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Motivation: New Directions for Theory, Research, and Practice

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The current state of motivation theory is reviewed. Emphasis is placed on the internal, unobservable aspects of motivation and the distinction between motivation and behavior and performance. Major theories of motivation concerned with the arousal and choice of behavior are examined, problems of implementation are discussed, and directions for future research are suggested. They include study of the circumstances under which any given motivational theory is most effective. The long-run objective should be a contingency type model of motivation.

Over the last five years various professional commitments have led this author to look at the field of motivation from both a theory-research perspective as well as a practical or applied perspective. The analysis of the theoretical and research literature has resulted in detailed and comprehensive review papers (Mitchell, 1979; Mitchell, in press). The attempts to deal with applications and implications were prompted by field research endeavors (Latham, Mitchell, & Dossett, 1978) and the writing and revision of a textbook (Mitchell, 1978). Several ideas have emerged from these activities.

First, from the reviews of motivation theory and research (Campbell & Pritchard, 1976; Korman, Greenhaus, & Badin, 1977; Locke, 1975; Staw, 1977), it became clear that some shifts in the field were occurring. The overwhelming percentage of current papers are concerned with information processing or social-environmental explanations of motivation (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1977, 1978) rather than need-based approaches or approaches that focus on individual differences. These latter approaches, represented by people like Maslow, have almost disappeared in the literature.

The information processing approaches are illustrated by the large amount of work on expectancy theory, goal setting, and equity theory. Theories focusing on the job environment, such as operant conditioning or job enrichment, and theories em-

phasizing social cues and social evaluations also have been important. These approaches have all been helpful in increasing the understanding of motivation.

A second trend, however, has not been so widely recognized. More specifically, when one reviews this research, it becomes readily apparent that most of the studies investigate only one theory in depth. Many studies set out to demonstrate that goal setting, operant conditioning, or expectancy theory work. In other cases the research is concerned with fine tuning the theory (e.g., Is participative or assigned goal setting better? Should expectancies be added to or multiplied by valences? Is a variable or continuous schedule of reinforcement best?). These questions are important, but few studies have been designed to integrate theories, to test them competitively, or to analyze the settings in which different theories work best.

Several issues also emerged from the practical experiences and attempts to summarize applied principles. First, there are some preliminary questions that must be answered and requirements that need to be met before implementing any motivational system. These questions and requirements revolve around (1) how people are evaluated and (2) the demands of the task. In other words, to apply motivational principles, one must do some preliminary work involving other organizational factors.

Second, in attempting to apply motivational principles in an organization, one often runs into mitigating circumstances. There are situations and settings that make it exceptionally difficult for a motivational system to work. These circumstances may involve the kinds of jobs or people present, the technology, the presence of a union, and so on. The factors that hinder the application of motivational theory have not been articulated either frequently or systematically. The purpose of this paper is to review what is currently known about motivation, describe some theoretical areas in which ambiguity exists, and identify some situational constraints on the utilization of this knowledge.

The goal of this paper is not to provide a comprehensive source of references on the topic of motivation. Vast resources are already available for that purpose. There are whole books devoted to the topic (Korman, 1974; Lawler, 1973; Ryan, 1970; Vroom, 1964; Weiner, 1972), books of readings (McClelland & Steele, 1973; Steers & Porter, 1979; Tosi, House, & Dunnette, 1972), and many review articles (Campbell & Pritchard, 1976; Korman et al., 1977; Locke, 1975; Mitchell, 1979; Staw, 1977). The material and principles discussed in this paper will be dealt with at a fairly global level. This is not to say that the ideas are not supportable or that a detailed level of analysis is not important. In most cases, at least one representative citation will be provided. However, the objective of the paper is to stimulate debate and interest in some issues about motivation that (1) have been said infrequently or (2) have recently emerged and need to be highlighted.

