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REFLECTIVE MANAGEMENT: PAST AND FUTURE

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ABSTRACT

Management frequently blames poor performance on unmotivated, uncommitted, and lazy workers, but poor performance may also be caused by ineffective management. Using the Law of Effect as an explanatory principle, the influence of a manager’s own behavior on employee performance is explored. Expectancy Theory likewise provides a framework for managers to help understand employee motivation and commitment to the organization. However, current management trends focus on employee, management coaching and facilitation instead of previous command and control practices and managerial behavior must reflect more effective approaches to management. Critical thinking is supported as a necessary competency to develop capabilities required to facilitate creativity, risk-taking, and empowerment. Management approaches must support employee and organizational commitment, effective communication, trust, and a sense of fairness necessary for organizational success.

INTRODUCTION

Poor performance is a fact of life in organizations: “If there is one universal truth about managers, it is that all of them have problem subordinates” (Viega, 1988, p. 145). While there may be many potential reasons for substandard performance, this paper focuses on how supervisors may contribute to their subordinate’s poor performance and provides suggestions on how organizations can improve organizational performance. This approach is consistent with Drucker (1954) who wisely noted that:

The manager directs people or misdirects them. He brings out what is in them or he stifles them. He strengthens their integrity or he corrupts them. He trains them to stand upright and strong or he deforms them. Every manager does these things when he manages—whether he knows it or not. He may do them well, or he may do them wretchedly but he always does them. (p. 344)

More recently, Campbell, Von Bergen, Soper, and Gaster (2003) suggested that managers look in the mirror to see how the person they see may have contributed to their employee’s poor performance. These researchers observed that supervisors rarely recognize the dramatic impact of supervisory behavior on subordinate performance, and that supervisors would do well to practice “reflective management,” i.e., before blaming employees for inadequate performance, managers should look at themselves and reflect upon how their own behavior may have
contributed to problem performance. This paper identifies and discusses how poor management practices continue in organizations based on the Law of Effect and Expectancy Theory. An explanation of critical reflection and how it supports performance improvement and encourages commitment and empowerment will also be presented. Options for managers to improve these areas to support organizational goals are reviewed, focusing on addressing organizational needs and rapidly changing environments where bureaucracies are no longer as effective. Approaches are recommended followed by a summary and conclusions.

THORNDIKE'S LAW OF EFFECT

The Law of Effect (Thorndike, 1913) was developed almost 100 years ago but still provides a key to helping managers understand how a worker’s behavior can be shaped and directed using consequences. Practitioners and researchers in behavioral and management fields have acknowledged the importance of the law. For instance, Vroom (1964) noted that “without a doubt the Law of Effect or principle of reinforcement must be included among the most substantiated findings of experimental psychology and is at the same time among the most useful findings for an applied psychology concerned with control of human behavior” (p. 13). The premise of the Law of Effect is that behavior followed by pleasurable consequences will occur more frequently while behavior followed by an unpleasant consequence will occur less often. It is essential that managers learn to understand the perspectives of their employees so they can have a more thorough understanding of what they need to do as managers to support employee good performance. Without this understanding, it is likely that performance will not improve.

Consequences come after behavior and encourage or discourage future behavior. Positive consequences such as praise and bonuses after successful completion of a project or for work well done encourage similar behavior in the future. Negative consequences tend to discourage similar future behavior and may include negative comments or a demotion.

Kerr (1975) provided many examples of inadvertent errors organizations and their managers make regarding rewards and punishments. Following Kerr (1975), Campbell et al. (2003) note that giving attention to a disruptive employee often reinforces or rewards the disruptive behavior which will make it more likely to occur in the future. Other examples provided by Campbell et al. (2003) include supervisors correcting employee mistakes, assigning easy tasks to employees who perform poorly on more difficult tasks, employees delegating work back to managers because they say it is too challenging (reverse delegation), and even managers refusing to promote deserving employees because the managers don’t want to lose their good performers—and instead promote poor performers. Substandard performers should not go to lunch with the boss, even if it is to talk about performance improvement because lunch is likely to be perceived as a reward by the worker. Verbal rewards are only appropriate when the job is done correctly.

