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UNDERSTANDING (AND TEACHING) EMPLOYEE MOTIVATION: FIVE EASY PIECES[1]

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Our understanding of employee motivation in organizations has progressed far since 1900; perhaps too far. Or perhaps too fast for having come so far. This century has witnessed an explosion of ideas relating to employee motivation. A considerable amount of work specifically has focused on the components of motivational processes: needs, drives, motives and the course of their satisfaction. Other research has explored the human condition more generally (for instance, social cognition processes) and along the way developed strong and apparent implications for the employee motivation and control process. Included in this upsurgence of ideas have been such bedfellows as Maslow's need hierarchy, expectancy theories, Festinger's theories of cognitive dissonance and social comparison, Adam's theory of inequity, relative deprivation theory, attribution theory, Theories J, X, Y, and Z, and Watsonian and Skinnerian Behaviorism, to name a few. A quick glance into any introductory text in organizational behavior will usually reveal the mention of at least a half dozen of these.

Attempts by motivational researchers to integrate these differing views, or to reconcile their differences, have met with little success. Occasionally, an enterprising theorist has attempted to assimilate one theory into another (as in recent attempts to subsume equity theory under the heading of expectancy theory.) In general, this process seems to deprive the subsumed theory of its message, while compromising the elegance of the subsumer and its predictive (rather than descriptive) quality.

The diversity of currently espoused theories on employee motivation arises in part from their addressing different pieces of the motivational puzzle. The different theories are really more complementary than competing. Furthermore, these theories for the most part have been derived within the confines of pristine and uncomplicated research environments. Unfortunately, the world is rarely so tidy as a researcher's laboratory, a professor's classroom, or a textbook's case-study. Consequently, the success of any given approach to motivating employees is dependent on a vaguely "all other things being equal" assumption. Currently accepted views of employee motivation can be wonderfully predictive and useful, when insulated from the interference of those issues, problems, and questions raised and addressed by other theories. In effect, telling a manager that he can motivate employees by doing X (for instance, rewarding good performance) is a little like telling that manager that taking vitamin B will make him healthy. Taking vitamin B may help his health, but he can't live on vitamin B; it is not the sole determinant of his physical health. Its contribution to physical well-being must be viewed in the broader nutritional context of other vitamins, minerals, calories, etc. Similarly, no single theory of motivation will cover all aspects of the motivational "health" of employees. Thus, to be useful to managers, any motivational theory's particular wisdom must be understood within the broader framework of other theories—and the qualifications and complications they present.

For the practicing manager or student, the profusion of viewpoints on human motivation must prove confusing indeed. Yet, the confusion that arises may stem from feeling that because all these theories deal with one topic—human motivation—they should fit into *one* handy equation for understanding and directing employee behavior. Perhaps a more sensible way to utilize the accumulation of theories of motivation is to understand each theory's proper "domain of application" (Fazio, Zanna, & Cooper, 1977) and to celebrate the unique wisdom each theory has to offer, rather than trying to translate or assimilate the theories into each other. Perhaps what is needed is not integration under the auspices of one theory, but simply aggregation under the roof of one framework. Perhaps what is needed is an eclectic approach to human motivation which treats differences between theories not as mistakes or paradoxes, but rather as resources for understanding the multiple facets of "motivational" problems.

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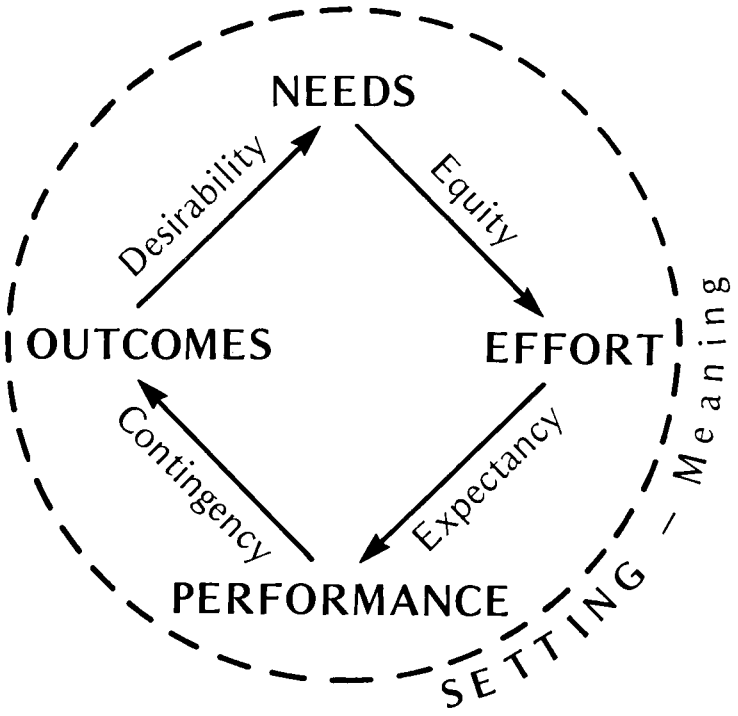

Figure 1. The five easy pieces of employee motivation.

