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Motivation: Dispelling Some Management Myths: An Analytical Critique

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The paper presented will analyze and discuss several common beliefs about motivations that are held by managers in various work settings. Behavior analytic principles and research will be used as reference for the analyses and discussions. The position taken is that several of the common beliefs are not supported by either casual or empirical observation. Alternative explanations end applications, supported by a body of research in the field of behavior analysis, will be offered.

Key Words: Motivation, Rewards, Goal Setting, Competition, Threats, Incentives

Introduction

All of us who work with others in a supervisory or management role have encountered difficulties in motivating people to do the work we need them to do. We also have our viewpoints on what motivation is, and what our responsibility is in motivating others. This paper will discuss some common Behavior Analytic perspectives regarding motivation in the work place. It will offer some critical analyses of those beliefs and some alternative ways of thinking about motivation and how to motivate. The ideas put forth have been studied extensively in both laboratory and field studies including studies in various business and industry settings (Daniel,, 1994; Daniels,, 1989; Gilbert, 1978; O'Brien, Dickinson, and Resow, 1982; Skinner, 1969).

Myth #1: Goal setting is a great motivator

Most successful people commonly use goal setting. The tools of organizing, prioritizing, and planning generally aid them in more efficient and/or more productive performance. It would seem, then, that goal setting would serve as a valuable motivator f or optimizing performance (Fellner & Sulzer-Azaroff, 1984). Because of this notion, management programs that employ goal-setting strategies, such as Management by Objectives (MBO), have been widely implemented. The success of such programs is generally not of the magnitude, as one would predict. Why? In park because effective goal setting is a somewhat difficult skill involving identifying the right goals and determining the right objectives. Many, through lack of experience at setting appropriate goals and objectives, set unrealistic goals and objectives and, thus, doom themselves to failure. They are not able to meet the goals and objectives they outline. When this occurs, they not only experience the personal disappointment inherent in failing, but they also tend to incur criticism and perhaps other punitive consequences from superiors. This experience, instead of motivating the individual to perform better, tends to discourage both goal setting and other work performance (Fellner and Sulzer-Azaroff, 1984). If given a choice, the individual is not likely to choose to use the goal setting strategy because using it did not 'payoff'. Further, the experience of having set goals and then failing to achieve them, points out what was not accomplished and thereby limits what the individual will attempt in the future.

Even when goal setting is used successfully to plan and prioritize tasks that are accomplished, it is not the goal setting that is the motivator. It is the attainment of goals (Fellner and Sulzer-Azaroff, 1984; Huber, 1985-1986) that will motivate individuals to: 1) continue to set goals and 2) perform well. When an individual reaches a goal or completes an objective, there is recognition of accomplishment and feeling of success that the individual most likely experiences. Further, superiors tend to be pleased with the achievement and may commend the individual or at least find fewer faults in what they have done. The accomplishment itself, the joy of accomplishment and the acknowledgement of the accomplishment by others is what motivates the individual to continue to work hard and do well.

Myth #2: Workshops/seminars/meetings are great motivators

Many managers and supervisors believe that attending inspirational workshops, seminars and meetings is a great way to motivate people to work harder and better at their jobs. After all, they contend, one has only to observe how excited the attendees are and listen to the great, new ideas that they bring back from the event to know that they are now highly motivated to excel at their work. There is some truth to this in that when individuals come back to work after listening to charismatic presenters, there is a definite tendency for there to be some renewed vigor in doing their work and in trying out the new ideas that they learned. Unfortunately, this surge in performance is generally short lived (Johnson, 1975). After a few days or perhaps a few weeks, the individuals slip back to their former levels and habitual methods. Why? Because usually they experience that it just isn't worth the effort to continue doing more or working harder. They experience that, despise the fact that they are getting more done or doing better quality work, they are not getting paid more nor even being recognized more for their extra efforts. Unless, there is a personal satisfaction that they derive from performing more effectively or more efficiently, there simply is no motivation to continue working harder.

Although, as discussed above, workshops, seminars, and meetings are not, in and of themselves great motivators, they can be used as motivators. One way is to reward people who are doing well with the opportunity to attend the event. Thus, they would earn the privilege of attending the workshop, seminar, or meeting by performing well. This won't work for every individual, but will word for those who would enjoy the break from the routine, would not be overwhelmed with work that piled up in their absence, and would get paid for their time while at the event. Another way to enhance the motivational aspects of workshops, seminars and meetings is to make sure that individuals who do implement ideas and perform better once they return, receive feedback, acknowledgement, and perhaps other rewards for the improvements. Thus, they will experience some benefit for their increased efforts and will be more likely to continue to work at the higher level.