EXPECTANCY THEORY

Campbell et al. (2003) explain that management can influence employee behavior in two ways: by what comes before behavior (antecedents) and by what comes after behavior (consequences). Vroom (1964) explained this influence with expectancy theory where “an expectancy is defined as a momentary belief concerning the likelihood that particular act will be
followed by a particular outcome” (p. 17). The three components of expectancy theory are expectancy, instrumentality, and valence. Expectancy is the link between effort and results, e.g., a person may think that if she works more efficiently then she can increase the number of sales calls she makes per day. Instrumentality is the link between results and performance; here an individual may believe that if he exceeds his sales quota then he will be rewarded. Valence is the value or desirability of an outcome to an individual. Thus, employees need to understand the connections between effort, results, and rewards in order to achieve organizational goals and to be motivating the rewards must be valued by the employees. This can only occur if management communicates effectively with employees regarding expectations and listens to employees to learn what motivates them.

Few managers consider reviewing their own actions, personal ambition and ‘invincibility’ relative to employee outcomes and expectations. The Law of Effect suggests that managers look at their own behaviors to determine how they contribute to poor employee performance and consider how changes could improve their ability to manage. Expectancy Theory, when used to reflect on personal behavior, can provide insights on conscious and perhaps unconscious expectations for employee success or failure. As Densten and Gray (2001) explain, without reflection, managers may fail to consider other viewpoints, remember only their perceived successes, and forget the consequences of past actions.

CRITICAL REFLECTION

Denston and Gray (2001) believe critical reflection, which is the ability to evaluate one’s actions and question personal assumptions to improve decision making, is a necessary competency for leaders. In the current environment where employees are expected to contribute to organizational effectiveness, this critical competency would apply to all levels of employees if organizations expect high performance. The ability to develop, create, and use these models and learn from them would provide the basis for Senge’s (1990) learning organization. This is also based in part on Brookfield’s (1995) concept of constructivism to integrate previous experience with new ideas and create new mental models. Coleman (1996) stated it was necessary to develop employee capabilities to the point where they can take personal responsibility for their own jobs; creativity and risk-taking must be encouraged just as managers must assume a supportive role and delegate authority. Gray (2007) proposes that critical reflection will allow management to focus on processes and organizational practices and allow examination of the issues. Critical reflection supports informed and effective decision-making. Not only would this support knowledge management by sharing knowledge throughout the organization, it also provides opportunities for all employees to provide input into decision-making. However, critical reflection would require an effective learning system and the knowledge about how to do critical reflection so it can become embedded in the culture. Coleman (1996) reports several areas for managers to consider and reflect upon that would support a participative environment. Multiple elements have been identified as contributing to increased employee participation, and these are presented with brief explanations.
EMPLOYEE COMMITMENT TO THE ORGANIZATION

One such element is organizational commitment. Organizations are looking for ways to increase employee commitment to the organization. This is because “Employee commitment is one of the most important measures of leaders success; ... high levels of employee loyalty have been linked to an estimated 11% boost in productivity” (Mayfield & Mayfield, 2002, p. 89). Further, lack of commitment also explains more than 34% of employee turnover expense which can be costly with Mayfield and Mayfield (2002) estimating to be as high as 100-150% of the departing workers’ annual salary. Stum (2001) agreed on the importance of commitment and suggested reviewing the dynamics of the workplace in terms of employee commitment and what organizations must do to win employee commitment. Stum (2001) also focused on three elements of workforce commitment, identified as productivity, pride and retention. Productivity included making personal effort to improve skills to contribute more effectively to their jobs as well as personal sacrifices to help the work group succeed. Pride included recommending services and products produced by the firm as the “best” and recommending one’s organization is one of the best places to work. Retention included plans to stay with the organization for the next several years and included plans to stay with the firm even if offered slightly higher pay and a similar job in a different company. These three aspects of commitment can lead to an increase in employee satisfaction and productivity.

Stum (2001) illustrates his concepts at the organizational level using Maslow’s hierarchy and named his concept the Performance Pyramid. A need hierarchy was developed to illustrate the needs of the workforce within an organizational setting through factor analysis and correlation based on over 100 survey items. These items were grouped into five distinct categories to create the following five levels of workforce needs which support organizational commitment: 1) feeling physically and psychologically safe in the workplace, 2) extrinsic rewards in terms of compensation and benefits, 3) a sense of belonging to both the larger organization and the work unit/team, 4) the need for positive change at both individual and organizational levels, and 5) the need to achieve a sense of fulfillment to balance life and work responsibilities. The data in this study suggested the lack of a “silver bullet” to ensure commitment and retention relevant to compensation, training, or work-life balance.

