

Executive Coaching

Volume I, No. 2

Newsletter

Understanding Basic Human Behaviors at Work

One of the earliest studies of human behavior at work was done at AT&T's Western Electric Hawthorne Plant from 1927 by Harvard's Elton Mayo. The findings were published in a widely influential report by F. J. Roethlisberger and W. Dickson, *Management and the Worker*. Their principle findings are still relevant today: when workers have an opportunity to contribute their thinking and learning to workplace issues, their job performance improves.

The initial study set out to discover how lighting affects performance and fatigue of workers. The findings revealed that it is not so much physical conditions that matter, but social. People were motivated to perform well by the mere fact that someone paid attention to what they were doing. They were also encouraged to interact socially and to contribute ideas. Their social needs were shown to have a powerful impact on their performance at work. Several of the current top business books emphasize this same concept.

"The success of your organization doesn't depend on your understanding of economics, or organizational development, or marketing. It depends, quite simply, on your understanding of human psychology: how each individual employee connects with your company and how each individual employee connects with your customers." (Curt Coffman and Gabriela Gonzalez-Molina, Ph.D. in *Follow This Path: How the World's Greatest Organizations Drive Growth by Unleashing Human Potential*, Warner Books, 2002.)

Subsequent research in the seventy years that have passed since the Hawthorne study continues to reveal much the same thing: in order to tap into the potential of human capital, executives and leaders must pay attention to their employees, on a level that respects their basic human nature and individual differences.

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Dr. Parker has a Ph.D. specializing in both clinical and organizational psychology. She is experienced and certified to use a number of assessment tools and intervention strategies to improve individual and team performance. Dr. Parker is an Illinois Board Registered MISA (dual diagnosis) professional and a licensed psychologist. She manages a private practice in Chicago and Northfield where she serves clients seeking counsel on executive development issues as well as personal life management concerns.

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Yet a growing number of executives intuitively know what research by the Gallup Organization reveals: most organizations are running at about one third of their human potential. Successful organizations don't expect that employee incentives will guarantee better job performance. Instead, they pay attention to human nature.

As one CEO puts it, "In today's business world there are really only two important challenges: One is to reduce costs and cut prices. The other is to grow margins by acquiring and sustaining profitable customers. I can't do that. My employees must do it, one customer at a time."

Companies on the path of extreme competition must be able to provide more than price advantage. In order to do so, organizations must tap into employee motivation and discover what drives them. When they do, they unleash tremendous energy and potential.

What many organizations don't see is that employee performance and its subsequent impact on customer engagement revolve around intrinsic motivation determined in the brain. This motivation defines specific talents and the emotional mechanisms everyone brings to work. Recent discoveries in neurosciences support the fact that emotional processes are integral to learning, reasoning and decision making. How can leaders improve their understanding of their employees' strengths and motivating drives?

What are the basics of human motivation?

Several theories of human nature provide perspectives for understanding basic human drives. A review of these will remind leaders how important it is to understand how employees behave at work and how they are motivated. However, a note of caution: *While assessment tools will categorize and simplify human behavior, they cannot fully represent a person's complexity.* Each theory and its measurement merely provide a basic framework. Theories and assessment profiles are helpful in understanding how and why humans behave. Attention and respect must always be paid to individual differences.

Employees are not the same, and in order to gain greater understanding of an individual's strengths and value, it is necessary to look at certain categories or classifications of personalities, styles, preferences and interests.

Carl Jung said that people either derive energy from relating to others or from internal thoughts. They also tend to gather information in different ways, either by focusing on data, or by intuitively seeing the big picture. They express themselves in different ways, either with a focus on rational thinking, or on feelings and values. And they also have tendencies to make decisions rapidly with planning and organization, or to be more spontaneous and pressure-prompted.

Using the Myers Briggs Type Indicator or other assessments, these dichotomies can be measured to indicate type preferences:

1. **Extraverted** or **Introverted**
2. **Sensing** or **Intuitive**
3. **Thinking** or **Feeling**
4. **Judging** or **Perceiving**.

A trait is a temporally stable, cross-situational individual difference. Currently the most popular approach among psychologists for studying personality traits is the five-factor model or "Big Five" dimensions of personality. According to statistical factor analysis, there is much evidence that there are five basic personality traits. Researchers are not in total agreement regarding all of the aspects of the five factors. However, there is general agreement that the following descriptions mostly define these factors:

1. **Emotional stability** (also called **Neuroticism**): The degree to which an individual is calm, self confident, and cool versus insecure, anxious, depressed and emotional
2. **Extraversion**: The extent to which an individual is out going, assertive and positively interactive with others, instead of reserved and quiet
3. **Openness**: Defines individuals who are creative, curious and cultured, versus practical with narrow interests (some call this a **Culture** dimension)
4. **Agreeableness**: Concerns the degree to which individuals are cooperative, warm and agreeable versus argumentative, cold, and antagonistic
5. **Conscientiousness**: The extent to which individuals are hard working and organized, dependable and persevering versus lazy, disorganized and unreliable

A very popular assessment tool is called the DISC, and it is based on a theory of behavior style preferences formulated by psychologist William Moulton Marsten in the 1930s. The letters "DISC" stand for four basic behavior preferences:

1. **Dominance**: Response to problems and challenges
2. **Influencing**: Ability to influence others to their point of view
3. **Steadiness**: Response to the pace of the environment
4. **Compliance**: Response to rules and procedures

The general meaning is that people will demonstrate by their behaviors a natural tendency to be high or low on each of the four dimensions. A person high on the D factor is usually task oriented, competitive and a risk taker. A high I rating indicates a "people-person," who enjoys interacting and developing relationships. A high S means a person is reliable, organized and conscientious, albeit non-demonstrative.