Myth #3: Competition is a great motivator

Many analogies have been made between sports scenarios and work place scenarios. One factor that is a critical element in the sports arena is that of competition. In sports, individuals seek to be better at their events, or in their team positions, than other individuals, and teams strive to defeat the opposing teams. All in all, the participants are striving to do their best and to win. On the surface, this concept of competition seems like a valuable tool to implement in the workplace. The logic is that competition (in sports) leads to individuals striving to do their best; in the workplace we want people doing their best; thus, using competition in the workplace will lead to employees striving to do their best. What has been left out of this line of thinking and where the critical error lies, is in the observation that people compete to win Inherent in competition that pits individuals against other individuals, is the fact that only one individual, or one team, can win. All of the other competitors, thus, lose. In the workplace this can be disastrous. Especially if winning will result in some highly desirable prize, competition sets the stage for an individual doing what ever it takes to win. This not only means doing the best that they can do at their job, but it also can mean sabotaging the opponents. When the opponents work within the same company, this is an obvious problem.

A second way that competition is harmful in the workplace is that losing or failing, especially when trying to do their best, is very discouraging for many, if not most individuals. If certain individuals or teams regularly win and the others regularly lose (as does tend to happen), at some point those who continually lose, will stop making the effort Their performance will deteriorate instead of getting better. If there is only one winner and the rest lose, over time the majority of individuals will, thus, be losing and consequently will stop making the effort. The overall effect of using competition in the workplace, then, is that it will not motivate people to work harder, but will instead, tend to discourage people from trying (Daniels, 1989).

Competition can, however, be used advantageously in the work place with a slight shift in focus. If the competition is set up to be a competition against standards or goals, instead of a competition between individuals or teams, it can be a valuable tool Daniels, 1989). With this focus, it is possible for all of the workers who compete, to win. Winning or succeeding does tend to encourage people to continue to work hard, because winning or succeeding means that the efforts have paid off. Competing against standards can also have a bonus side effect. It frequently enhances cooperation between the individuals involved. One primary reason this may occur is that sometimes-greater success can be gained by working together.

Myth #4: The only way to motivate some people is to threaten them with the consequences

Threatening employees with job termination, loss of pay, reprimands or other undesirable consequences is a common tactic used to get some people to work. To the manager or supervisor who employs this tactic, it seems to be effective. This is because it usually results in the person doing whatever they need to do to avoid the consequence (Johnson, 1975; Komaki, (1986); Locke, Feren, McCaleb, Shaw, and Denny, 1980). This is especially true if the worker knows that the manager will follow through with what was said.

The worker doesn't do what is demanded and the consequences are delivered, over time the individual will either begin doing what he is told, or he will leave the company, by choice or through termination. Either situation, at first look, seems to be desirable. Either the work gets done or the problem employee is self-managed making room for someone who will possibly be a better worker.

There are, however, several problems with using threats in the workplace (Locke, et al, 1980). First, the threats may not work. Second, even if the threats work to get the desired performance, the employee is likely to perform only at the minimal level required and she may also become disgruntled. Third, if the threats lead to the employee leaving the company, there is a turnover cost that maybe significant.

If threats are stated, but not carried out, they will not be effective at getting the desired behavior. If employees learn that, despite what the manager says, they can continue to do just what they were doing without losing their job, or pay, or being reprimanded they will most likely just continue to do what they were doing. There really is no reason to change. In this case the threats clearly do not motivate the desired performance.

If the manager does use threats, does carry them out when necessary, and does, thereby, get the person to do what is being demanded, performance will still not be optimized and, additionally, several undesirable side effects may occur. Performance will not be maximized because the only benefit to the employee will be gained by doing just what was asked. In that way the threatened consequence may be avoided. Doing more than, or better than, what was demanded in the threat, won't result in any better outcome. Thus, the manager will get the performance that was required, but nothing more. In addition, employees who receive threats from their supervisors tend to become resentful and disgruntled. They may talk poorly about the manager, and perhaps the company, and they may look for opportunities to get back at either or both. Both of these situations could prove to be quite detrimental to the company.

If using threats leads to employees leaving the company, the company now has to deal with all the results of the turnover, including some work going undone f or some length of time, others having to pick up the slack, training new employees, etcetera. Because of the costs associated with turnover, it really is not desirable to lose many employees. Also in this scenario, the effort to motivate the employee to perform better clearly does not work.

An alternative to using threats and their consequences to try to motivate performance is to use a reverse strategy which is to acknowledge and reward employees for improving and for doing good work. This can lead to on-going improvement, in that, continual improvement continues to pay off for the employee. Thus, the manager can create an incentive for the employee to maximize performance instead of just getting by with what has to be done.

Myth #5: Managers should not have to use rewards to mot ivate people to do jobs they're getting paid to do.

Perhaps managers shouldn't have to use rewards to motivate people to work bard or do a good job. However, observations of work performance show that: 1) money is not enough to get all people to do what they are supposedly getting paid to do, and 2) rewards do work to motivate behavior (Connellan, 1978; Epstein, 1985; Johnson, 1975; Knapp, Hopper, and Bell, 1984). That is the reality. If money were enough to get people to do their jobs, there would be no problem. Furthermore, if rewarding and showing appreciation to people for doing good work does motivate people to perform better, it is logical to do so.