Suggestions for improvement include but are not limited to providing positive feedback when warranted as well as feedback on how to improve performance when employees are not achieving the desired results and clearly explaining expectations. Empathetic language should focus on building a relationship beyond the work environment and can include relating to workers with relevant experiences similar to their own, demonstrating willingness to listen to their concerns, showing more or less empathy as appropriate in given situations, and talking to workers about non-work-related issues. Meaning-making includes discussing organizational opportunities with employees which allows them to develop a rationale for their participation and contributions, sharing success stories about others in the organization as well as failure stories, providing new hires information about the organizational culture, and talking about how to succeed in the culture. As Morrison, Burke and Greene (2007) explain, sense-making or meaning-making must have an appropriate environment to grow which means it must be supported by management. Storytelling (5-10 minutes) where an employee can use a recent work experience to explain how it supports their values—including humorous events—encourages
connections between work life and personal meaning. These positive management actions can enhance the development of organizational commitment.

Effective Leadership Approaches and Organizational Commitment
Niehoff, Enz, and Grover (1990) discuss visibility of top management and the impact it can have in organizations. Support for relationships was found in this research between employee attitudes and perceptions, top-management approaches (i.e., transformational), and organizational leadership. These leadership approaches (being supportive of employee efforts, allowing employee input in decision-making and inspiring a shared vision) were related positively to organizational commitment and job satisfaction. The same actions were negatively related to role ambiguity, which is uncertainty about expected behavior in your job or position, which can cause stress. When top management encouraged innovation, this was related positively to commitment and also related negatively to role ambiguity. Executive visibility—i.e., executives being visible within the organization—had a positive relationship with employee commitment. As such, this study supported the initial link between the actions of top management and employee (attitude and perception) outcomes. Results indicated employee commitment can be impacted positively simply by the presence of executives in the local office because employees perceive top management is working. This also implies that the concept of leading by example is indeed effective in transformational leadership, and that organizational leaders can impact the commitment of employees positively to the goals, objectives, and values of the organization by their visibility. Employees will also commit to their organization and progress toward increased levels of performance when they are supported by top management in decision-making and risk taking. The same actions also serve to reduce role ambiguity and increase job satisfaction.

Creating Employee Engagement and Organizational Commitment
Employee engagement is defined in three different dimensions, cognitive, affective and behavioral (Anonymous, 2005). In the cognitive domain, this would include what employees think about their company and if they support and believe in its mission, values, goals, and objectives. The affective component would include what and how employees feel about their company such as the existence of a ‘bond’ that makes them feel like a part of the organization, proud to belong, and whether or not they would recommend their organization is a good place to work. The behavioral component relates to how employees act such as exerting the maximum effort when they are at work and whether or not they plan to stay at the organization regardless of setbacks or successes. Core issues influencing employee engagement included clarity of company values, effective management of talent, standards of ethical behavior, respectful treatment of employees, employee involvement in decision-making, and endorsement of company products and services (image; Anonymous, 2005). The research in this article found that companies that have clear values which are reflected in daily activities tend to have better performance. People are more likely to display a higher level of commitment, higher satisfaction, lower turnover, lower dissent, and lower dissatisfaction over pay when strongly shared values are evident. Employees need to feel a sense of purpose reflected in a positive way in the environment (Anonymous, 2005). This relates to meaning making, as each employee determines individually what purpose is served, thus constructing meaning (Morrison et al., 2007) for their participation and contributions.
Jain, Giga, and Cooper (2008) reviewed the three major kinds of commitment—affective, normative and continuance. The authors provide linkages between employee well-being and employee commitment to the organization through six constructs (manageable workload; personal control over the job; support from colleagues and supervisors; positive relationships at work; a reasonably clear role, and sense of control of involvement in changes in the organization). The authors found that a positive predictor of organizational attraction was a hassle-free existence; this increased affective commitment, which is related to the desire an employee has to remain with an organization. Commitment was broken down into three elements, conditional continuous commitment, normative commitment and organizational attraction. Jain et al. (2008) noted that any type of commitment may contribute positively to employee retention although affective commitment may appear to be more desirable from a practical perspective.

**Justice and Fairness**

Eberlin and Tatum (2007) believe that organizations would notice an improved level of employee commitment by elevating the perception of social justice in managers in their roles as leaders and across the organization. The authors also noted that it is a common mistake for organizations to assume that satisfied employees are also high-performing employees; however to perform their jobs well, employees are not required to be satisfied. Eberlin and Tatum (2007) suggest the best way to predict employee performance is through employee commitment as demonstrated by the degree of fairness employees perceive throughout the organization.

