Improving Workplace Productivity: Applications of Maslow's Need Theory and Locke's Goal-Setting

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Improving Workplace Productivity: Applications of Maslow's Need Theory and Locke's Goal-Setting

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Abstract

Many famous I-O psychologists have constantly devoted and contributed in the study of motivation at workplace, thus giving birth to various motivation theories over the past decades. By introducing extraordinary perspectives or findings, they either focus on behaviors, needs, expectancy or goal-setting.

The authors have selected Maslow's Need Theory and Locke's Goal-setting Theory-two out of the most popular theories on motivation, and will look into their effectiveness in influencing productivity and performance in groups or individuals.

Keywords: I/O psychologist; motivation theory; Maslow; Locke

Introduction

The way of describing why people are willing to work has been developed from the concept of "an instinct" to more comprehensive ones like "need, motive, or drive" [1]. When the term "Motivation" evolved, Vinacke has described it as the conditions responsible for variations in intensity, persistence, quality, and direction of ongoing behavior [2]. Motivation is always considered largely related to job performance and productivity. The more motivated the employee, the better performance they will have. Theories developed on motivation are believed to be practical in helping leaders to give a positive influence in productivity of the organization.

Maslow's Need Theory

American psychologist Abraham Harold Maslow first introduced his concept of a hierarchy of needs in his paper "A Theory of Human Motivation" in 1943 and his subsequent book Motivation and Personality, in which he claimed that these needs are universal [3]. According to Maslow, needs, which are biological or instinctive, characterize humans in general and have a genetic base [4]. They often influence behavior unconsciously. What causes people to behave as they do is the process of satisfying these needs. After a need is satisfied, another need rises to take its place. Life is always chasing for satisfying needs. If a lower-level need has not been satisfied or fulfilled, a person will revert to actions that might satisfy the unsatisfied lower-level need.

As the theory describes, the needs are arranged in a hierarchical order of importance, namely physiological needs, safety needs, social needs, esteem needs and self-actualization needs. The five different levels of Maslow's hierarchy of needs are most often displayed as a pyramid. Needs at the bottom of the pyramid are basic physical requirements including the need for food, water, shelter,

and warmth. Once these lower-level needs have been met, people can move on to the next level of needs, which are for safety and security. This can be described as financial security, health and wellness, safety against accidents and injury, etc. Then, people will further go up to third level of social needs, including love, friendship, or being accepted, etc.

Further up the pyramid, the need for personal esteem and feelings of accomplishment take place. And when it reaches to the top need level, Maslow insisted on the importance of self-actualization, which is a process of growing and developing as a person in order to achieve individual potential. According to Maslow's definition of self-actualization, it refers to fully use and exploiting one's talents, capabilities and potentialities, etc. As we sometimes say, live our lives to the fullest. Only very few people can satisfy this need, such as Martin Luther King, Jr., Gandhi, or Mother Theresa.

Application

Employees have basic physiological needs that they seek to satisfy and are specifically necessary for their motivation at work. In this sense, offering employees a place in their work environment that is stocked with food and drink, a place of higher standards of hygiene where employees can breathe clean fresh air and a competitive wage or salary to afford good accommodation and clothing helps employees meet their survival, i.e. of basic physiological needs [5,6]. It is said that "a person who is lacking food, safety, love, and esteem would probably hunger for food more strongly than for anything else" [7].

The basic needs level for staff can be satisfied through different ways. An effective one could be setting a wet pantry with warm and family atmosphere. Even though the company may not offer formal meals for all its employees, the leaders can consider placing some fruits, snacks, coffee, tea bags, etc. in the pantry. Such action does not have great cost but can create a sense of family to employees, letting them feel more attached to the company. More facilities can be provided including water dispenser, refrigerator, microwave heater or cooker, etc. It is also necessary to ensure good air ventilation or temperature regulation at the office, which can be achieved by providing air-conditioning, air sprays (especially in washing rooms), and even set up of standardized partitions and working seats. Many may enjoy or desire of working at an office like Microsoft offers, not just because of the attractive compensation

schemes, but also their spacious, innovative, and relaxing office areas. As founder of Facebook Mark Zuckerberg also said, "Treat your employees right so they won't use your internet to look for new jobs."

To satisfy the second hierarchy which involves safety and security, leaders have to ensure employees are working under safe environment. For example, the office facilities must be in compliance of the property safety legislation. There has been increasing support for working mums with new-born babies in the workplace, in which breast-feeding areas or restrooms for female staff are provided. This helps to protect female workers as well as give a strong support to them, as a result can also increase their motivation to work. A competitive compensation and benefits package induces the financial security to all employees. For sales-oriented jobs, leaders may even have to design a compensation plan specifically on commission basis.

Maslow's hierarchy has been seen as highly useful in offering a motivational framework that will get the Generation-Y workers to perform enthusiastically and deliver their best efforts. O'Malley reminded that Generation Y consider work-life balance as a necessity, rather than a luxury [8]. Therefore, a clear picture of career ladder and promotional plan, work-life balance culture, family-friendly policy, recognition schemes and life-long training can all be essential elements to fulfill the social needs for employees, especially the Generation Y or Z workers who always do not only focus on getting paid at work. Thus, Frank and Jeffrey suggested employers considering an adoption of a benefits/rewards menu or "cafeteria" plan, which includes a large series of benefits for employees to choose, so that employees are allowed to choose among alternative rewards and benefits packages, in a way can address to their different needs [9]. Some findings have shown that among information technology professionals, the model was used to demonstrate that money itself is not sufficient motivator for IT professionals and thus their motivation can be highly improved and perfected by the provision of those needs advocated by Maslow and in particular the self-esteem need [10].

