

2.2.7: Human Relations Movement

Learning Objectives

- Understand how Elton Mayo influenced management theory, and how the human relations movement affects current management theory.

The human relations movement was a natural response to some of the issues related to scientific management and the under-socialized view of the worker that ignored social aspects of work. The key uniting characteristics of Taylor, Weber, and Fayol were the ideas of efficiency produced through either operational, legal, or administrative improvements. One of the principal assumptions was an emphasis on rationality.⁴⁸ According to scientific management, there was a logic to actions, and formal and knowledge authority were the principal catalysts of workplace motivation. Scientific management tended to downplay the effects of social pressures on human interactions.⁴⁹ The human relations movement enhanced scientific management because it acknowledged that peoples' attitudes, perceptions, and desires play a role in their workplace performance. With this acknowledgement, for example, managers began to realize that settling disputes was more difficult than the scientific management approach described.

The major difference between scientific management and human relations theory was that human relations theory recognized that social factors were a source of power in the workplace. While Taylor recognized the existence of social pressures in an organization, he sought to diminish them through pay, that is, compensating workers for production even though social pressure forced workers to reduce production. Fayol recognized the existence of social issues as well, but he emphasized commitment to the organization as a management technique rather than commitment of workers to each other or to their supervisor. Weber placed emphasis on the rule of law and believed that laws and regulations would guide society and corporations. Yet he did not spend enough energy recognizing the outcomes that happen when rules break down. Fayol and Weber did not recognize the role of corporate culture in an organization and did not examine more closely why workers do not follow orders. The human relations movement added more of the social element to the study and theory of work.⁵⁰

Perhaps no research studies have been as misunderstood as the Hawthorne studies. The Hawthorne studies are the most influential, misunderstood, and criticized research experiment in all of the social sciences. The legend goes that **Elton Mayo** (1880–1949) researched, theorized, and developed human relations theory based on a 1924–1932 experiment he conducted at the Hawthorne plant of the Western Electric Company in Cicero Illinois. However, there is very little of the legend that is true. The truth is more complicated and difficult to understand. Most textbooks claim that Mayo researched and conducted the studies. Yet this is fiction. The studies were commenced by scholars from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Mayo did not become involved until 1927. Nevertheless, it is Mayo's vision of Hawthorne that has come to dominate the literature.

The first phase of the Hawthorne studies was called the illumination study, and it sought to measure the impact of light upon productivity. The study was inconclusive because there were too many variables other than light that could have affected worker productivity. The researchers had difficulty understanding why productivity increased. The second phase of the study was called the relay-assembly-test-oom, and these experiments were carried out in a room where researchers tested the effect that working conditions such as breaks, length of the workday, company-provided lunches, and payment method had on productivity. They selected six young female workers to be part of a team that produced a phone relay switch. Each woman was young and unlikely to be married any time soon. One woman was assigned to gather the parts to make the switch, and each of the other five women was assigned to assemble one component of the phone relay. The researchers found that production increased regardless of what variable was manipulated. Nevertheless, soldiering still occurred during the experiment. After two workers were fired for a health issue and getting married, production increased even more. The results were surprising to the researchers: they had expected to see a reduction but instead saw a consistent increase.

The Hawthorne executives turned to Elton Mayo, an Australian psychologist from Harvard University, to explain the puzzling results. Most of the controversy regarding the Hawthorne studies stems from Mayo's involvement. Mayo observed that production could be increased if management understood the role of individual workers' attitudes toward work and also took into account how group attitudes affected behavior. Mayo theorized that social issues and attention paid by the supervisor to these issues played a role in increasing production. The Hawthorne women were granted freedoms at work, including the ability to make suggestions regarding their work conditions. Many of the Hawthorne women felt that they were special and that if they performed well on the relay assembly task, they would be treated better by the company's management. Additionally, the Hawthorne women became very

friendly with each other. Their connection as a team and increased satisfaction in their work appeared to drive the women to greater performance. Yet the study found that financial incentives were a clear driver of performance as well.

A third study, called the bank wiring room study, was conducted between 1931 and 1932. Rather than being selected to form a new group, participants in the bank wiring room study consisted of an already existing group, one that had a number of bad behaviors. Regardless of financial incentives, group members decided that they would only produce 6,000 to 6,600 connections a day. Workers who produced more were ostracized or hit on the arm to lower production. George Homans summarized the difference in the results of the relay assembly and the bank wiring room experiments:

“Both groups developed an informal social organization, but while the Bank Wiremen were organized in opposition to management, the Relay Assemblers were organized in cooperation with management in the pursuit of a common purpose. Finally, the responses of the two groups to their industrial situation were, on the one hand, restriction of output and, on the other, steady and welcome increase of output. These contrasts carry their own lesson.”

Researchers found that cliques were formed that placed informal rules on the workers within a group. According to Homans, the workers also made a connection with one of the managers to control production. The discovery that management could ally themselves with the workforce to limit production was a notable contribution to management thought at the time. It suggests that managerial authority can break down if the manager disagrees with management’s policy toward the workers.



Exhibit 3.5 The Hawthorne Electric Plant The Hawthorne studies examined the effects that differences in working conditions (such as the timing and frequency of breaks) had on productivity. The term got its name from the experiments conducted at the Western Electric Hawthorne plant, illustrated here, located in Cicero, Illinois. These studies made popular the idea that attitudes affect performance. Credit: (public domain / flickr / This work is in the public domain in the United States because it was published in the United States between 1923 and 1977 without a copyright notice.)

