

Morale and motivation in the Canzalian Credential Assessment Unit – TEACHING/RESEARCH NOTES

Synopsis of case

The Canzalian Credential Assessment Unit (CCAU) is a public service agency that does a range of different activities. Its assessors come from a variety of backgrounds including the teaching profession, and technical and trades work. While some staff are long-serving, others are new recruits. Within the staff as a whole, there is a wide range and variation in working style, including the quantity and quality of output, with very few exhibiting what the manager considers appropriate behaviours and attitudes for public servants. He needs to even out the differences between what he sees as four very different working styles, while ensuring that staff remain motivated by and committed to the quite varied requirements of the assessment role – from technical expertise to thoroughness and accuracy, and to meeting tight deadlines.

Concepts for discussion

This is an ideal case for the discussion of motivation theory as it applies within a typical workplace. Topics that can be explored include:

- Discretionary behaviour and effort
- Ability, motivation and opportunity (AMO)
- Contextual performance.

Basic issues

1. How a manager can ensure that the make-up of his staff remains appropriate when the role of his organization is evolving?
2. Whether it is possible to integrate very diverse staff members into a cohesive whole, and how this could be done.

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Immediate issues

1. How the manager can increase the motivation of staff and their commitment to take a more holistic view of their role in the organization.

Suggested student assignments

1. Can recent developments – a new manager, increased investment in technology, and an unexpected pay increase – be used to encourage staff to lift their game.
2. What other motivational tools might be explored? What elements of job satisfaction could be drawn on?
3. How can a manager deal with longer-serving staff who have settled into a comfort zone and see no need to change their work habits?
4. How can the performance appraisal system be made more meaningful and effective?

Research notes to assist with responses to student assignments

Discretionary behaviour

Purcell (2002) notes that:

“the choice of how, and how well to do things is not necessarily made deliberately. It can be unconscious and just part of the way people behave in this organisation. But it can certainly be withdrawn, often in the sense of not caring. This may be a reciprocal response to a belief that the firm no longer cares about me or my future, or my opinions.”

The most important realisation is that the experience of job satisfaction and having commitment to an organisation encourages employees to exercise *discretionary behaviour* (Purcell 2002). *Discretionary behaviour* determines the way work is done, the speed, care, innovation and style of job delivery.

Assessors need to work with both care and speed, as urgency and efficiency is almost as important as conscientiousness. The case study may be read to suggest that a lack of job satisfaction, job autonomy, professional development and recognition causes some assessors to withhold their *discretionary effort* - leading to either careless expediency, or inefficiency.

If employees are identified as withholding their *discretionary effort*, Purcell's comments imply that the culture of an entire organisation may need to change if this is to be rectified. Kotter's (1995) eight-step approach to leading change is suggested as the vehicle of change implementation.

The problems the CCAU faced were “slow-burning” ones and will take time to resolve. Contributing factors include poor job satisfaction, lack of professional development, poor communication, and little planning, all of which have generated a low-skilled, poorly equipped, and unmotivated, non-commitment culture that lacks alignment with the aims of the organisation.

Ability, Motivation and Opportunity (AMO)

Research presented here points to Ability, Motivation, and Opportunity ‘(AMO) theory’ as the basis for a solution to this problem. Purcell (2002) identifies employee ability, employee motivation for *discretionary effort*, and opportunities in the *work environment*, as three interrelated factors responsible for employee performance. This is reminiscent of the Beer *et al* (1981) emphasis on *competence* and *commitment*. Ability or competence is usually developed through training and/or mentoring. Pfeffer (1998) highlights the importance of professional development aimed at enhancing “*generalist competence and organisational culture*” rather than specialised skills.

Ability

In the case study context, the “ability” component of *AMO theory* requires the management team to be more selective in the future recruitment of assessors; and make a serious commitment to their professional development.

Congruence is the compatibility between an employee, their workplace and the job (Vigoda 2000). According to Beer *et al* (1981) lack of congruence can be costly in terms of time, money and energy, perceptions of trust and a common purpose, and may lead to stress and other psychological problems. Vigoda (2000, 188) notes that studies have linked job congruence to employee productivity and performance.

Organisations which employ staff identified as likely to “fit in” well with the working environment enjoy high productivity and improved quality of performance, little absenteeism and low turnover. Well-suited employees also have, more realistic expectations, are less aggressive, less power-seeking and less political (Vigoda 2000).

Pfeffer (1998, 96) points out that permanent employment or job security can be counterproductive unless the firm hires people who fit the culture and unless incentives reward outstanding performance.