However, the needs theory has its limitation when applied in real life. As it predicts that as people move up in the management hierarchy, they are motivated by increasingly higher-level needs. The fact is an organization can never give enough in terms of individual growth and development [11].

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Pointed out that "Maslow's need hierarchy theory is almost a non-testable theory". For example, his definition of self-actualization is difficult to test scientifically. His research on self-actualization was also based on a very limited sample of individuals.

Locke's Goal-setting Theory

The Goal-setting theory was initially proposed by Professor Edwin Locke of the University of Maryland at College Park and Professor Gary Latham of the University of Toronto, Canada. Compared to Maslow's need theory, Locke's goal-setting theory is considered to be more comprehensive by giving an emphasis on human intentional behavior regarding to motivation at work. Frank and Jeffrey commented that "it is this notion of purposefulness and intentionality that is unique to goal-setting theory [9]."

According to Locke and Latham, goals carry two major functions: They serve as a basis for motivation and they direct behavior [12]. A goal may guide a person on deciding how much effort to put into work. Goals are intended behaviors, and will influence people on task performance. While goals are important, it should be remembered that two conditions must first be completed before goals can positively influence performance, which are known as goal acceptance and goal commitment. Goal acceptance simply implies that a goal has been assigned, while goal commitment is broader and can include not only assigned goals but self-set goals as well. To explain further, the individual must be aware of the goal and know what must be achieved. Then he or she must accept the goal as something he or she is willing to work for. Acceptance of the goal implies the individual intends to engage in the behavior needed to attain it.

There has been a saying "Aim for the moon. If you miss, you may hit a star." Such idea can be reviewed through the theory as it suggests that people who have more difficult but attainable goals perform better than those who have less difficult goals. Thus more difficult goals generate more commitment to their attainment. Besides, the more specific the goal, the more concentrated the individual will pursuit effort in it as well as the more directed the behavior.

It is also important for the person to receive feedback about task performance; this guides whether the employee should work harder or continue at the same pace. This feedback can come from self-judgment or from other people. Amano stated that feedback is a critical element for improving performance because it informs the individual (or group) about his/her performance in a timely fashion [13]. Frank and Jeffrey also stated that the feedback connection makes the theory much more dynamic by showing that as the individual evaluates his or her performance, intermediate states may be changed [9].

Application

In recent years, goal-setting theory has been ranked high among various management theories. Rousseau posited that goal setting is a form of self-management, where people can set their own goals and translate them into action [14]. As Locke and colleagues proposed, goals have the effect of "directing attention and action (direction), mobilizing energy expenditure or effort (effort), prolonging effort over time (persistence) and motivating the individual to develop relevant strategies for goal attainment (strategy)" [15]. Smither cited three criteria in order for goal setting to be successful: goals must be specific, have time limits, and be challenging, but attainable [16]. He further elaborated that besides the above criteria, it is crucial that employees accept the goals and be committed to them.

Some believe that goal-setting theory can be useful in predicting job satisfaction, which is an important attribute for employee productivity and commitment to the organization. Goal setting is proved workable at the firm level. One example showed that CEO entrepreneurs in the architectural woodworking business set growth goals for their business. In two and 6-year follow-up studies, goal difficulty level was significantly associated with venture growth [17]. According to McCracken and Wallace, strategic human resource development could be achieved through employing the steps of goal-setting theory, which include defining the organization's business, identifying strengths and weaknesses, analyzing the organization's environment, identifying threats and opportunities, setting strategic goals, and ensuring these goals will be achieved [18]. The SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) thinking tool will be an effective way to analyze the above areas.

Latham and Locke suggested that leaders can be the key people in communicating the goals to the employees [19]. Management was convinced that goal setting is not an easy task that can be done without careful analysis of employees' self-efficacy aligned with the task difficulty. In this regard, leaders can introduce their ideas with the help of SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable,

Realistic, and Time-based) goals, and convince the employees to achieve them so as to achieve higher performance and productivity. It is also necessary to identify people of high and low self-efficacies as "people with high self-efficacies are more likely to choose difficult (high) goals than those with low self-efficacy" [19]. By doing this, management will be able to assign the goals to right people, which will result in better overall performance.

Furthermore, leaders may give positive feedback toward a successful goal achievement. Clark posited that avoidance and delay of tasks are indications of the existence of a commitment problem [20]. Therefore, leaders could help supervisors detect the existence of a commitment problem and use goal setting as an intervention. Besides, implementing a carefully designed performance review system can also help leaders to review their employees on the pace or direction of their work. For instance, the ProMES weighting scheme developed by Pritchard may be practical in increasing motivation and performance [21]. While goal-setting is adopted, leaders should also consider the gender and cultural differences among individuals and groups. Silverthorne stated that individual and gender differences play a critical role in selecting motivational interventions to improve performances [22]. For example, Asians tend to value group efforts, while Westerners value individual efforts.

Conclusion

Steve Jobs, co-founder of Apple Inc., once said: "The only way to do great work is to love what you do." To make staff love what they do might be the most essential yet complicated task when employers are trying to motivate their staff at work. There will never be a single perfect motivation theory in this world which can be applied to all situations seamlessly. Even both the need theory and goal-setting theory embrace their own credits and limitations. For example, leaders still have to count the resources or budget support while designing the compensation and reward plans. Personality of individuals and cultural factors can also affect the effectiveness when applying the models. It looks as if adopting more than one theory simultaneously could be more practical in improving performance and productivity, thus they can absorb each other's weaknesses or enhance their separate strengths. Nonetheless, as the business world is ever changing, leaders should always thrive for flexibility and balance

between the theories and reality so as to create a win-win situation for both the organization and the employees.

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