Background

Many nonacademics would probably describe motivation as the degree to which an individual wants and tries hard to do well at a particular task or job. Dictionary definitions describe motivation as the goal to action. The more technical definitions given by social scientists suggest that motivation is the psychological processes that cause the arousal, direction, and persistence of behavior (Atkinson, 1964; Campbell, Dunnette, Lawler, & Weick, 1970; Huse & Bowditch, 1977; Kast & Rosenzweig, 1979; Korman, 1974; Luthans, 1977). Many authors add a voluntary component or goal directed emphasis to that definition (Hellriegel & Slocum, 1976; Lawler, 1973; Ryan, 1970; Vroom,

1964). Thus motivation becomes those psychological processes that cause the arousal, direction, and persistence of voluntary actions that are goal directed.

Although there is some disagreement about the importance of different aspects of this definition (e.g., whether arousal or choice is more important), there is consensus about some underlying properties of this definition. First, motivation traditionally has been cast as an *individual* phenomenon. Each individual is unique and all of the major motivational theories allow in one way or another for this uniqueness to be demonstrated (e.g., different people have different needs, expectations, values, attitudes, reinforcement histories, and goals). Second, motivation usually is described as *intentional*. That is, motivation supposedly is under the employee's control. Most behaviors that are seen as influenced by motivation (e.g., effort on the job) typically are viewed as actions the individual has chosen to do.

A third point is that motivation is *multifaceted*. The two factors of greatest importance have been the arousal (activation, energizers) and direction (choice) of behavior. The question of persistence has been of minor importance, partly because the issue of maintenance of behavior (once it is started and directed) has received less attention and partly because some authors have defined persistence simply as the reaffirmation of the initial choice of action (March & Simon, 1958).

The arousal question has focused on what gets people activated. What are the circumstances that arouse people so they want to do well? The second question, that of choice, deals with the force on the individual to engage in desired behaviors. Given that the person is aroused, what gets them going in a particular direction? These distinctions are reflected in much of the writing on motivation.

The fourth point to make is that the purpose of motivational theories is to predict *behavior*. Motivation is concerned with action and the internal and external forces that influence one's choice of action. Motivation is not the behavior itself, and it is not performance. The behavior is the criterion—that which is chosen. And in some cases the chosen action will be a good reflection of performance. But the psychological processes, the actual behavior, and performance are all different things, and the confusion of the three frequently has caused

problems in analysis, interpretation, and application.

So, given these elaborations, a definition of motivation becomes somewhat more detailed. Motivation becomes the degree to which an individual wants and chooses to engage in certain specified behaviors. Different theories propose different reasons, but almost all of them emphasize an individual, intentional choice of behavior analysis.

Preliminary Questions

Given that one understands what motivation is, the next question concerns why it is important to management. Most organizations function under the principle of rationality (Scott & Hart, 1979). That is, the primary goal of management is to increase efficiency by getting the greatest output at the lowest cost. Therefore, any behaviors that contribute to greater efficiency will be actions that management will want to encourage. These actions might be coming to work, being punctual, or exerting a lot of effort. Because these behaviors often are assumed by management to be motivated—voluntary choices controlled by the individual—management often establishes what it calls a motivational system. This system is intended to influence the factors that cause the behavior in question.

The important point to make is that one must be clear in distinguishing between this motivation system and the definition of motivation as a cognitive, individual, intentional phenomenon. The motivational system is imposed from the outside. It is constructed according to the assumptions held by management about (1) what behaviors are important for effectiveness and (2) the factors that influence these behaviors. To make sure these assumptions are correct, some preliminary work should be done before any system is tried.

Performance Appraisal

Although many organizational factors contribute to effectiveness, such as turnover, absenteeism, and technology, probably the factor that is described as most important and one that management feels it can influence is job performance. Job performance typically is viewed as partially determined by the motivation to work hard and, therefore, increases in motivation should result in greater effort and higher performance. However, to have any idea about the effects of a motivational system, one

must have a good performance appraisal instrument. Changes in performance must be detectable and demonstrable. There is not enough space to go into the merits of various appraisal procedures (Kane & Lawler, 1979; Kavangh, 1981; Landy & Farr, 1980), but there are some generalizations that can be made about appraisal and its relationship to motivation.

First, it goes without question that a both reliable and valid system is needed—not only for issues of motivation but for issues of selection, promotion, counseling, and adherence to legal guidelines. In short, a sound appraisal device is necessary for many personnel functions.

