Employee Motivation is not a Problem

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Many managers worry about employee motivation unnecessarily. Decades of research have solved this problem, and managers only need to know the questions to ask to solve their employee motivation problems. Today, we understand how to motivate. Creating and sustaining motivation can be diagnosed and straightforwardly addressed. This happy situation is largely due to the implementation of Expectancy Theory. In his Expectancy Theory, Victor Vroom proposed that employees’ motivation comes from their analyses of what performance they can expect from their efforts, what the costs and benefits will be from those efforts, and how much they personally like or dislike those particular costs and benefits. That is, before expending effort at work, employees ask themselves three different questions:

- What are the costs and benefits of my efforts? Can I expect any rewards from the organization (hence, the name Expectancy Theory)? Will I get that promotion? A pay raise? The esteem and admiration of my boss? And, what costs might I expect from that effort? Would I have to stay late and miss more dinners with my family? Incur the resentment and jealousy of my peers?

  In other words, before expending effort, individuals ask themselves: Do my benefits outweigh my costs? If the answer is, “No,” Expectancy Theory predicts no effort, and so no motivation.

- How much do I, personally, value each of those possible benefits and costs? The theory emphasizes that it doesn’t matter how much anyone else thinks the person should value those benefits and costs, it is how much the person considering expending the effort actually values them. If he or she doesn’t personally value the expected benefits of the effort more than the costs, Expectancy Theory predicts no effort, and so no motivation.

- If I expend the effort, what is the chance that I can actually perform at a level that would result in the benefits I value? That is, it is not enough to expect benefits for the performance and to want those benefits; there will be no effort if the person does not believe he or she has the abilities or resources to attain the necessary performance.

  For example, someone might be uncomfortable around people, and become impatient at meetings. If she knows those characteristics will make her a poor manager, she will judge that she does not have the possibility to become an effective manager, and so Expectancy Theory predicts she’ll expend no effort to become one.

If any one of these three elements is missing, we would not expect effort: If the costs of the effort outweigh the benefits, employees will not make the effort; if the benefits the organization offers are unattractive (or the costs are too personally odious), employees will not make the effort; and if employees do not have the ability or resources to turn effort into the performance necessary to obtain the benefits, they will not make the effort.
Of course, Expectancy Theory is a highly rational theory, and we know that emotions often trump rationality (even so, this theory has been a good predictor of effort for those actions important enough for individuals to take the time to analyze their options).

Certainly, emotions color how individuals make these assessments; for example, those who see the world in a more positive light are more likely to judge that the available rewards are more attractive, that the odds of achieving attractive rewards are higher, and that they have the ability and resources necessary to obtain those rewards. That is further evidence that we all are better at rationalizing what feels right than we are at rationally weighing factual evidence. Nonetheless, for practical purposes, whether or not employees are sufficiently rational decision makers is not as important as Expectancy Theory’s usefulness in diagnosing why people do what they do in organizations.

**Diagnosing Motivational Problems**

Motivational problems usually present themselves as others not doing what you want them to do. These could be employees, suppliers, colleagues, or your own boss. You need to ask yourself: Why is the person not motivated to take the action I want? Motivational problems require a careful diagnosis, and the following questions can help guide your analysis:

- **Does the person have the ability and resources to do what you want?** It does no good to pile on the incentives (or threats of punishment) if the person does not believe it is possible to do what you want. If the motivation problem results from this perceived deficit, it can only be remedied by making sure the person believes the task can be done. It is an all-too-common mistake to misdiagnose someone’s belief that they cannot do something as an incentives problem, so always ask this question first.

- **Does the person actually value the expected benefits being offered more than the expected costs?** Everyone does not value the same things. For example, many see no real opportunity for any pay raise of significance or gain their greatest pleasures at work from a congenial relationship with co-workers. You cannot make people value what you think they should value or assume that everyone else values what you personally value. What is more, don’t forget that many people value their sense of personal autonomy (and self-respect) more than the small amount of additional money they might expect to get. An accurate diagnosis depends on understanding what others actually do value and then being sure to attach what they really do value to the actions you want.

- **Are rewards really contingent on the effort required?** This is the incentives problem: managers hope for “A” from their employees while actually rewarding “B.” Do you hope the person will be a team player but only reward for individual job performance? A corollary to this problem is assuming that the only reward that can and should be attached to effort is money. Money does matter to people, but it is not the only thing that does, and too many managers just assume that if they do not control much money they cannot motivate. People want many different things, so be creative.
References


