

7.3: Role of Motivation

Learning Objectives

1. Distinguish between content and process theories of motivation
2. Identify five content theories of motivation and four process theories
3. Identify three kinds of action that individuals or groups who are motivated may take

Nothing great was ever achieved without enthusiasm. - Ralph Waldo Emerson

Alone we can do so little; together we can do so much. - Helen Keller

The Latin term *sine qua non* literally means “without which, not” or “that without which, nothing.” In other words, if something is a *sine qua non*, it’s absolutely necessary. Emerson’s comment indicates that he considered enthusiasm to be the *sine qua non* of greatness. Our position in this book is that motivation is the *sine qua non* of effective group action.

As Hoy & Miskel, (Hoy, W.K., & Miskel, C.G. (1982). *Educational administration: Theory, research, and practice* (2nd ed.). New York: Random House) noted, motivation comprises “complex forces that start and maintain voluntary activity directed to achieve personal goals.” In short, being motivated means having energy and wanting to put it to work.

Before we examine just what motivation accomplishes within an individual or in a group setting, we should first take a look at a number of views concerning where it comes from.

Theories of Motivation

Thinkers in business, education, psychology, and many other fields have long wondered about and performed research into the causes of motivation. Their theories fall into two major categories: content theories and process theories.

Content theories of motivation focus on the factors which motivate behavior by rewarding or reinforcing it. Process theories attempt instead to determine how factors that motivate behavior interact with each other.

Content Theories of Motivation

Several content theories of motivation were developed in the middle to late years of the 20th century. Probably the most well-known today is Maslow’s need hierarchy, with its five levels, which we reviewed earlier in this book.

Another content theory from this period is Clayton Alderfer’s “ERG” theory. (Alderfer, C.P. (1972). *Existence, relatedness, and growth: Human needs in organizational settings*. New York: Free Press). According to Alderfer, people’s needs can be broken down into the categories of existence, relatedness, and growth. Like Maslow’s hierarchy, Alderfer’s model portrayed people’s needs in a hierarchical fashion. It differed from Maslow’s hierarchy, however, both in its nomenclature for the levels in the hierarchy and in its contention that development through the hierarchy takes place in a cycle between differentiation and integration. Differentiation is a broadening of people’s awareness through new and challenging experiences, whereas integration follows as an individual brings together diverse elements of his or her personality into a new and more unified form. When you decide to join a new club or organization, for instance, you first meet many people whose habits and behaviors may be new and perhaps disorienting to you. Later, however, you become more familiar with the way things work and feel consolidated and confident in your role within that group.

A third content theory is Frederick Herzberg’s two-factor theory. (Herzberg, F., Mausner, B., & Snyderman, B. (1959). *The motivation to work*. New York: Wiley). Herzberg classed rewards as either “motivators” or “hygienes.” He held that motivators—including achievement, recognition, responsibility, and the opportunity to advance within a group—are factors that contribute to satisfaction, but which when absent don’t cause dissatisfaction. In other words, we appreciate them but can do without them. Hygienes, on the other hand—such as money, status, and job security—don’t create satisfaction when they’re present, according to Herzberg, but do lead to dissatisfaction if they’re absent. In a sense, thus, they’re what people consider to be basic minimal needs and can go only as far as preventing dissatisfaction.

Two more content theories of motivation have been identified by more contemporary authorities. Kenneth Thomas (Thomas, K.W. (2000). *Intrinsic motivation at work: Building energy and commitment*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler) drew a distinction between extrinsic rewards—those which come from the external environment—and intrinsic rewards, which come from within an individual or group.

Thomas believed that intrinsic rewards are more likely to motivate people and identified four kinds of intrinsic motivators. The first is a sense of meaningfulness, which is the idea that what a person or group is doing is worthwhile. The second is a sense of choice, which is the feeling that the person or group can make decisions about how to behave. The third is a sense of competence, which is the belief that the person or group is behaving capably. The fourth motivator is a sense of progress, which is the feeling that the person or group is actually accomplishing something.

A final content theory of motivation was put forth by Steven Reiss (Reiss, S. (2000). *Who am I? The 16 basic desires that motivate our behavior and define our personality*. New York: Tarcher/Putnam and researchnews.osu.edu/archive/whoami.htm) and developed as the outgrowth of a study involving more than 6,000 people. On the basis of statistical analysis of his results, Reiss contended that 16 basic desires motivate people's behavior: power, independence, curiosity, acceptance, order, saving, honor, idealism, social contact, family, status, vengeance, romance, eating, physical exercise, and tranquility.

Interestingly, Reiss asserted that 14 of the 16 desires are similar to those found in animals and are likely to be genetically determined. He also suggested that people's motivations differ substantially from individual to individual and group to group because each person's ranking of the 16 desires is unique.

Process Theories of Motivation

Theorists who espouse process theories of motivation are more interested in what starts, sustains, and stops behavior than they are in the things that motivate the behavior in the first place. We'll consider four kinds of process theories in this section.

