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Theories of motivation

Why do we work? Is it the money? Is it because we love our jobs? Or does it have something to do with fear? In eight years of looking at this issue I have read plenty of motivational theories that associate work with people's needs or wants but very few that mention fear.

Yet it seems to me that fear remains a significant source of motivation . Fear of failure, fear of getting fired, of missing a deadline or of losing face: are these not all powerful emotions that tie people to their regular jobs? How many people are prepared to endure tyrannical bosses, harassment and miserable working conditions simply so that they can hold on to a job?

It seems extraordinary to be considering these questions today, after so many years of theorising from the likes of Elton Mayo, Abraham Maslow, Frederick Herzberg and Douglas McGregor - the "big four" of motivational theory. But for all their ideas that did so much to advance our thinking on motivation , they failed to create a satisfactory theory of work.

Mayo was inspired by perhaps the most famous of all experiments in motivation , those carried out at the Hawthorne factory of Western Electric in Chicago. I went there a few years ago in a kind of industrial tour of the Midwest. Those at Midvale and Bethlehem in Pennsylvania, where Frederick Taylor carried out his work on scientific management, are derelict although the old Bethlehem Steel plant is being made into an industrial museum.

The empty factory floors of the Hawthorne works were awaiting redevelopment at the time I called. The factory had hosted a series of experiments between 1924 and 1932. These had two distinct phases. The first was designed to discover whether electric lighting - then a new development for factories - could improve productivity.

The small "test" team of women assembly workers did indeed improve its output when the lighting was increased. What really threw the investigators was that when the lighting was dimmed to the level of moonlight, production rose again.

Mayo, the Harvard professor brought in to comment on a further set of experiments, this time looking for the real reasons behind the increased output, concluded that it had everything to do with employee morale. The women, he said, felt special because they had been separated from others and given much more managerial attention than their colleagues. People were taking an interest in them.

The conclusions may well have been correct but the absence of a proper control experiment meant that other possibilities could not be discounted. Western Electric's personnel manager, for example, believed that money had been the biggest factor in the production improvements, since those in the test room had been given a better rate of pay. But Mayo chose to ignore this point. He also ignored the idea that motivation can vary in strength and direction depending on circumstances.

Maslow pursued this line of thinking in developing his theoretical hierarchy of needs that explains how people's desires change as respective needs are fulfilled. Frederick Herzberg turned the problem of motivation on its head by looking at sources of dissatisfaction at work and found that the things that demotivated people

differed from those that inspired them.

The conditions that needed to be right if people were not to become dissatisfied with their jobs he called "hygiene factors". In various studies, he found that the most important of these involved the culture of the company and the way that people were supervised. Work conditions and salary were important but less so. What he called the "intrinsic motivators" were the sense of achievement from a job well done, recognition, the work itself and responsibility, together with, to a lesser extent, potential for advancement and learning.

Curiously, although Herzberg considered what he called "kick in the pants" motivation, he did not associate this with fear. Rather he reflected that motivation was attached to the supervisor who was issuing the threat. There was motivational push - the kick - and there was an alternative "pull" that could be exerted through reward. This stick-and-carrot approach, he concluded, was not intrinsic motivation, because people were doing things in response to some stimulus and not because it was something they really wanted to do. With this kind of stimulus, he noted, it was necessary constantly to up the ante.

In an experiment that did include control groups to avoid the distorting "Hawthorne effect", Herzberg's list of leading motivators such as recognition and added responsibility were introduced gradually at the rate of one a week among one of the groups. Subject matter experts were appointed in each group, supervision and the inspection of work were reduced and work quotas were dropped. Within six months the group was out-performing the control groups where no such changes had been introduced. The achieving group's members were enjoying their jobs more and experiencing less absenteeism than the other groups.

Unlike the Hawthorne results, Herzberg's studies had established beyond doubt the productivity that could be achieved by investing greater responsibility among work teams. So why, in spite of all that has been demonstrated about the advantages of investing responsibility in workers - so-called empowerment - do we still see so little of it in the workplace?

Why instead do so many managements feel that it is acceptable, even desirable, to maintain a climate of fear? Sally-Ann Huson, knowledge and intellectual property director at TMI, a UK training and development company, points out that a degree of fear can be helpful in some activities.

"Fear of falling off a cliff when you are skiing will keep you focused on what you are doing; but I don't experience the same fear when I am running a training programme. It's less of an issue," she says. "You could argue that it can be linked to your reputation or a worry of experiencing rejection.

"A lot of people don't realise that motivation is about the circumstances that exist at any given moment when a task needs to be accomplished. I love what I do and find it inspiring. But there are days when my energy isn't there and the 'to do' list is as long at the end as it was at the beginning. We have to accept that motivation is a complex issue."

There's the rub. It helps to explain why Peter Drucker, the management writer, once remarked: "We know nothing about motivation. All we can do is write books about it."

