1-1-1989

Management Misperceptions: An Obstacle to Motivation

Gerald E. Goll
University of Nevada, Las Vegas, null@unlv.nevada.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/hospitalityreview

Management Misperceptions: An Obstacle to Motivation

Abstract

Managers and supervisors create a motivational environment by being responsive to the needs and wants of employees. However, managers have many misconceptions about what workers want from their jobs. The author discusses how to create the best organizational environment.

Management Misperceptions:
An Obstacle to Motivation

by
Gerald E. Goll
Assistant Professor of Management
College of Hotel Administration
University of Nevada, Las Vegas

Managers and supervisors create a motivational environment by being responsive to the needs and wants of employees. However, managers have many misconceptions about what workers want from their jobs. The author discusses how to create the best organizational environment.

It may be said that a manager cannot motivate an employee. Motivation is a very personal thing. People are motivated by what they themselves need or want, not by what others believe they need or want. Motivation is simply the strength of a drive toward satisfaction of an operative need or want. However, managers are able to create a motivational environment, an environment in which employees are able to find a sense of inner satisfaction. Managers and supervisors are able to create a motivational environment by being responsive to the needs and wants of employees. However, in order to be responsive, an accurate perception of what workers want from their work is essential.

Employers and supervisors persist in their perception that employees place the greatest importance on wages and job security. This belief continues to obscure the reason that many people serve. Indeed, the over-emphasis on pay may be the very thing that obscures a person's reason for serving; if the only incentive is pay, then the only reason people will work will be for the money.

Some employers realize that they can get almost anyone to come work for them if they offer enough money, but it will take more than money to keep that person. This may be one of the more critical factors in the creation and retention of quality employees in the hospitality industry in which the costs of high employee turnover may have a serious impact on guest satisfaction and organization profits. Facing an uncertain future in available labor due to the changing demographics of the traditional hospitality labor market, the problem of motivation and retention may only be compounding itself. The nub of the problem may very well be traced to management's misperception of what workers really want from their work.

85

A first, and possibly most critical, step in correcting management's misperceptions is the development of an ability to more empathetically view the work environment through the eyes of the employees. Judging the quality of a job using only self-reference is proving to be self-defeating. Management must better understand the situation.

Surveys of Workers Send Story Message

Consistent with concerns over motivation and productivity, several surveys have been conducted over the past 40 years to determine what workers want from their work. Indeed, the issue continues to be what can be offered to motivate workers to higher levels of productivity and to enhance higher rates of retention of the more productive employees. These surveys are sending a strong and consistent message, a message that too many employers are missing or, even worse, ignoring. These are not college professors espousing theories and concepts, although well they might because many of the concepts which have passed the test of time are applicable if taken seriously. These are, instead, the workers themselves telling anyone who will listen what is really important to them.

Representative of these surveys is one which was conducted in 1946 by the Labor Relations Institute of New York. Workers were asked to rank 10 factors of their work in the order of importance to them. Supervisors were asked to rank the same 10 factors in the order that they believed the workers would rank them. The results are shown in Table 1.

Table 1
General Industry
What Workers Want From Their Work
(1946)

Employee Ranking		Supervisor Ranking
1	Full appreciation of work done	8
2	Feeling of being in on things	9
3	Sympathetic help with personal problems	10
4	Job security	2
5	Good wages	1
6	Interesting work	5
7	Promotion and growth within the organization	3
8	Personal loyalty to employees	6
9	Good working conditions	4
10	Tactful discipline	7

Source: K. Kovach, "Why Motivational Theories Don't Work," *S.A.M. Advanced Management Journal*, (Spring 1980), p. 56.

86

This survey was repeated by Kenneth A. Kovach in 1980[1] by administering the same questionnaire to over 200 employees and their immediate supervisors to see if the results bore any resemblance to the 1946 survey. The similarities were striking. In over 35 years of progress in management thinking, there was virtually no change in management's perception of what was important to the workers. The results of Kovach's survey are shown in Table 2.

Table 2
General Industry
What Workers Want From Their Work
(1980)

Employee Ranking		Supervisor Ranking
1	Interesting work	5
2	Full appreciation of work done	8
3	Feeling of being in on things	10
4	Job security	2
5	Good wages	1
6	Promotion and growth within the organization	3
7	Good working conditions	4
8	Personal loyalty to employees	7
9	Sympathetic help with personal problems	9
10	Tactful discipline	6

Source: K. Kovach, "Why Motivational Theories Don't Work," *S.A.M. Advanced Management Journal*, (Spring 1980), p. 57.

