Applying Motivation Theory to Analyze a "Real World" Scenario: Causes and Solutions

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Abstract. A foundational topic in every introductory Organizational Behavior (O.B.) course is work motivation. Textbooks devote one or two chapters to this subject and cover many different theories that have been developed over the years to explain the presence or absence of consistently high effort at work. It can be challenging to bring this critical content to life for students to help them understand its practical implications. Without specific guidance in an experiential direction, students' focus understandably turns to keeping straight theory names and their specific components to do well on a quiz or test: learning that is likely to be quickly forgotten shortly thereafter. To address this problem, described here is an easy-to-implement assignment with high personal relevancy for students that revolves around one of the most popular and broadest theories of work motivation, expectancy theory.

Keywords: work motivation, expectancy theory, experiential exercise.

1. Introduction

Some courses in the core business curriculum seem to naturally lend themselves to experiential applications for students, for example, managing a hypothetical investment portfolio in a finance class or consulting with a small business owner for a marketing research project. It can be more difficult to create a practical application type of exercise in an Organizational Behavior (O.B.) course with its focus on managing people in a work context. One topic area that has potential for doing so is work motivation, a subject with a long history of research-based theories and models that O.B. textbook authors attempt to comprehensively cover in one or two chapters. Having taught a survey course in O.B. for many years, I have sought to enliven what can be a rather exhaustive, potentially overwhelming treatment of existing motivation theories by creating a student-relevant, experiential exercise that focuses on one of these approaches: expectancy theory.

2. Background

Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) authors have noted the challenge the topic of work motivation presents for students in an O.B. course (e.g., Afota & Robinson 2023; Benson & Dresdow 2021; Holbrook Jr. & Chappell 2019; Smith Sockbeson *et al.* 2023; Stecher & Rosse 2007). The sheer number of theories and models, coupled with the relatively short time a first course in O.B. can devote to this topic, results in a conundrum for instructors. How to convey the fundamental theoretical concepts that researchers have uncovered about work motivation, without overwhelming students and risk them missing out on the practical usefulness of this knowledge? A review of the SoTL literature exposes a number of different approaches instructors have devised for dealing with this challenge through assignments that supplement the textbook coverage of the motivation subject. The most popular tactic seems to be hypothetical scenario-based exercises (e.g., Blair & Shaver 2019; Mills 2017; Munoz *et al.* 2022; Paglis 2011; Stecher & Rosse 2007). Other innovative approaches include analyzing and discussing films or TV episodes (Lyon & Kusar 2023; Parikh 2014; Smith Sockbeson *et al.* 2023), ranking motivators (Tosti-Kharas & Lamm 2023), role-plays (Afota & Robinson 2023), simulation games (Buil *et al.* 2019), and even using toys (Smrt & Nelson 2013). Creators typically design assignments around one or more of the well-known motivation theories, for instance, the job characteristics model (Munoz *et al.* 2022; Smrt & Nelson 2013), equity (Holbrook Jr. & Chappell 2019; Smith Sockbeson *et al.* 2023; Stecher & Rosse 2007), intrinsic motivation and self-determination (Blair & Shaver 2019; Buil *et al.* 2019; Parikh 2014), and expectancy (Holbrook Jr. & Chappell 2019; Paglis 2011; Smith Sockbeson *et al.* 2023; Stecher & Rosse 2007).

The aim of the exercise described in this article is to contribute another technique to this motivation application tool set for instructors. Its specific added value lies in how it differs from the majority of the examples above. Rather than dealing with a hypothetical scenario, this experiential exercise involves "real world" personal application. Specifically, it requires students to analyze a motivation problem they have experienced themselves or have directly observed in another student, coworker, or teammate. A second advantage of this exercise over most of those listed above is that it is designed to be completed outside of class time. This is a benefit because, as noted above, the motivation topic is especially content-heavy and needs to be squeezed into just a few class sessions. This time constraint makes ideal an assignment that adds value for students' understanding of the subject without absorbing in-class time. Instructors who wish to do so can easily supplement the basic assignment with in-class activities, as explained further below. In sum, the assignment has significant learning potential for students, while being flexible and easy for instructors to implement in their courses.

As indicated by the learning objectives below, the assignment focuses students on understanding and applying principles from expectancy theory (Vroom 1964). Briefly, expectancy theory states that motivation is determined by workers' perception of the strength of these three relationships for their specific work context:

- If I exert effort, can I perform this task well? [expectancy]

- If I perform well, will I be rewarded for it? [instrumentality]

- Is the reward attached to performance personally valuable to me? [valence]

Expectancy theory (Vroom 1964) was chosen as the basis for this exercise for three reasons: its prominence among the foundational theories of work motivation, its broad application for improving management practice, and its capacity for integrating components from other motivation theories. First, the expectancy model has a long history in the O.B. literature and in textbooks; it is widely accepted as one of the fundamental theories of motivation (e.g., Connolly 1976; Miner 2003; Mitchell 1974; Van Eerde & Thierry 1996). Ratings of 13 motivation theories by 71 O.B. experts gave expectancy theory and goal-setting theory (Locke & Latham 2002) the highest "mean importance" ratings. "Importance" criteria were defined as usefulness in understanding behavior in organizations, generation of significant research, and clear implications for management practice (Miner 2003). Second, among motivation theories, expectancy theory is especially broad in its practical application. Specifically, breakdowns in expectancy theory components can explain diminished motivation due to problems with setting performance expectations, selection / placement / training deficiencies, performance appraisal biases, and ineffective reward systems, to name a few examples. Through this exercise, students can explore how this theory can be used to identify problems in these management practices and offer solutions. Third, expectancy theory was chosen because it enables instructors to incorporate components of other theories, such as goal-setting, equity, and self-efficacy theories, in the analysis of a "real world" motivation problem. As noted earlier, the motivation topic can overload students with different theories (Anderson 2007; Locke & Latham 2004). Expectancy theory's synergies with other motivation approaches can help students make sense of how these different models link together to better understand the predictors of work motivation. The "Optional Extensions" section of this article describes an approach for guiding students in this kind of integrative analysis.