Five Easy Pieces: A Unifying Framework

As the first approximation of a consolidation of past work on motivation, the following are five predominant themes which I believe run through the various schools of motivational research, theory, and thought—five pieces to the employee motivation puzzle. To emphasize the practical value of this approach, the themes are presented as questions a manager needs to address in order to deal with matters of employee motivation. There is, of course, a conceptual method to the madness of these five themes. The traditional distinction between content and process theories conveniently divided the enterprise of behavioral engineering into two components: needs and motives, which constitute the resource (or *content*) by which behavioral engineering is even possible; and the links or relationships (or *processes*) by which the resource can be utilized to energize and direct behavior. Appropriately, then, the first of these five themes deals with the resource—individuals' needs and motives—through which the last four themes become worthy of consideration. The other four themes are process themes, and are arranged in order of the increasing role of cognition and awareness on the part of the employee. The latter themes, predicated on considerable conscious deliberations, may not always be an issue in energizing and directing an employee's behavior; the early themes focus on aspects fundamental to the success of *any* behavioral engineering attempt.

To understand how these five themes fit together conceptually, consider the feedback cycle of employee motivation and performance presented in Figure 1. An employee's needs (or motives) give rise to efforts. These efforts result in some level of performance. This level of performance provides the employee with an outcome. The outcome then feeds back and affects the needs of the employee. Finally, this all occurs within some setting or

context, including other workers and management. The five themes arise from the relationships among components in this feedback cycle.

Theme 1: What are the employees' needs? This theme is the realm of content theories of motivation, and focuses on the appropriateness (desirability) of outcomes offered by an organization to employees. In Figure 1, this theme lies in the connection between outcomes and needs. Maslow (1954) and Herzberg (1966) among others have presented taxonomies and hierarchies of needs and motives by which to understand and recognize the needs of employees. The primary value of these theories is that they provide lists of possibilities for the practicing manager to consider. Most also suggest, however, in what direction a given employee's needs might be expected to change over time. For example, Maslow's need hierarchy proposes that as an employee's safety and security needs are met, social needs (like affiliation) will become more important.

One important message of this theme is that to motivate employees, an organization must be able to offer employees (through their jobs) outcomes the employees want or need. It is not enough simply to reward good performance of employees. The reward must be an outcome that fulfills a need of the rewarded employee, for that reward to have a beneficial effect on motivation.

It is often tempting to conclude that all a company needs to cure its motivational ills is a well-designed monetary incentive program. However, when the most desirable outcome in a job is the experience of a successful sale, or affiliation with customers, monetary rewards or promotions may have little impact. Management's attempts to secure employee cooperation need to reflect an understanding of the motives of the workforce.

Theme 2: Is attainment of outcomes desired by the employee contingent upon job performance? In terms of Figure 1, Theme 2 focuses on the relationship between performance and outcomes. Thorndike's Law of Effect (1911) posits that behavior is directed toward need satisfaction. The behaviors necessary to obtain needed or desired outcomes are the ones that will occur. Therefore, the behaviors on the job desired by management will occur only if attached to outcomes which in turn (Theme 1) address employee needs.

Managers will see two types of contingency relationships in the work setting. *Extrinsic* contingencies between employee performance and outcomes occur when the accomplishment of work tasks provides an employee outcomes which do not inhere in the work. Pay, for instance, is an outcome of labor artificially connected to performance by the organization. *Intrinsic* contingencies between performance and outcomes arise when the very act of working generates some outcome for the employee (for instance, affiliation or personal growth) which is independent of any consequences artificially attached to performance by the organization. When the outcomes are desired by employees, intrinsic contingencies in organizations involve behaviors which are rewarding, while extrinsic contingencies involve behaviors which are rewarded.