As Kovach pointed out, the absolute rankings of the items, although interesting, are not the issue. The significance lies in the variance between what the employees considered to be important in their jobs and what their supervisors thought was important to these same employees. At issue is the dichotomy between what the workers say they want and what management thinks they want. This variance is indicative of the misperceptions harbored by supervisors and reflects the problems associated with the use of self-reference in attempting to create a motivational and productive work environment.

In comparing the two surveys, it is readily apparent that "full appreciation of work done" and "a feeling of being in on things" were of significant importance to the workers. However, the supervisors ranked these two items consistently low. Supervisors in both surveys ranked "interesting work" fifth, but in the surveys of workers, "interesting work" climbed from sixth in 1946 to first in 1980.

In both surveys, the workers indicated that job security and good wages were important by ranking them fourth and fifth. However, other factors may have been as important if not more important. The supervisors consistently ranked good wages and job security first and second. It is not the rankings, per se, which are important. It is the misperceptions of management which is significant in providing incentives to employees which are most responsive to their needs and wants.

87

Hospitality Workers Are Surveyed

These findings could also have significant implications within the hospitality industry. Several hospitality associations, including the National Restaurant Association and the American Hotel and Motel Association, are working in concert to promote the industry as a good one in which to work. The public relations experts have come up with catchy slogans to catch the eye and capture the imagination of potential employees.

These overtures will fall on deaf ears unless they appeal to what workers really want out of their work. Even in these employee recruiting efforts, the focus appears to be on wages.

The survey was again conducted during the summer of 1987 using the same questionnaire used by Kovach. Sampling was limited to only workers and supervisors in the hospitality industry, specifically lodging and food and beverage operations in the Midwest, Southwest, and West.

Over 800 hourly employees were asked to rank the 10 factors in the order of importance to them. This sampling consisted of hourly workers, both tipped and non-tipped, in motels and hotels as well as in food and beverage operations in both free-standing restaurants and within hotels. Geographically, there were responses from businesses in the Chicago, Milwaukee, Las Vegas, Houston, San Diego, and San Francisco areas. Over 335 supervisors were asked to rank the factors in the order that they perceived that the workers would rank them. Supervisors' responses were obtained largely from within the same organizations from which the workers' responses were obtained. This provided some control over the relationship of the responses of both.

The rankings of the factors were established by two methods. First, a spreadsheet was developed with the frequency of responses for individual factors recorded. Second, the frequencies were totalled, weighted according to the ranking number, and then averaged. Without exception, the frequency method and averaging method produced identical results.

This survey of hospitality workers and supervisors is continuing to be conducted as opportunities such as management seminars, present themselves. The trend of responses is consistent. Questionnaires are provided several days before the seminar and completed forms are collected and tabulated upon the arrival of respondents at the property. Presentation of the results at the property is a sure-fire method of increasing interest in the seminar's content, especially when the managers and supervisors see for themselves their own misperceptions of what is important to the very people they are supervising.

The results of this continuing survey are shown in Table 3.

Table 3
Hospitality Industry
What Workers Want From Their Work
(1987)

Employee Ranking		Supervisor Ranking
1	Appreciation of work done	5
2	Interesting work	6
3	Good wages	1
4	Promotion and growth within the organization	4
5	Job Security	2
6	A feeling of being in on things	8
7	Good working conditions	3
8	Personal loyalty to employees	7
9	Sympathetic help with personal problems	10
10	Tactful discipline	9

Just as supervisors in general industry had perceived that workers would rank good wages and job security first and second, so did supervisors in the hospitality industry. Most assuredly, hospitality workers gave significance to wages and security, but ranked "appreciation of work done" and "interesting work" ahead of these tangibles. As long as motivation and incentive programs are based on these misperceptions, those factors which truly provide workers with a high sense of satisfaction will be overlooked. This oversight can be costly in both the short and the long run. This is not to say that pay and job security are not important. They are. This is a given. But the workers themselves are telling us that there may be some other things which are just as important, and maybe more important.

Responsive Management is Effective Management

Management can, and possibly should, be more responsive to the needs and wants of its employees. To be responsive to employees is not a contradiction. Management serves four constituencies: its guests, its employees, its owners, and the organization itself. Indeed, the organization is the sum total. These constituencies constitute a system and, as in any system, any influence on one part has the potential to impact on all parts. Misperceptions of what workers really want out of their work causes management to miss the target in providing meaningful incentives and motivators. This unresponsiveness to employees can, and indeed does, impact on being responsive to the expectations of the other consistencies.