But besides the methodological properties of the device, there are some substantive issues as well. The more closely a performance appraisal device fits with the definition of motivation, the easier it will be to assess the effects of motivational interventions or strategies. More specifically, if performance is defined in behavioral and individual terms and so is motivation, then the concepts and their measures show correspondence. They are less likely to be confounded by other factors.

This distinction is very important. Some appraisals use group or team goals as performance criteria as opposed to individual performance. Also, some appraisals emphasize outcomes (policies sold) as opposed to behavior (clients visited). The further away one gets from individual behavior, the more difficult it is to infer directly and unambiguously a change in motivation rather than a change in performance.

To some extent, however, the type of appraisal may be dictated by the technology or task with which people are engaged. In some cases group performance or outcomes may be the best one can do. This is a point that will be covered later, but at this juncture it is sufficient to mention that (1) a good performance appraisal device is necessary and (2) the closer this device is to measuring individual behavior, the easier it is to evaluate the effects of motivational systems or technologies introduced by management.

Factors Influencing Performance

Given that a good performance appraisal system is in place and that it measures individual behavior, the next question is: Does motivation make a difference for performance? Many years ago Vroom

suggested the equation: performance = ability × motivation; and somewhat later the term role perceptions was added to the right side of that equation (Porter & Lawler, 1968). More recently, Campbell and Pritchard (1976) expanded that definition to performance = $f(\text{aptitude level} \times \text{skill level} \times \text{understanding of the task} \times \text{choice to expend effort} \times \text{choice of degree of effort} \times \text{choice to persist} \times \text{facilitating and inhibiting conditions not under the control of the individual})$. These authors recognized that performance is caused by at least four and maybe more factors. In order to do well one must (1) know what is required (role expectations), (2) have the ability to do what is required, (3) be motivated to do what is required, and (4) work in an environment in which intended actions can be translated into behavior.

The implication is that there probably are some jobs for which trying to influence motivation will be irrelevant for performance. These circumstances can occur a variety of ways. There may be situations in which ability factors or role expectation factors are simply more important than motivation. For example, the best predictor of high school grades typically is intellectual endowment, not hours spent studying. In a paper entitled "Performance Equals Ability and What," Dunnette concluded that "ability differences still are empirically the most important determiners of differences in job performance" (1973, p. 22). Some of the problems referred to in this quote pertain to inadequate performance measures or poorly articulated theories of motivation, but part of the problem is that performance on some tasks simply is controlled more by ability than by motivation.

Another circumstance may occur in which performance is controlled by technological factors. For example, on an assembly line, given that minimally competent and attentive people are there to do the job, performance may not vary from individual to individual. Exerting effort may be irrelevant for performance.

One way to gain information about these issues is through a thorough job analysis. This type of analysis can help to determine what behaviors contribute to performance and the extent to which these behaviors are controlled voluntarily (motivated) or controlled by ability factors, social factors, or technology. Except for some recent work by Hackman (Hackman & Morris, 1975; Hackman &

Oldham, 1980), this is infrequently discussed.

The implications of the points about job analysis, performance appraisal, and the factors that contribute to performance appraisal, and the factors that contribute to performance boil down to one crucial point: *Performance is not the same as motivation*. If one wants to assess changes in motivation or the influence of interventions on motivation, then one must measure motivation and its contribution to behavior. If performance is assessed globally or nonbehaviorally, then performance is not a good indicator of motivation. Even when performance is individually and behaviorally assessed, motivation may control substantially less than 100 percent of the variance in performance. That is, behaviors may be jointly determined by ability and motivation or some other combination of factors. When either of these two circumstances is true, the researcher or practitioner should seek to define and assess motivation separately. This point is infrequently recognized (Lawler, 1973) and almost never practiced.

In summary, before any motivation system is installed, one must be sure (a) that there is a good performance appraisal system available, (b) that motivation is an important contributor to performance, and (c) that where motivation clearly is not the major contributor to performance, a separate measure of motivation or of behaviors clearly caused by motivation is developed. When these three conditions are not being met, there is little point in pursuing the topic further. If they do exist, then one has the opportunity to put into practice what has been learned from previous research on motivation.