Contingency problems can arise in a variety of ways. When raises are awarded competitively, receipt of a raise depends on more than an individual's performance; receipt of the raise also depends on how other employees fared in comparison. Furthermore, when awards must pasds through several layers of approval in an organization, the directness of the link between performance and employee-desired outcomes becomes fuzzier. Access to employee-desired outcomes becomes less contingent upon performance, and more dependent upon other considerations (for instance, budgetary or political realities in the organization.) Employee motivation can't help but suffer accordingly.

Significantly, contingency cannot be a problem when the employee-desired outcomes are intrinsic to work-related tasks. If the outcomes inhere in performance of the task, there can be no fuzziness in the connection between the two. However, here problems can arise for the organization if desired outcomes are inherent in *any* performance (e.g., affiliation), but not specifically in good performance.

Theme 3: Do the employee's efforts determine his or her performance? This theme, which focuses on the relationship between employee effort and achieved performance level, has long been the realm of expectancy theories (e.g., Vroom, 1964). One important message of research in this area is that it is not enough for a manager to establish an obvious contingency relationship for the employee between performance and employee-desired outcomes. The employee must believe he or she is *capable* of performing at the level necessary to attain the desired outcomes. In effect, if there is a desired outcome which is contingent upon some level of performance, the employee must *expect* to attain that level of performance, if he or she tries. If the employee cannot expect to get the desired outcome by trying, he or she simply will not try.

Often an apparently sound contingency relationship between performance and employee-desired outcomes (such as an incentive system for rewarding productivity) will fail to energize employee efforts for one of several reasons: (i) *goal clarity*—the required performance level is not sufficiently specified for the employee to know what to do to achieve it, or (ii) *ability*—the employee does not believe he or she possesses the skills necessary to perform up to the required performance level, or (iii) *effort*—the employee does not feel that he or she is capable of the required effort, for example doesn't have the time or just isn't physically capable, or (iv) *exogenous control*—performance level is not perceived by the employee as under his or her control, as

when productivity is dependent upon co-workers, or the whims of individuals external to the organization (such as customers or suppliers). All four considerations revolve around the notion of availability. The performance level required to obtain desired outcomes must seem within reach—available—in order for the outcomes attached to that level of performance to energize the employee's behavior.

Theme 4: Is the outcome the employee attains from a task worth what he or she is giving up to get it? This theme deals with the issue of comparing amounts of effort expended to obtained outcomes, and the extent to which the obtained outcomes address needs. In terms of Figure 1, this is the link between needs and efforts, and addresses the feedback nature of the cycle. Equity theory (e.g., Adams, 1963) suggests that in directing their behaviors, employees who are aware of outcome contingencies are concerned with the ratio of what they put into behaviors (effort) and what they get out (need reduction or satisfaction). Whether this input/output ratio is satisfactory is determined by one of several types of cognitive calculations (Festinger, 1954; Runciman, 1966). The worker might compare his personal input-to-output ratio to other similar workers; or he or she might compare the average input-to-output ratio for his or her reference group to that of another reference group. Thus, a blue-collar worker might assess the satisfactoriness of his or her input-to-output ratio by comparing it to other blue-collar workers, or to managers.

The satisfactoriness of an input-to-output ratio might also be evaluated against less socially-derived referents (Goodman, 1974). Comparisons could be made against internal standards (perhaps derived from past experiences, or from information sources such as published statistics), or against other personally-available alternatives (for instance, the ratios offered by other available jobs).

The case of Pennsylvania Metals (1965) illustrates the importance of expectancy and equity considerations in motivating a workforce. Penn Metals was a large industrial supplier, whose salesforce were all salaried. Top management was interested in redirecting the salesforce effort away from small-volume individual clients, to higher-volume corporate consumers. Top management assumed that informing the salesforce of this new sales strategy would be sufficient to initiate the desired changes. Not surprisingly, this assumption proved incorrect. For the salaried salesforce, the experience of a successful sale was the most desired outcome on the job. The added time, coordination, and uncertainty which were part and parcel of working the larger corporate accounts did not make successful corporate sales any more rewarding, but did make them considerably less likely. Management's attempts to redirect the salesforce effort needed to include either an incentive system which reflected the differences between working large and small accounts (thereby compensating salesmen for the greater required effort and lower likelihood of success), or a sales support system which minimized the differences between working small and large accounts (thereby making successful sales equally available in both).