This is an especially sensitive phenomenon in the hospitality industry which, by definition, is labor intensive. Other industries may attempt to solve labor problems through automation, but automation can go only so far in the hospitality industry. No machine can ever replace a cheery smile and a sincere, "May I help you?"

89

Management creates the organizational environment. Is the environment conducive to employee satisfaction, productivity, and retention, or is it more conducive to employees simply going through the motions, marginal productivity and quality, and excessive employee turnover? It becomes obvious that employee turnover is only one of many symptoms of the bigger problem, management's unresponsiveness caused by its misperceptions which are formed by self-reference. The overriding need is for management to understand the situation through the employees' eyes, not just its own.

Management Must Consider Employees' Interests

Victor Vroom's "expectancy theory" is a case in point.[2] Paraphrasing his basic variables of expectancy, instrumentality, and valence with more common terms provides clarity and converts his ideas from theory to an "intellectual tool" which can be pragmatically employed.

Employees ask four questions. Management must be prepared to answer them, not in terms of self-reference, but in terms of the employees' interests. Better yet, proactive management answers these questions before they have to be asked.

"What's in it for me?"

This may be the most common question asked in society today. Most assuredly students are asking it in class and employees are asking it at work. This question is at the heart of expectancy and in being responsive to employees' needs. But how can management be responsive if it misperceives what really counts to the employees?

"How hard do I have to work to get what's in it for me?"

This question, also asked by employees, strongly influences their effort and productivity. If the task assigned is perceived to be beyond their current abilities or conflicts with their personal values, forget it. On the other hand, management through more empathetic supervision and meaningful training may be able to increase each employee's ability. This is what Martin Evans and Robert House were talking about in the "path-goal model of leadership."[3] Effective management provides the path by which employees are able to reach their own goals as well as the organization's. Indeed, these goals can be very similar. They need not be in conflict.

More than just theory, this may also become an intellectual tool for management to improve satisfaction, productivity, and retention. Robert Herzberg has shown us that sense of achievement and personal growth and development are strong motivators.[4] What better way to increase employee loyalty and, thus, productivity and retention? When an employee can say, "I am better today than I was yesterday but not as good as I will be tomorrow," that employee will feel good about himself. When he recognizes that this improved self-image is due to his employer's caring, that employee may become a retention, not a turnover, statistic.

"What are my real chances of getting what's in it for me if I do what you want?"

If management uses only the carrot-and-the-stick approach and

90

then reneges on the carrot, all efforts are wasted. Nothing will fragment an organization faster than management failing to keep its word. Of course, this employee will expect more because he is worth more to the organization. Whatever the added cost, it will be less to the organization than marginal productivity and high rates of employee turnover. More significantly, the surveys indicate that there are other rewards besides pay.

"And, is what's in it for me really what I want?"

This is the key question that management must answer, not by promises but by performance. If the reward is not of value to the employee, or is of less value than what is really valued by the person, then employee performance will be less than expected. It is, indeed, a cause and effect relationship.

Showing employees that their efforts are appreciated, creating more interesting jobs, and affording employees the opportunity to grow and develop within the organization are all critical factors in motivation. The employees themselves are telling us this.

Feedback is essential, but it must be the right kind of feedback. It is integral to creating a motivational environment. However, the wrong kind of feedback may be worse than no feedback at all. More interesting and satisfying jobs can be created.[5] By creating indispensable jobs, employees can become relatively indispensable. It may well be the quality of the job that is at the heart of motivation.

The overriding need is for management to understand the situation and understand it empathetically—to "see" the environment it is creating through the eyes of the employees as much, or more, than seeing it through its own eyes. It is this insight which can convert theory to a pragmatic tool.

It is a reactive, short-sighted view that motivational theories don't work. They do work! Implementation will usually fall short, however, when based on misperceptions of what really motivates employees. Pay and job security are important, but there are some other things that may be just as important, or even more important.

References

[1] Kenneth A. Kovach, "Why Motivational Theories Don't Work," *S.A.M Advanced Management Journal*, (Spring 1980), pp. 54-59.

[2] Victor H. Vroom, *Work and Motivation*, (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1964).

[3] Robert J. House, "A Path-Goal Theory of Leadership Effectiveness," *Administrative Science Quarterly*, (September 1971), pp. 321-328.

[4] Frederick Herzberg, *Work and the Nature of Man*, (Cleveland, Ohio: World Publishing Company, 1966).

[5] Gerald E. Goll, "Relative Indispensability," *The Bottomline*, (August/ September, 1988), pp. 18-21.