Expectancy Theory

Expectancy theory was originated by Victor Vroom, (Vroom, V. (1964). *Work and motivation*. New York: Wiley) and has been broadened and popularized since then by other authorities. Vroom's theory is complex, but its central idea is straightforward: People are most likely to be motivated in a certain way if they believe 1) that they will receive a reward, 2) that the reward they expect to receive is something they value highly, and 3) that they can do what it takes to achieve the reward.

Here's an example. If the members of a team of employees think they will receive praise from their boss if they produce a snappy PowerPoint presentation as part of a project they've been assigned, if they all care about receiving the boss's praise, and if they think they have the skills to create the presentation, then they're apt to work hard on the activity.

Attribution Theory

Attribution theory holds that people's behavior is motivated by how they interpret the behavior of others around them. For instance, we may think that what's causing others to act as they do is a combination of internal, personal factors. On the other hand, we may think that their behavior is a product of environmental variables.

According to attribution theory, people might actually be motivated to convey more significant rewards for someone's failure than for success. Take the case of the team of employees working on the project. Let's say that their PowerPoint presentation has several errors in it. If the boss observes it and thinks, "Wow—they must've put a lot of time into this," he or she might be motivated to congratulate the team on its hard work and offer some kindly advice for improving the presentation. On the other hand, if the presentation is letter-perfect but the boss thinks, "I'll bet the department head down the hall showed them exactly how to do that," the boss may be motivated to offer only a routine acknowledgment that the assignment has been completed.

Goal Theory

Goal theory, (Locke, E.A. (1968). Toward a theory of task motivation and incentives. *Organizational Behavior and Human Performance*, 3, 157–189) contends that people are motivated to behave in certain ways, and to keep behaving in those ways, primarily because they intend to achieve particular goals. This sounds simple and reasonable enough, but goal theorists believe that reaching a goal actually includes seven steps. The first five steps bring behavior about, whereas the last two maintain and regulate it.

Here's what a goal-setter has to do in these seven steps: first, survey and understand his or her environment; second, evaluate which elements of the environment are of value to him or her; third, make an emotional assessment of possible courses of action; fourth, decide what is apt to happen if he or she behaves in a particular way; fifth, decide how likely it is that the results he or she desires can actually be produced; sixth, decide exactly how to behave; and seventh, take action. The authors of this book appreciate the intellectual elegance of goal theory but wonder if they, you, or anyone any of us know has ever deliberately followed all these steps!

Behaviorism

Behaviorism has probably received more attention and is better known throughout the public at large than any of the other three theories we've discussed. B.F. Skinner, (Skinner, B.F. (1974). *About behaviorism*. New York: Knopf) the most prominent Western exponent of behaviorism in the last century, wrote that all human behavior is a lawful process determined and controlled in systematic and consistent ways. Furthermore, Skinner and his adherents contended that all behavior is a function of its consequences in the environment. What this means is that any action people take will depend completely on what happens afterward. If the action affects the environment in such a way that it afterward strengthens the behavior, the behavior will persist or reoccur. If what happens afterward does not strengthen the behavior, on the other hand, the behavior will eventually cease.

Unlike other theorists of motivation, behaviorists do not describe what happens inside people when they act in certain ways. They don't deny that people have feelings and thoughts, but to the degree that they deal with such phenomena at all, they consider them to be effects rather than causes of behavior.

Fruits of Motivation

We've already established that motivation is a necessary condition to the functioning of any individual or group. If we have it, we possess the capacity to take action.

So, what action might we take? Three possibilities stand out, each of them either for better or worse. First of all, we may comply with other people's wishes, rules, or expectations. We may be motivated, for instance, to obey traffic signals and "no trespassing" signs.

Second, we may produce outcomes or create resources for a group. Motivated members of a political party, for example, may prepare or distribute flyers or make phone calls supporting the party's candidates.

Third, we may decide to sacrifice some of our own comfort or security for the sake of others. The classic example of this behavior is wartime military service.

Notice that motivation, wherever it comes from, provides a capacity for action but doesn't guarantee it. In other words, it's a necessary but not a sufficient condition for getting things done. In the next section, we'll take a look at ways to both produce motivation and ensure that people take action based on it.

Key Takeaway

Content theories of motivation concentrate upon rewards and reinforcing factors, whereas process theories focus on what starts, sustains, and stops behavior in response to those rewards and reinforcers.

Exercise 7.3.1

1. Frederick Herzberg wrote that people's motivation can be maintained only if they are given responsibility and an opportunity to achieve something. Do you agree? Provide an example that supports your answer.
2. Name and rank your top five desires from Steven Reiss's list of 16 desires. Share and compare your desires with a classmate. What do the results imply with respect to how you and the other person might best become motivated in a group?
3. Expectancy theory says that people will be motivated under three conditions: if they believe they will receive a reward for doing something, if they value the reward, and if they believe they can do what it takes to achieve the reward. Describe a situation in which you were motivated to do something and explain whether and how those three conditions were met.

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