Theme 5: What is the meaning to an employee of the motivational program offered by the firm? This theme is interested in the impact of the overall setting (in particular, management's intentions) on the effectiveness of a motivational program. To this point, all four themes have considered outcomes offered by an organization as having only need-satisfaction value for an employee. But a dollar, when offered in exchange for a favor or completion of a task, is no longer just 100 cents worth of need-satisfaction potential. It becomes an influence attempt, and a suggestion of just how much influencing someone thinks is necessary to obtain compliance. Thus, the outcomes offered by an organization do more than just address needs—they can convey information.

Cognitive social psychologists (e.g., Kelley, 1971; Bem, 1972) have of late become enamored with an important issue: how does the individual use cues from the environment to understand the causes (or justifications!) of his or her own behavior? Most of the research supports the contention that environmental cues (including such things as magnitude of pay) are often used to reevaluate the *intrinsic* need-fulfillment potential of a behavior, and thereby the willingness of an individual to engage in that behavior independent of any organizationally-imposed outcomes (such as pay). In effect, the outcomes offered by an organization can *convey a message* to employees.

There are two ways in which the meaningfulness of outcomes offered by an organization might affect an employee's motivation to perform on the job. On the one hand, an employee might infer from an organizationally-orchestrated outcome (like pay) something about the intentions or beliefs of those in power in the firm. Such an inference effectively alters the consequences of cooperation. For instance, a large incentive might suggest an attempt by management to manipulate, or that a task is intrinsically unsatisfying, hence the necessity of offering a large incentive to elicit cooperation. Conversely, a small (or no) incentive could convey a laissez-faire, high-trust management posture, or imply that a task has intrinsic need-satisfaction potential, hence less artificial coaxing is necessary to obtain compliance (e.g., Festinger & Carlsmith, 1959). Such inferences would then enter into an employee's evaluations of the need-fulfillment potential of a behavior or task, and thereby influence his or her decisions about how to perform, or whether to perform at all, on the job.

At this level, the concern is often not so much that behaviors desired by the organization will not occur, but that those behaviors will occur for the wrong reasons. If

a worker accepts the implication of an organization's behavioral engineering attempts, he or she might comply with a request, without becoming attitudinally committed. Such detachment would mean less involvement in the task (and perhaps thereby less conscientious performance), as well as a return to previous behaviors in the absence of surveillance or coercion (Lepper & Greene, 1975).

On the other hand, the intentions of management in a firm may be well-established, something accepted by employees as fact, and not inferred from the outcomes offered by the firm. These intentions would then provide a lens through which employees would bring into focus the need-fulfillment potential of a given course of action. Thus, when a manipulative manager offers a reward for a 10% increase in productivity, the reward may not be the only consequence for a worker who temporarily raises his or her productivity that 10%. The manipulative manager might be planning to use that increase in productivity as the new baseline—an excuse to demand higher productivity of everyone, all the time (Lawler, 1971).

This point was illustrated by the experiences of top management at an engineering firm in Tucson, Arizona. Previous actions at the company had established management's reputation, and this reputation provided employees with a framework in which to interpret the value of a proposed new MBO program. In fact, the program was something of a "good faith" attempt by management to improve the firm's climate, and halt a disconcerting exodus of top talent. However, management's reputation for being manipulative and self-serving led employees to assume that there were unforeseen (to them) negative consequences to participating in the MBO program. It is no small wonder that the program failed.

Conclusions

The field of employee motivation is like a New Hampshire forest in October—full of wonderful delights, but perhaps a place in which it is altogether too easy to lose one's footing. In reaction to this problem, the five themes outlined above provide a "walking stick"—a theoretically non-rigorous framework through which to negotiate the pitfalls of what has become a veritable morass of wisdom. The utility of these five themes lies in their ability to consolidate the accumulated knowledge we have about worker motivation, without the informational loss occasioned by ill-advised attempts to theoretically combine the uncombinable. These five themes preserve the singular wisdom of many theories, yet provide a working framework within which to bring together their usefulness in understanding worker motivation.

In reviewing the five themes, it is interesting to note both the interdependence and relative autonomy of each issue. Moving through the five themes, any identified problem must be solved without creating problems for other themes. For instance, any attempt to increase the equity of an offered outcome must at least be accomplished within the constraints of being desired, contingent, and availbale, with an eye to the symbolic meaning of the effort as well. These are all facets of the same issue (motivation) and thereby inextricably intertwined, but quite different facets nonetheless.

