

MOTIVATION: A FUNCTION OF COMMUNICATION, BEHAVIOR DEFINITION & REWARD**Barrie Edwin Millen Blunt, Oklahoma State University**

“The question is why some workers tend to be high producers, or why persons of largely similar backgrounds who are engaged in the same activity under comparable conditions exhibit considerable variability in output.” (Georgopolulos et al 1957 345)

During an age of cutbacks, declining federal support, and rising unemployment, one must try to understand what has fostered confusion for the past 25 years. What stimulates productivity? What can organizations and their managers do to stimulate employees, produce results, and enhance growth of subordinates?

Much effort has been devoted to the leadership inquiry. The *style approach* to leadership attempted to describe various leader styles (Lewin et al 1939; Blake, Mouton 1964; Cartwright, Zander 1960; Halpin, Winer 1957; Hemphill, Coons 1957; Kahn 1958; Katz et al 1950). The more recent *contingency* approaches to leadership assert that no one style of leadership is universally more appropriate than another (Fiedler 1967; Fiedler, Chemers 1974; Tannenbaum, Schmidt 1958; Hersey, Blanchard 1969). Theorists using this framework suggest that the appropriate leader behavior style depends on situational factors. Recent *path-goal* works have considered various contingencies including subordinate expectations, but have continued to focus on contingency-style impacts (House, Dessler 1973; Greene 1979; Schriesheim, DeNisi 1979; Evans 1974). The essential difficulty with this approach is the potentially large number of alternatives relative to style. Thus, it is reasonable to imagine equally as many “correct” style behaviors as there are performance situations.

An alternative approach to leadership research is to focus on supervisor-subordinate interactions and subsequent outcomes, rather than on styles and outcomes. The underlying logic of this process is straightforward. All persons are inclined to engage in certain behaviors to the extent that those behaviors will result in outcomes which are perceived as beneficial. If a congressman or mayor or president places high value on retaining an office, the aspirant will probably engage in behaviors thought likely to produce that outcome.

Similarly, individuals in an organization who place a high value on money will probably focus their efforts to ensure that they receive what they value. Appropriate behavior for politicians is to position themselves on visible issues in a manner consistent with the majority of their constituency, and for the organization worker it may be to produce a large output.

Such a fundamental approach is valuable for supervisors concerned with employee motivation and productivity as well as for individuals considering research in organizational leadership. The central issue is: How can the organization influence subordinate behaviors through the use of benefits, or similarly, how can individuals best acquire from an organization that which they value for themselves and their families?

A four-step process is necessary to fulfill these identical, yet often widely divergent goals.

- 1) The most difficult step structurally is to provide the individual supervisor with authority and autonomy to control independently a variety of benefit options available to each subordinate. Innovations such as across-the-board “merit” increases clearly move away from this discretionary approach.
- 2) Assuming the implementation of supervisory discretion, an open and honest line of communication must be established between each pairing of supervisor and subordinate. This linkage has the primary purpose of articulation and understanding of subordinate interests and values. It is a linkage of critical importance which is constantly smothered by other concerns perceived to be more pressing. The wealth of literature on performance appraisal indicates the extent and severity of this problem.
- 3) The behaviors sought by the organization and the supervisor must be clearly defined for each individual subordinate. This requires not only the definition of immediate tasks, but more important, a clear indication of the overarching behaviors which the supervisor considers most important to the organization.
- 4) There must be appropriate valued rewards for subordinates who engage in defined behaviors.

One may contend that this approach contains at least two significant limitations. First, there is the possibility that individuals may not know or understand their own values. Second, it may be inappropriate for an organization inflexibly to define behaviors in which employees are to engage. In response to the first criticism, I suggest the implementation of a strategy whereby 1) the employee is provided a predefined benefit structure which includes a variety of incentives, and 2) that the supervisor works with the employee to understand better the employee's individual values and desires. This is entirely consistent with effective communication and efficient management.

The second issue requires acceptance and understanding, rather than rectification. We must recognize that the individual has a responsibility to the organization to provide the defined services. It is only in this capacity that the organization can and should articulate defined behaviors. These actions taken by the supervisor are appropriate and essential.

In sum, the worker of today is very similar to the worker of other eras, and like all workers, desires valued rewards for effective efforts. It is in the best interests of the organization to tie these benefit opportunities to motivated and productive behavior. This is the responsibility of the organization to itself, its supervisors and its individual workers.

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