According to Bertucci (2006) government should aim at building “learning organisations” which focus staff on sharing their explicit and tacit knowledge, and establish incentives for public service employees to learn and upgrade their skills. In the CCAU, professional development initiatives need to incorporate a generalist component, rather than relying on a solely “specialist-skills-training” approach.

Motivation

All organisations need to commemorate their accomplishments to give employees a sense of their individual and collective relevance, and motivate future efforts. By achieving specific goals, people gain a sense of personal accomplishment and self worth (Locke and Latham 1984, 1990).

Celebration motivates, promotes, and recruits dedicated people who want to work for a successful agency that is achieving important public purposes (Behn 2003, 591). Saunderson

(2004, 257) found 100 percent of survey respondents agreed, or agreed strongly, that positive recognition impacts employee morale and feelings of being a part of the organisation.

Increased commitment can lead not only to increased loyalty and performance, but also to increased “*self-worth, dignity, psychological involvement, and identity*” for the individual (Beer *et al* 1981, 19). Job satisfaction is usually found when people feel that their job is challenging and when they feel they have a lot of control over how the job is done (job autonomy) (Purcell 2002). *Affective commitment* to the organisation is shown when individuals say they are proud to work for the firm and wish to continue to do so (Purcell 2002).

Performance appraisals can also be used as a motivational tool – one focused more on rewarding well those that deserve recognition, rather than punishing hard those that do not. Equally important is the use of performance appraisal as a means of indicating to the Assessors that conscientious and efficient work is expected and will be rewarded.

As the Assessors are public servants, the following research is also of relevance. Brewer *et al* (2000) identified four distinctive conceptions of Public Service Motivation (PSM): Samaritans, communitarians, patriots and humanitarians (Mann 2006, 35). Mann (2006) asks if there is something identifiable and quantifiable that attracts some people to work in the public sector. Can PSM be recruited for? And does PSM correlate with worker job satisfaction and increased productivity?

Denhardt (1992: 272-6) identifies the “pursuit of significance” as a motivator of public servants. Where significance in this context can concern the welfare of others and the public interest, but is usually motivated by making a difference: changing the world for the better.

Opportunity

People need the opportunity to apply their ability and skill and to contribute more broadly to the life of the organisation. This is the *AMO model* (Purcell 2002). The notions of “ability” and “motivation” are broadly similar to Beer *et al*’s (1981) “*competence*”, “*commitment*” and “*congruence*”.

What distinguishes *AMO theory* from other approaches is the emphasis on “opportunity,” which according to Purcell (2002) means creating “*space for wider participation and involvement in how things should be done and how to respond to the change*”. For instance, the opportunity to for instance develop new skills, gain more autonomy and/or have more influence.

Contextual performance: An alternative or an auxiliary?

Contextual performance offers a potential means of implementing some improvement in employee performance ahead of longer-term initiatives such as culture change.

Jawarhar and Carr (2007) write that theory and research have distinguished between task and *contextual performance* (Borman and Motowidlo, 1993; Campbell, 1990; Colemand and Borman, 2000 and Motowidlo and van Scotter, 1994). Consistent with the social exchange

perspective, employees direct their *contextual performance* toward individuals/entities that offer them support.

This represents a way in which organisations can compensate for low levels of employee conscientiousness. By providing support from the organisation and through effective relationships with leaders, organisations can elicit *contextual performance* from individual employees who lack the personality predisposition to work conscientiously. *Contextual performance* may be very useful in soliciting the completion of tasks or projects, and may even influence an employee or group of employees to improve their performance.

However, as contextual performance relies heavily on the relationship between an individual employee and her/his team leader or manager, within any team there will always be some employees that are not as inspired or influenced as others by a particular leader or manager. Therefore, unless the *contextual performance* approach is used on each individual in a group with an overall aim of changing the whole group by reaching some kind of critical mass, the contextual approach is at best an auxiliary approach.

Conclusion

AMO theory, possibly with other approaches such as the use of *contextual performance* to keep the wheels turning, and celebrating success where and when appropriate, could eventually inspire the re-emergence of *discretionary effort* in Assessor work-styles in the CCAU.

AMO theory's focus on "ability," if applied, encourages the delivery of adequate professional development; and in combination with Beer *et al* (1981) focus on *congruence* should also encourage more stringent employee selection criteria. *Contextual performance* has a vital part to play in the meantime, as it is required, along with the performance management system, to keep the business unit going – compensating for the lack of job satisfaction and commitment. It should be noted lastly, that despite the challenges mentioned, most of the assessors like working in CCAU – and some even enjoy the work. With a bit of foresight (vision), planning, and most of all investment in people (professional development opportunities) a successful, professional, rewarding, safe and fun workplace is possible.

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