A high C refers to a person who is compliant and concerned with rules and paper work. The implications for job placement are obvious.

Another assessment frequently used at the same time as the DISC is one that defines personal interests, attitudes and values (PIAV). Based on the work in the 1930s of another psychologist, Eduard Spranger, it rates a person's degree of interest in six domains:

1. **Utilitarian:** Usefulness and efficiency of activities, including economy of time and resources
2. **Aesthetic:** Beauty and harmony in the environment
3. **Theoretical:** Learning, with a high regard for knowledge and research
4. **Individualistic:** Influencing others, and having power
5. **Social:** The good of mankind, justice and fairness for all
6. **Traditional:** A social system, which could be religious, political or philosophical

According to this theory, each person holds these interests in a hierarchical manner, and will seek to satisfy their first and second interests in all of their activities, including at work. The implications are important for job placement, as well as for job enrichment.

Abraham Maslow believed that satisfying physiological and safety needs alone is not enough to motivate a person fully. Once these needs have been met, there are others waiting to take their place. In Maslow's Hierarchy, a person progressively seeks to satisfy more sophisticated needs:

Physiological Needs: Basic physical needs such as the ability to acquire food, shelter, clothing, sex and other survival needs

Safety Needs: A safe and non-threatening work environment, job security, safe equipment and installations

Social Needs: Contact and friendship with fellow-workers, social activities and opportunities

Ego: Recognition, acknowledgment, rewards

Self-Actualization: Realizing one's dreams, using one's gifts, talents and potential



In 1968, Frederick Herzberg wrote a classic article in the *Harvard Business Review* on how to motivate employees—an article that today remains the all-time best selling reprint for the publication. He explains that money doesn't really motivate people, but if inadequate, will cause dissatisfaction. People are motivated by interesting work, an opportunity to contribute and be heard, and appropriate recognition. Job enrichment is created by giving employees responsibility and participation in decisions. Herzberg reinforces the research results of the Hawthorne studies.

Herzberg's landmark article called, "One More Time: How Do You Motivate Employees?" (*Harvard Business Review*, reprint 87507) merits a thorough reread for understanding the basics of motivation in employees.

David McClelland described three basic motivators in managers in an important article in the *Harvard Business Review* (1976). His original work on motivation defined three social motives in humans (1949):

1. The drive to **achieve**
2. The drive for **power**
3. The drive to **affiliate** with others

The key issue here is the way a manager defines success, i.e. what motivates the manager. Some equate success with personal achievement ("personal power manager"); others see it as being liked by others ("the affiliative manager"). While both have merit, in order to succeed in a complex organization, a manager needs to have a power motivation that is not a dictatorial impulse but a desire to have a strong impact and to be influential. Furthermore, that desire for power must be organized for the benefit of the organization ("the institutional manager"), rather than for personal achievement.

During the Enlightenment (1762), Rousseau observed that institutions could only flourish if they are founded on a social contract that enables human beings to pursue their individual and collective interests to the fullest extent possible. This French philosopher knew then what we emphasize in successful organizations today: *The modern enterprise flourishes when there is attention to and respect for the human beings who contribute their work efforts.*

The human potential that can be unleashed in the work place is enhanced by teams working together with opportunities to contribute, participate in decisions and have social interactions. This is as true today as it was in 1930 at the Hawthorne Plant.

Darwin and evolutionary psychology: A new theory of four basic human drives

A recent book on motivation offers a new theory on basic drives in humans: *Driven: How Human Nature Shapes Our Choices*, by Paul R. Lawrence and Nitin Nohria (Jossey Bass, 2001). These two Harvard Business School professors draw evidence for their four-drive theory from evolutionary psychology and Darwin as well as from the social sciences and business. Human beings are driven to seek ways to fulfill all four drives because these drives are the product of the species' common evolutionary heritage: they increase the ability of our genes to survive. They make a good case for the following basic drives:

1. **The drive to acquire** objects and experiences that improve our status relative to others
2. **The drive to bond** with others in long-term relationships of mutual care and commitment
3. **The drive to learn** and to make sense of the world and of ourselves
4. **The drive to defend** ourselves, our loved ones, our beliefs, and our resources from harm

Each drive also has a “dark side,” as when *the drive to acquire* becomes excessively competitive and diminishes respect for others, or when *the drive to defend* one's current thinking diminishes *the drive to learn* new perspectives.

These four drives exist in each of us, and determine the choices we make. In some people, one drive will be more developed than others, creating an imbalance. In some jobs, some drives will be emphasized more than others. The authors suggest that organizational life can be enhanced when attention is paid to all four drives.

The independence of these drives is what forces people to think and to choose, because not all drives can be met at all times. These four drives are what make people distinctly human – complex beings with complex motives and complex choices.

Modern economic theory based on Adam Smith may actually create an imbalance by its over-emphasis on *the drive to acquire*. With opportunities for economic reform prevalent in countries such as Russia, Afghanistan and now Iraq, smoother transitions are made possible when leaders pay attention to all four drives as they exist in the basic nature of mankind.

“The challenge is to find a course forward that fulfils all of our basic drives in some creative, balanced way ... The way forward must be to use the best side of each drive to check the dark, excessive potential of human nature” (Lawrence & Nohria, p. 283).

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