What did the studies mean? On some level, they were meaningless because they proved little. Indeed, they have been called scientifically worthless. There were too many variables being manipulated; the sample size was too small; observations were collected at random; the Hawthorne researchers viewed the experiments through their own ideological lenses. They made mistakes in assuming that the wage was insignificant to the workers, when in reality the wage was a significant driving force. Yet these criticisms ignore two major facts about the Hawthorne studies. The first is that the Hawthorne studies were the first to focus on the actual work life of the workers. This was a notable change in sociological research. The second fact is that the studies were intended to generate future research, and future research did discover that attitudes play a major role in determining workplace outcomes. Another important finding concerned the role of the supervisor. Many worker behaviors, attitudes, and emotions have their genesis in their supervisor’s actions. Stress and fatigue can be the result of interactions with supervisors and coworkers; they are not just a response to less-than-ideal physical conditions. Finally, the Hawthorne studies showed that work motivation is a function of a wide variety of factors, including pay, social relationships, meaning, interests, and attitudes.

Barnard and the “Zone of Indifference”

Chester Barnard (1886–1961) was president of the New Jersey Bell Telephone Company.⁵¹ As president, he was given an unusual amount of time to conduct research. Barnard had been a student at Harvard, and through his connections there, he found out about some of the industrial research going on. His notable contribution was a book called *The Functions of the Executive*.⁵² Barnard argued that an executive’s purpose is to gain resources from members within the organization by ensuring that they perform their jobs and that cooperation exists between various groups within the organization. The other notable function of an executive is to hire and retain talented employees. Barnard defined a formal organization as consciously coordinated activities

between two or more people but noted that such coordination is not likely to last for very long, a factor that may explain why many companies do not survive for long periods of time.

Barnard believed that executives best exerted authority through communication and the use of incentives. Communication within an organization should include definite channels of communication, and workers should have access to knowledge and information. Communication should be clear, direct, and honest so that members of an organization understand what is expected of them.

Barnard stressed several important outcomes regarding incentives. Some of his incentives reflected the human relations movement's occupation with social outcomes but tempered that movement's emphasis with an understanding that workers labored for pay. The first incentive was that there should be monetary and other material inducements to encourage better performance and production. The second incentive was that there should be nonmaterial incentives, such as recognition. The third incentive was that working conditions should be desirable. The fourth and final incentive was that workers should find pride and meaning in the work they do. Barnard believed that a combination of these elements would ensure cooperation and contributions from organizational members.

While his findings on executive functions, communication, and incentives were significant, Barnard's largest contribution to the study of management involved what he called the "**zone of indifference**." The idea behind the zone of indifference is that workers will comply with orders if they are indifferent to them. This does not mean they have to agree with or support the orders. Rather the zone of indifference suggests that workers need merely to be indifferent to an order to follow it and that workers will follow orders due to an individual's natural tendency to follow authority. The zone of indifference must be reached through the following factors. First, the workers must have the ability to comply with the order. Second, workers must understand the order. Third, the order must be consistent with organizational goals. For both management and the worker to cooperate, their interests must be aligned. Fourth, the order must not violate an individual's personal beliefs. Barnard provided an explanation for why workers do not always obey orders.

Follett and Conflict Resolution

Mary Parker Follett (1868–1933) found a way to use the tenets of the human relations movement to solve some of the problems with the scientific management framework. Follett was a political scientist from Harvard. (Her work on the Speaker of the House remains the classic in the field.) After graduating from Harvard, given the limited opportunities for women, she wound up in the field of social work. She continued to publish works on philosophy and political science, but, based on her social work connections, she soon found herself drifting over to the Taylor Society, a group dedicated to the principles of scientific management. Later in her career, she turned toward business. As Wren and Bedeian note, chronologically she belonged to the scientific management era, but intellectually she belonged to the human relations movement era.⁵³

Follett's work was largely ignored for years either because it was too original or because she was a woman; it is likely both factors played a role.⁵⁴ Her ideas found little acceptance during the period because in her time, management saw workers only as tools. Her focus was on how to reduce conflict. Follett's contribution was that she pointed out that management should take social concerns into account when dealing with workers.

She asked questions of management: How do we create unity of action? How do we help workers live fuller, richer lives? How do we contribute to group success? Her argument was that individual behavior is affected by and affects others in the group.⁵⁵ Accordingly, she argued for the need of the principle of coordination to have a continuous interaction of all factors. What she meant was that both management and the worker should be able to understand the other's viewpoint. She sought to have both management and the worker share power with each other, rather than have power over one another. In addition, unlike Weber and more in line with Taylor, she believed that power should be based on knowledge and expertise.

Follett also argued that there are several ways to resolve conflicts. The first is to have one party dominate the other. In **dominance**, one party dictates the terms of the arrangement. Follett recognized that very few situations in life allow this to be possible and that, for many companies, this approach is impossible without incurring social costs in terms of a disaffected workforce. The second solution is **compromise**. In a compromise, neither side gets exactly everything it wants, and the best each side can do is obtain a result that each can agree too. The problem with this approach is that both sides give up what they really want and settle on what they can agree on. In a compromise, neither side is happy. The third way to solve conflict is **integration**, which occurs when each party states its preferences and attempts to reach an agreement. Follett provided an example of integration:

In the Harvard Library one day, in one of the smaller rooms, someone wanted the window open. I wanted it shut. We opened the window in the next room where no one was sitting.⁵⁶

It would appear that this situation is a compromise. But closely look at it; Follett wanted the window closed, and her study partner wanted a window open. It just did not have to be in that room. Because they rearranged the problem, they came up with a solution that was satisfactory to both of them.

? Concept Check

What did the Hawthorne studies, Barnard, and Fayol contribute to management thought?

What did the works of Follett and Mayo contribute to management thought?

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