX

Achievement
Recognition
Work itself
Responsibility
Advancement
Growth

Motivators

Pay and benefits
Supervision
Work Conditions
Policy and administration
Relationships: peer, subordinate,
superior, and personal
Status

Hygiene Factors

Figure 1. Herzberg Two-Factor Theory

Superiors mindset	Theory Y	Under Performing	High performing
	Theory X	Low Performing	Under Performing
		Extrinsic	Intrinsic*

Employee motivation

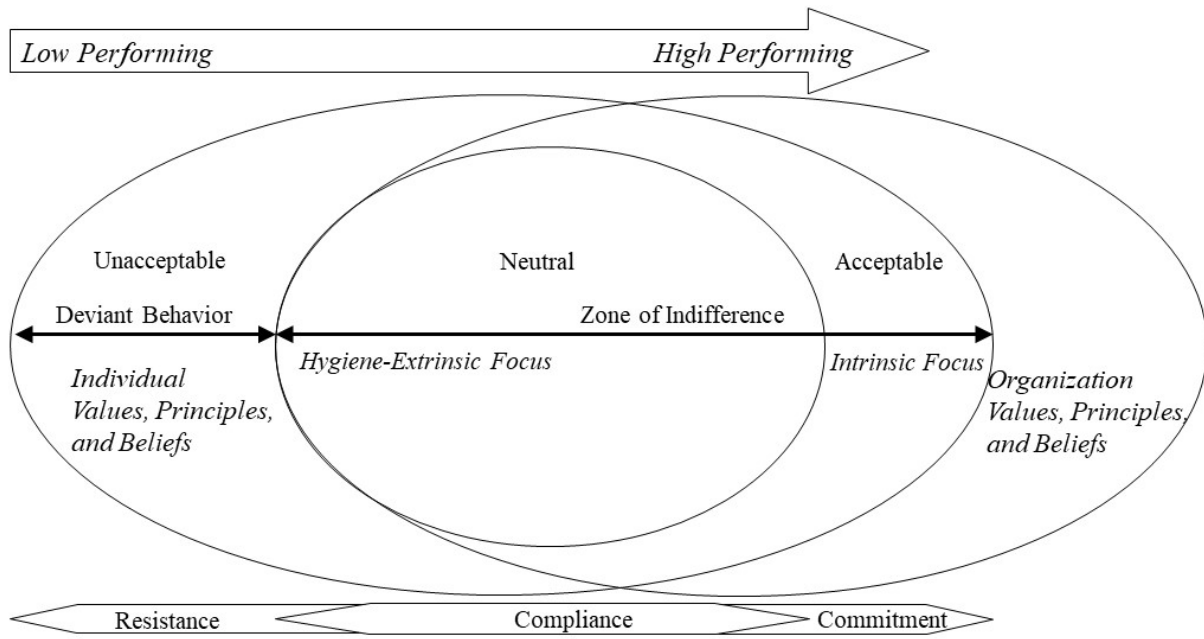*provided hygiene factors are met

Figure 2. Individual Value Perspective and Focus

Figure 3. Individual and Organization Perspective