Research Review

As mentioned earlier, theories of motivation typically are concerned with the questions of arousal and behavioral choice. The purpose of a review of these topics is not to criticize the different motivational theories. All of them have revealed some aspects of motivation that have empirical support. But some of the *factors controlling behavior* that they emphasize are more or less applicable in various situations. It is hoped that an understanding of these mitigating circumstances can serve as an initial step in developing contingency models of motivation: models that describe when and where certain motivational systems will be most effective.

Theories of Arousal

The most popular theories of arousal for many years have been those that emphasize needs. Theories that emphasize individual needs (e.g., need achievement) or groups of needs (e.g., need hierarchies) all postulate that the arousal process is due to need deficiencies. That is, people want certain things in their jobs and they will work to fulfill those needs.

The major implications of this research have been two-fold. First, these theories clearly recognize and make central the idea of individual differences (Alderfer, 1977). Different people are motivated by different things. The second widely accepted point is that organizations generally have overlooked upper level needs. The works of such people as Maslow, McGregor, Herzberg, and Alderfer all suggest that, in general, organizations spend much more time being concerned with the fulfillment of lower level needs (e.g., through motivational systems emphasizing pay, hours of work, and the physical setting) than with the fulfillment of upper level needs (e.g., through systems emphasizing autonomy, recognition, creativity, and variety).

In recent years there has been a shift away from these need-based theories of arousal (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1977, 1978; Weiner, 1972) to approaches that emphasize processes such as social facilitation or evaluation apprehension (Ferris, Beehr, & Gilmore, 1978). These theories suggest that people are aroused by the presence of others and the knowledge that other people are evaluating them. The social cues in the form of expectations given off by subordinates, co-workers, and supervisors become important causes of arousal.

Other current approaches emphasize some ideas of cognitive inconsistency—for example, Korman's (1976) work on self-esteem—or the match between task related needs and the characteristics of the job. An example of this latter approach is Hackman and Oldham's (1980) theory of job enrichment suggesting that an enriched job is motivating only for those who have high needs for growth.

What almost all of these theories emphasize in one way or another is that arousal is seen as (1) current and (2) highly related to the social or task environment. Thus, instead of deep-seated needs developed a long time ago that reside solely within the individual, a much more external and present frame of reference is emerging. Central to almost all of the

new approaches is the idea that the individual cognitively processes and evaluates a lot of information and that motivation is linked strongly to this information processing activity.

In summary, the arousal theories say (1) attend to individual differences, (2) try to attend to upper level (intrinsic) needs, (3) note that social expectations have powerful effects, and (4) note that current information is extremely important. In attempting to implement these ideas, however, difficulties often arise. Some of these obstructions are as follows.

First, there is a whole set of organizational factors that make it difficult to individualize rewards and emphasize upper level intrinsic needs. The larger the organization and the more heterogeneous the work force, the more difficult it becomes. Ideally one would like to let employees have some choice in their compensation—for example, cafeteria style plans (Lawler, 1976)—and let managers have greater flexibility in the administration of rewards. But in practice these strategies are hard to implement. Dealing with unions also tends to restrict this flexibility because their striving for equity often leads to solidifying reward systems rather than increasing the latitude of management.

The theories that focus on social cues and expectations require that people be observed and that management have some influence on social norms. One idea that strives to let evaluation apprehension operate at the appropriate level is to match the level of appraisal with those people who most frequently observe the work of the individual. So, for example, if supervisors do not directly observe the work of subordinates, but co-workers or their subordinates do observe this individual, then have peer or subordinate evaluations be part of the appraisal process.

Influencing social norms is more problematical. Factors like organizational climate are known to be important, and processes such as team building may help to instill norms or expectations for hard work. However, very little theory or research exists that uses these norms as dependent variables. This is an area for further work.

In summary, some important things have been learned about arousal as an individualized process and one that is frequently related to current social cues. However, practical limitations such as organization size, unions, or heterogeneity of personnel

may limit attempts to implement the knowledge. Also, further work is needed on understanding how one can influence social norms and expectations.