Myth #6: Companies cannot afford the cost of using rewards to motivate their employees

Rewarding employees for doing a good job does not have to be a costly venture (Daniels, 1994; Daniels, 1989). Small tokens of acknowledgement and appreciation that cost little or nothing can greatly enhance performance. How can this be? In most work settings such expressions of appreciation (praise) and acknowledgement of good performance (positive feedback) are so rare that their value is great. This is simply a matter of economics. What is in low supply (rewards) are in high demand People will pay more (in this case they will pay in teens of work output) for what is in high demand, but low supply (rewards). Sincere expressions of appreciation and acknowledgement can, thus, be rewards that cost the company little, yet bring large dividends in performance

Main #7: Managers cannot afford the time it takes to motivate employees with praise and reward systems

Many managers spend a large portion of their time "putting out fires". These problems arise, to a large extent, when the people they are supervising don't do what they are told to do. They do something else, or they don't do enough, or they don't do the job well. The common response to these problems is for the manager to repeat the instructions and/ or threaten with consequences to get the workers to do what they should have been doing in the first place (Daniels, 1989). If the task was unclear to begin with, repeating the instructions may or may not help depending on whether the manager is able to clarify what is desired If the initial instructions were clear, the employee not following them, is a motivational problem. If this is the case, as discussed above, using threats and punitive consequences, at best, just gets the job done to the minimum standard required. In contrast, using praise and reward systems can get employees to improve and work at levels far in excess of what is minimally acceptable. What this means is employees will do what they are praised and rewarded for doing. They will do what they are asked to do; as much or more than they are asked to do; and at or above the quality they are asked to do, if it benefits them to do so. By using praise and rewards to get people performing well, the manager is teeing proactive in problem-solving end will, in actuality save time. Metaphorically speaking, the manager will be able to "some forests" instead of just saving what can be saved by putting out the fires.

Myth #8: Some people are just plain lazy and if they don't have some self -motivation there's little, if anything, the manager can do to motivate them

Saying that some individuals are "lazy" is really saying that they are not motivated. If we look at motivation as a process of inciting action, instead of as an internal (static) state, we open the door to the possibility of being able to affect motivation (Daniels, 1994; Daniels, 1989). People who are 'self-motivated', thus, have developed the skill of being able to motivate themselves. Further, it is likely that they use the same tools to motivate their own behavior as are used to motivate the behavior of others. Part of what motivates their behavior is the fact that, doing what has to be done, helps them to avoid undesirable consequences such as failing, feeling guilty, and compounding stress. People who are highly self-motivated and do exceptionally well *(i.e.* those who maximize their performance), have experienced success, the acknowledgement of their success, and the excitement of their success. Many of these rewards have come from (and continue to come from external sources (parents, peers, teachers, supervisors, etc.), but what such self-motivated individuals have learned, is to also reward themselves. They have learned to recognize their successes, praise themselves for successes and allow themselves the good feelings that accompany their successes. People who are not self-motivated have not likely had similarly successful experiences and they have not acquired similar skills. Managers who work with such individuals are presented with a great opportunity to both motivate them and help them develop self-motivation skills.

If what develops motivation and self-motivation is 'success' as was argued above, then the first step in motivating and developing self-motivation is setting up individuals to succeed. This generally means setting goals and assigning tasks that will challenge the individual, but which also will be ones the individual will most likely be able to accomplish. As they succeed, the manager needs to point out the success, or help the individual identify their success, praise the success and show excitement over the success. Over time the individual will learn to experience these rewards aside from the input of others.

Is it cost effective for the manager to work on developing self-motivation in "lazy" employees? Perhaps "yes", perhaps "no" depending upon many factors, not the least of which is the cost of employee turnover. The point is, however, that even "lazy " employees can be motivated.

Conclusion

The paper presented has discussed several of the issues ant arguments centered on 'motivation'. The behavior analytic perspective has been presented in arguing against several commonly heft belief s about motivation in the work place. All of the ideas presented have been studied in various work place settings. The task at hand is to replicate and apply the steadies and findings within the construction industry.

There are some unique factors within the construction industry that may make some of the applications more challenging. For example, for some construction companies, each job means different work crews and, to some extent, different managers. This constant change can make it more difficult to apply appropriate rewards as motivators. Further, it may be even more tempting to use threats to motivate, since threats, as pointed out in the discussion, tends to work quickly and, thus, seem, at least in the short run, to be effective. With constant change in work groups, managers may not be as concerned with the long-term effects of using threats. However, given that many of the same workers will be employed on different jobs, and given concern for the quality of the present job, it is still in the best interest of the company to remember the potential harm in using threats to motivate workers.

Another factor that makes using reward systems a challenge is in dealing with unions. Legal, contractual, constraints can make the use of some reward systems all but impossible to implement. However, social rewards, such as praise, acknowledgement, and appreciation, because they don't involve monetary value, can usually be used without contention. Also, as pointed out above, because of the relative scarcity of praise and other verbal appreciation, if the comments are sincere, they can be highly motivating and can lead to enhanced self-motivation.

In the construction industry, as in any industry, there are limitations, or at least considerations, in applying motivational strategies. This is not, however, a reason to forgo methods that are more positive than some of the more traditional and more common, approaches. It is, instead a challenge to adapt strategies for the ultimate benefit of both the company and the employees.

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