Perhaps most different of all is Theme 5. Unlike its accompanying process considerations, identification of a problem at this level does not automatically convey a prescription for that problem's resolution. For a manager, if an offered outcome isn't desired by employees, find another that is. If it isn't contingent, make it. If it doesn't appear available to employees, render attainment more probable. And if it isn't equitable, simply up the ante. But if the meaningfulness of a motivational attempt is interfering with its effectiveness, what then is the appropriate action to take?

Significantly, the answer to this last question need not lie in tinkering with the relationships among components of the motivational feedback cycle, as it would seem to with other process considerations. Rather, the meaningfulness of a behavioral engineering attempt clearly goes beyond the microcosm of the employee, that persons's performance, and its outcomes. Theme 5 deals not only with the mechanics of engineering behavior, but also with the social context in which a behavioral engineering attempt occurs, and the meanings derived from and assigned to that context.

Certainly the other four themes deal with issues that sometimes involve elements of the social setting. A thoughtful blue-collar worker might look to his coworkers to assess the equity or even desirability of an organizationally-offered outcome. Further, availability and contingency can both be influenced by other individuals in the organization. However, these other considerations (desirability, contingency, expectancy, and equity) just as certainly focus more specifically on the smaller universe of the employee, his or her work, and the outcomes that accrue to that work. The meaningfulness of a behavioral engineering attempt can be considered within this smaller universe as well, for instance when an employee internally upgrades the need-fulfillment potential of a behavior because of his or her own apparent willingness to engage in it with little artificial inducement. However, the notion of meaningfulness here also begs, to a much greater degree than the other themes, exploration of a larger universe—the universe of the behavioral engineers and the firm in which the employee works.

It may be easy to think of each employee as living in a "closed system" (Emery, 1969), much like one of B.F. Skinner's experimental rats in a Skinner box. Within this closed system, each employee has needs and the organization provides behavioral contingencies by which the employee can address those needs. There don't need to be other considerations, and for some employees there may not be. However, many (perhaps most) employees are not rats, and do not see their own behavior as being detached and insulated from the organizational context in which it occurs. Instead, the individual employee's motivational feedback cycle is an "open system," woven into the fabric of many other feedback cycles within the organization (e.g., Zahn & Wolf, 1981).

Significantly, this view fits the perception of Theme 5 as the most sophisticated of the five themes in cognitive processing. The employee is no longer within him or herself, just making mental calculations about behaviors and their potential for need-satisfaction. The employee has become a detective, trying to relate the microcosm of his or her own behavior to the macrocosm of behaviors and intentions in the surrounding world.

However, Theme 5 may differ from the other four in more than just its focus on the social context in which behavioral engineering occurs. It embraces the revelation that the intrinsic need-fulfillment potential of a course of action can be the outcome of cognitive processing, rather than a starting point. This suggests that Theme 5, the contextual meaning of a behavioral engineering attempt, may constitute a starting point from which the other themes operate. If consideration of the meaning of a behavior change attempt alters the intrinsic need-fulfillment potential of a course of action, the first four themes all become open to reexamination and recomputation by employees. Thus, Theme 5 not only addresses the social context in which behavioral engineering occurs—it also sets the cognitive stage on which the other four themes must play. Theme 5 proposes that the intrinsic need-fulfillment potential of a behavior will be calculated first. Only after that can an employee decide if the potential outcomes of a behavior (both intrinsic and organizationally-imposed) are desired, let alone contingent, expected, or equitable.

Interestingly, Theme 5 in this sense echoes one widely accepted interpretation of the Hawthorne studies (Roethlisberger & Dickson, 1939). Behavioral scientists often talk of the "Hawthorne effect," referring to a situation in which individuals are reacting to the underlying intentions, rather than actions, of others around them. The inferred intentions act as the lens through which actions—including employee motivation programs—are viewed. Thus, the success of a motivation program may well depend first and foremost upon employees' perceptions of management's intentions, rather than the mechanics of the motivational package. This in turn suggests that management's top priority, in implementing a motivational program, should involve consideration (and perhaps development) of the climate of the organization. In this way, management can insure that employees have a constructive (rather than adversarial) lens through which to view management's actions, an insight which perhaps constitutes the foundation for the field of organizational development.

Finally, it bears repeating that the increasing complexity or sophistication of cognitive processing implied in the ordering of the five themes may also reflect a probability of consideration. Some of the latter themes, such as equity and meaningfulness, might never come to mind; desirability of work outcomes could hardly be similarly ignored. This point becomes especially important in view of the apparent primacy of Theme 5 considerations to the employee motivation and control process. Even though the meaningfulness of a behavioral engineering attempt may be the least likely consideration, it also may be the most important, since it sets the stage on which the other themes play. When then, might we expect Theme 5 to be considered?