Theories of Choice

The major theories of behavioral choice are goal setting, expectancy theory, operant conditioning, and equity theory. The research on goal setting is quite clear. People work harder with goals than without goals. This is especially true if the goals are specific and difficult and if feedback exists (Locke, 1978; Steers & Porter, 1974; Yukl & Latham, 1978). The areas of ongoing research emphasize such issues as whether participative or assigned goal setting works best, whether rewards directly influence motivation, or whether they influence motivation by changing the level of the goal.

Expectancy theory and operant conditioning are very different in underlying philosophy (cognitive versus noncognitive), but they generate similar principles of application. Both approaches argue that (1) rewards should be closely tied to behavior, (2) reward administration should be frequent and consistent, and (3) people are motivated by outcomes (expected or past).

Reviews of expectancy theory (Connolly, 1976; Mitchell, 1980; Schwab, Olian-Gottlieb, & Heneman, 1979) and operant conditioning or social learning (Babb & Kopp, 1978; Davis & Luthans, 1980) are available. People doing research on both theories are concerned with issues that have to do with how to tie rewards to behavior, what sorts of schedules to use, how to measure various theoretical components, and so on. But, except for some minor disagreements (Mawhinney & Behling, 1973), the approaches are in agreement about principles of application.

Equity theory (Carrrell & Dittrich, 1978; Goodman, 1977) suggests that people are motivated by a desire for fairness. When they believe they are being treated unfairly, they will behave in ways that they believe will restore their sense of equity. Although overreward (getting more than one should) and underreward (getting less than one should) are similar from a theoretical perspective, the research suggests otherwise. People are more comfortable (less likely to change their behavior) with overreward than with underreward. If people feel that they are underrewarded and can do little about directly influencing their rewards, they are liable to

be dissatisfied, work less, and be absent more frequently than when they feel that they are being treated equitably.

Without getting into detailed analyses, one can point out some important differences and similarities between these approaches. The most striking difference is the basic underlying motivational mechanism postulated as the cause of behavior. There are (1) intentions to reach a goal, (2) expectations of maximum payoff, (3) past reinforcement histories, and (4) a desire for fairness. The similarities are that all four approaches define motivation as an individual, intentional process. Also, except for the operant approach, all three of the others focus on relatively current information processing. In this respect, the arousal and choice models seem to be headed in a similar direction. Finally, three of the models define motivation as directly influenced by outcomes (expectancy, operant, and equity approaches); goal setting sees outcomes as indirectly influencing motivation through goal level and intentions.

In order to utilize the information generated from these approaches, one must be able to set specific individual goals, tie rewards to individual behavior, and treat people fairly and equitably. As usual, this is easier said than done. A number of circumstances or situations make it difficult to implement these ideas.

One major problem is that many jobs involve considerable interdependence (Lawler, 1973). People frequently must work with others in order for the job to be accomplished successfully. This interdependence often makes it difficult to specify or tease out individual contributions. To the extent to which there is failure to assess individual behavioral contributions accurately, there will be trouble with individual goal setting and reward administration. Either group goals or rewards may be used.

A second important factor is observability. Individual feedback and reward administration both depend on the extent to which one knows what employees are doing. In many cases, people work alone, or in relatively isolated situations (e.g., within offices, on the road). To the extent that there is poor information about what people actually do, there will be difficulty with implementation.

A third problem has to do with change. In certain situations, jobs and people change fairly rapidly. The changes in jobs may be due to changes in

technology, and the changes in people may be due to turnover. Note, again, that motivation emphasizes an individualized behavioral approach. Changes in jobs and people necessitate changes in the motivation system in the form of different behaviors to observe and different rewards to administer.

Finally, the heterogeneity of jobs causes difficulty as well. Each different type of job ideally should require a different job description, different behaviors, and, therefore, different reward systems. These last two points focus on the compromise often required in implementing motivational principles. In many cases people or jobs must be lumped together. However, it should be recognized that, to the extent to which there is deviation from the individual behavioral conceptualization of motivation, there probably will be a reduction in the effectiveness of the motivational program and the ability to measure its impact.

Discussion

An analysis of both the theory and practice described above results in some important statements about where research on the topic of motivation should go from here. In terms of theoretical development, it appears as if three things are needed.