A sense of justice and fairness was also related to innovation in organizations. Janssen (2000) explains how non-management employees would develop their own innovative approaches to deal with heavy workloads. He found that these employees responded to increased levels of job demands with additional innovation if they perceived that their efforts would be fairly rewarded, which is consistent with Expectancy Theory. In contrast, if perceptions pointed to being under-rewarded and a lack of fairness, the innovation did not occur. However, specific factors within the organization and gender differences may cause variances in perceptions of the fairness and in the perception of job demands, which is why communicating effectively with employees is essential to understand these differences. Organizations have control over how employees are rewarded, so in this exchange relationship it is critical for organizations to determine if their treatment is perceived as equitable and to avoid negative perceptions developing where employees believe they are being exploited and innovative work behaviors are reduced or disappear completely.

**Effective Communication**

Bambacas and Patrickson (2008) suggest that "... interpersonal communication skills enhance organizational commitment and those most valued by organizations are those that are the most lacking in managers" (p. 57). The authors noted that much of the literature regarding communication has not investigated communication skills, but instead reviewed general aspects of interpersonal communication. In human resources (HR), essential leadership skills include promoting trust and openness. The three key dimensions of leadership skills are being truthful, honesty, and reliability in handling situations (Bambacas & Patrickson, 2008). Interpersonal communication skills fell into several categories, and Bambacas and Patrickson (2008) noted the most important were leadership, communication and motivation because of their link to
commitment. A key category appeared to be improving employee commitment by maintaining clarity and consistency of communications. These findings suggested that to enhance affective commitment the message needs to focus on the person receiving the message so coherency is certain and the message is interpreted intended. To be trusted as a leader was rated higher even though participative decision-making was essential to enhance commitment for HR managers. Clarifying employee expectations was also important in interpersonal communications because this deals with managing expectations of the psychological contract between employees and management. In this way affective commitment, which is also highly valued by organizations, is continually reinforced in the ways in which managers communicate to their subordinates (Jain et al., 2008).

Mayfield and Mayfield (2002) believe in the opportunity of “growing” loyal employees through appropriate, adaptive and strategic communication. They suggest loyal workers can also enhance the reputation of an organization in the job market which allows recruitment of better employees, and that effective leader communication is requirement for employee loyalty. Mayfield and Mayfield (2002) offer three different types of language that must be used, including giving directions, empathetic language, and meaning making language, also known as sense-making (Morrison et al., 2007) or meaning theory.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Stum (2001) explained how daily actions of managers will influence subordinates and how interaction between employees and managers set the tone in the organization. If organizations are to improve performance, managers must reflect on how they are perceived in the workplace as well as what behaviors they exhibit through their actions and their communication. In addition, policy and practice must be in alignment and not contradictory so that confusing messages will not be the norm. Bambacas and Patrickson (2007) found that interpersonal skills were most needed yet most lacking in management, so perhaps this is the place to begin in preparing managers for a work environment that creates commitment, allows participation and engagement, develops trust, and serves as an example for justice and fairness. Employees should be able to construct meaningfulness from their work (Jain et al., 2008; Bambacas and Patrickson (2007) found that affect has a place in organizations. Parish, Cadwallader, and Busch (2008) remind us that successful change initiatives have a strong relationship with affective commitment and how affective commitment is the key to effective organizational change. If organizations are to transform and develop into a more effective form to deal with the changing environment, managers must reflect on how they personally can integrate affective commitment (emotions) into the workplace to develop employee commitment. Affect should focus on developing emotional attachments to the organization, so managers who believe that the workplace is no place for emotion need to reconsider if they want to improve performance and motivate employees. This supports the increasing importance of emotional intelligence as a managerial skill.

Managers need to ask themselves how critical reflection can be used to develop the necessary elements of participation, commitment, affect, engagement, trust, fairness, and communication. Gray (2007) provides several approaches for critical reflection which included but was not limited to critical incident analysis, the use of reflective dialogue, and reflective metaphors. These would need to be practiced throughout the organization so they can become
part of the culture and everyday practice. Managers should ask themselves such questions as 1) do our systems allow critical reflection; 2) do we encourage and support critical reflection; 3) how can I better support critical reflection, and 4) what training is necessary for our employees. By using critical reflection in group settings and encouraging participation from everyone, the multiple aspects of employee commitment can be supported and developed concurrently. With alignment in these multiple areas that are necessary to develop commitment, managers must then look to themselves as role models and examples to see what others see, and look carefully at the messages they convey through their own behavior.

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