There are two answers; the first is environmental. Previous experience with an organization may sensitize employees to meaningfulness of behavioral engineering attempts. A firm that becomes known for its Theory X or Theory Y orientation, or is particularly open in its intentions, invites vigilance to the meaning underlying its behaviors.

This may be only half an answer, though, for it begs the question of why meaningfulness is experienced in the first place. This could well be due to individual differences. There may simply be a class of people who are particularly sensitive to the intentions underlying attempts to motivate and control employees. In effect, this would be some kind of mirror image of Machiavellianism. Where the Machiavellian specializes in orchestrating behaviors with underlying intent, the Theme 5 employee would be one specifically *sensitive* to the underlying intentions (either positive or negative) of the organizational world in which he finds him or herself. This could be the individual who always asks why: why the new program, why the change in procedures, why the new group incentive program?

While not necessarily opinion leaders, such individuals could play an important role in how *all* employees construe the intentions of the organization, and thereby react to the exigencies of work in the organization. In fact, this provides a second half to the environmental answer. Meaningfulness may be thrust upon an employee either by the organization itself, or by a more meaning-oriented co-worker. Therefore, being able to identify such employees could go a long way toward helping diffuse negative impact or enhance the positive message conveyed by an organization's attempts at employee motivation and control.

Theme 5 thus provides a particular prescription for future research on employee motivation. It is a prescription which centers on an issue of both practical nd theoretical importance. Past writing on humanistic management (e.g., McGregor, 1960) has emphasized the importance of the organizational climate and intentions of management to the motivational well-being of employees. While these concerns are reflected in Theme 5's focus on the meaningfulness of the organizational context, one thrust of Theme 5 is the employee's role in experiencing that context. Organizational climate can only have as much impact as employees' sensitivity to that climate. For the researcher, this raises the issue of whether it is possible to identify individuals who are more sensitive to the meaningfulness of their social context. In short, is there a Theme 5 personality? For the manager, this means motivation programs must be based on knowing more than just the needs of employees and the mechanics of motivating. Employee sensitivity to the social context of the organization is equally important.

In conclusion, the five themes consolidate our accumulated wisdom on employee motivation and control by concentrating on the complementary facets of contemporary motivational theories. The five themes provide a framework by which to understand the types of problems that can arise, and how to deal with them. It is, in the final analysis, a framework which proposes that the content of behavioral engineering may be secondary to its form; that is, the perception of what is given to employees will be heavily influenced by the spirit in which it arrives. Five dollars given in good faith may be "worth" more than ten dollars offered in the spirit of Machiavelli. Or, to borrow from the terminology of humanistic management, it may be as important that a firm communicate to its employees its Theory Y intentions, as that it engage in Theory Y behaviors. Aided by such knowledge, perhaps we can enjoy the forest of motivational knowledge and use it to advantage, instead of stumbling around in it and continually becoming lost.

Addendum

It is perhaps worth noting that this paper arose in an attempt to piece the puzzle of motivation together for the MBA's at Arizona. MBA's have a most annoying habit of asking embarrassing questions, such as "If all these theories about motivation are different, how can they all be right?" My own concern with this question led me to consider the assumptions some theories might be making in positing their framework for understanding employee motivation. In particular, I was reminded that in operationalizing a research design, researchers often accidentally pick the only level of some mediating variable at which a particular effect occurs. This leads them to suspect they've captured control of the effect, when in fact that illusion is allowed only by the particular operationalization.

So it would seem to be with motivation in the workplace. The five themes are a checklist—a series of qualifications or hurdles which all motivational programs need to address—rather than different strategies for approaching the same problem. If any incentive system qualifies on four of the themes, variations in the fifth will appear to "control" success. For my MBA students, this realization explains why many different theories can all be right. They are simply addressing different aspects of a most complicated phenomenon.

Finally, it is with no small sense of satisfaction that I note that the five themes capture the spirit of humanistic management. Themes 1 and 4 (desirability and equity) suggest that a manager must understand his employees to manage them successfully. Themes 2 and 3 (contingency and expectancy) stress the manager's role in clarifying the rules of the workplace for his or her subordinates. And Theme 5 (setting) notes that an environment of trust is essential to any people-management effort. These are not only hallmarks of humanism, but from my point of view signposts for success in management as well.

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