First, more integration is needed. Except for a few papers—for example, Locke (1978); and Woford (1979)—very little theoretical work has been done to suggest the additive or interactive effects of the various approaches. The empirical studies that do compare or combine approaches suggest that combining various factors can lead to an increase in motivation. For example, a paper by White, Mitchell, and Bell (1977) demonstrates that evaluation apprehension, goal setting, and social pressure all have significant effects on motivation and that these effects might be additive.

A second implication that follows the above line of reasoning is that contingency type models of motivation need to be developed and tested. More specifically, the question is no longer whether goal setting or operant approaches work, it is where and when they work best. The mitigating circumstances that were described make it more difficult for one theory to work than another. For example, social cues and evaluation apprehension may increase in importance with interdependence, and goal setting and expectancy or operant approaches may become

less feasible. With interdependence comes more social interaction and the chance to observe the behavior of others. Social cues and evaluation apprehension should be more salient. On the other hand, interdependence may make it more difficult to specify individual contributions and reward them. At this point there is almost nothing in the literature that suggests when and where different motivational strategies will be most appropriate.

The third issue complements the other two. Because many jobs are, in fact, interdependent, social, and subject to change, more theory and research needs to be generated on how group processes effect motivation. Strategies such as team building or other interventions designed to increase commitment and motivation need to be studied as motivational models. An understanding is needed of the effects of such interventions on motivated behaviors and how these behaviors contribute to performance. It is hoped that more attention to the above issues will result in a more comprehensive understanding of not only the causes of motivation, but how and when and where different strategies should be used.

Hand in hand with these changes in theory and research should come changes in practice. One of the first things that should be developed is a set of diagnostic questions that any manager should ask about the motivational process. A flow chart or

Exhibit 1 A Flow Diagram of Questions About Motivation

1. Can performance be defined in individual, behavioral terms? If not, develop a separate measure of motivation.
 2. Is motivation important for performance, or are abilities and situational factors more important? If motivation is important, but not the same as performance, develop a separate measure of motivation.
- If one cannot meet the requirements of questions 1 and 2, it may not be worth it to proceed further. If, however, motivation is important for performance and performance is a good reflection of motivation or a good measure of motivation exists, then proceed with the analysis.
3. Is the reward system rigid and inflexible? In other words, are people and tasks grouped into large categories for reward purposes?
 4. Is it difficult to observe what people are actually doing on the job?
 5. Is an individual's behavior dependent heavily on the actions of others?
 6. Are there lots of changes in people, jobs, or expected behavior?
 7. Are social pressures the major determinants of what people are doing on the job?
- If questions 3 through 7 are answered with a no, then some system combining a needs analysis with goal setting, operant, expectancy, and equity ideas should be effective.

decision tree could be developed such as the one presented in Exhibit 1. To some extent this looks like the Vroom and Yetton (1973) model. Unfortunately, the Vroom and Yetton model is vastly superior in its level of detail, analysis, and support. For example, the weighting of factors 3 through 7 in Exhibit 1 is still unknown. There is little to guide one as to the order in which to ask the questions. But, more importantly, there is little guidance about what to do if the answers to 3 through 7 are yes. If what people do can be observed, if various rewards can be utilized, and if rewards can be tied to individual behavior without concern for social pressures or changes in the job, then systems are available that are ready to go. However, the situation is more ambiguous if the reverse of these conditions holds. The knowledge about how to influence motivation when correct behaviors are hard to define and observe, constantly changing, and under

the control of interdependencies or social pressures is severely limited.

The obvious implication for the practitioner is that the cost of implementing one of the more traditional motivation systems (e.g., MBO, behavior modification) might outweigh the benefit under these latter conditions. Until there are better answers to the question of how to influence motivation when these conditions exist, it will be difficult to develop any sort of comprehensive strategy for enhancing motivation. Thus, although the focus of current research is coming to recognize the importance of social processes, changes in jobs or people (Katz, 1980), and problems in flexibility and ability to give feedback (Ilgen, Fisher, & Taylor, 1979; Nadler, 1979), few remedies for these problems have been developed. Until this is done, a substantial inadequacy will remain in the ability to understand and influence motivation on the job.

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