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Theory to Practice

Commentator

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Article

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Perry, Mesch, Paarlberg

Motivating Employees in a New Governance Era: The Performance Paradigm Revisited

After reading the article by Professors Perry, Mesch, and Paarlberg affording a "review of reviews" of what empirical research tells us about employee motivation in the public sector, I had five primary reactions based on my 20 years experience in the public sector. First, employee motivation is analogous to driving a car. You can get around by putting gas in the car, but you won't necessarily get good performance and the car may still break down. Second, any one of the motivational factors discussed in the paper will do *some* good, but each works best as part of a whole package (car maintenance, if you will): incentives, job design, and realistic communication. Third, and despite

these interrelationships, job design is arguably the single most important factor in motivation. Fourth, part of the gap between the promise and performance of various motivational techniques probably stems from the highly idiosyncratic way that motivational theories are applied in public organizations. Finally, it is dispiriting to realize how little we seem to know about motivation in the public sector. Let me share my reasons for drawing such conclusions, and offer some modest suggestions for public managers practicing and researchers studying public sector motivation in the future.

Goal Setting

My experience as a public sector manager fits quite nicely with

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what Perry, Mesch, and Paarlberg find about the relationship between goals and motivation. There may, indeed, be peculiar difficulties in using goals as motivational factors in the public sector, and employees may differ in their reactions to them. For instance, the Office of Personnel Management, the Department of Labor, the Chief Information Officer, the Solicitor, and the Office of Management and Budget are just a few of the external goal setters that we typically work with in my agency.

As such, we stress that internal upper management has the responsibility for the program goals, while employees have a responsibility to provide input into the goals and to work out effective ways to achieve program goals. We also understand, however, that employees in any organization are all different. Some don't care about overall goals, but their individual jobs and performance goals are sufficient motivation. Others, in contrast, care about the big picture very much. As such, and as the authors' review of research indicates, "managers profit by taking time to understand their subordinates" so they can better appreciate the complex link between goals and employee performance.

Individual Financial Incentives

Perry, Mesch, and Paarlberg also find a general consensus in prior research that individual financial incentives are not effective in the public sector. As a manager, I too have observed that individual pay recognition is not a real motivator. However, I also have seen that a thoughtful, constructive, and timely evaluation of performance *can* be.

Perhaps one reason that research finds little support for the idea that financial incentives don't seem to work in the federal government is that the evaluation and the bonus are not implemented at the same time. *But my management experience tells me that the*

evaluation itself is far more important to employees than the existence or amount of the resulting bonus. At evaluation time, after all, the amount of the "bonus pool" is unknown, so the evaluation is really the only performance gauge available to the employee. Much later (as much as two months in most cases) the bonus pools are announced and correlated to the annual performance evaluations by the cost center managers. Employees do not see the bonuses in their checks until December for an evaluation that happened in September for work done from the prior year!

Yet another factor that I find inhibits the impact of financial incentives is the lack of "celebrations" of achievement in most public agencies. Since there is no budget for employee recognition observances, any cookies, cake, and punch comes out of management's pocket. As such, these events are understandably rare. I suspect that private industry allows and affords a nominal amount for team-building expenditures geared toward celebrating jobs well done.

Group Incentives Systems or Participation?

Perry, Mesch, and Paarlberg's analysis also found that group incentive systems are effective in the private sector, but are not well tested in the public sector. I have observed that group incentives frequently are not effective in the public sector because of the perceived randomness of group awards. Often, for example, no set standards exist for giving awards, and if your group's sponsor writes it up, then you get it. Other factors that reduce the impact of group incentives are the small amount of bonuses relative to the employees' pay/grades and (again) the time lapse between the award, the recommendation, and the actual work that merited the award. Moreover, each member of the group typically gets the same award amount,

although each did not put in the same amount of effort, leading to dissatisfaction even among the awardees!

From my experience, I believe that group awards are less important to employee motivation than the extent to which *employees believe that their input has been valued in the decision-making process*. Moreover, if employee recommendations are not implemented and the group receives no feedback about why this is the case, even an award will not motivate them in the future. Because this has happened so many times to so many public employees, I heartily endorse a systematic evaluation of project proposals, management commitment to the proposal and to staffing the team, regular reports from the team to management, and regular management feedback.

Thus, not unlike the conclusions reached by the authors, my management experience tells me that participation has an important affective impact on employee motivation. Unlike what they find in their review of reviews, however, I think it also impacts performance. That performance may not be readily apparent in the *immediate* context of evaluation of a project. However, it is likely to have positive effects in *subsequent* team projects, as employees look more positively at management's commitment to valuing their ideas.

I also should add that we are having some success in the Bureau of Labor Statistics with a more structured and systematic approach to projects, awards, and recognition. Our approach is quite consistent with what the authors find works in other types of organizations. In particular, it is based on the principle that participation is important, as it affords a means to gain informed employee input for decisions. Moreover, since we believe that stovepiping in public organiza-

tions hurts the quality of the decisions made, we also use the idea of matrix participation groups (e.g., in developing a collaborative document, such as a strategic plan) as a means to introduce employees to others in the organization. This, in turn, helps to eliminate stovepiping.

As a corollary to Perry, Mesch, and Paarlberg's findings regarding participation as a means to better decisions, however, I also find it important to stress to employees that we are not *making* the decisions. Decisions are made by others higher up in the organization, based on many other things for which we lack expertise. Relatedly, I also stress to employees that, many times, an idea is ahead of its time so it is not used. I then encourage employees to keep the idea in their "mental" file; to refine it as circumstances, technology, and organizational goals change; and to bring it up again when the organization is ready for it. Employees must understand that there are few bad ideas, but that bad timing is rampant.

Job Design

As noted, I join Perry, Mesch, and Paarlberg in viewing job design as a key motivator. Based on my experience as a public manager, however, I take this one step further. To me, job design—and the manner in which it is approached—is the most important part of the overall employee motivation package. Specifically, I've found that the best job design, like politics, is local, meaning that the design starts with the employee, not with the job. In the past, when coming into a new office, I have held one-on-one meetings with each employee. We discuss overall organization goals, and then I work individually with each staff member to determine his or her talents ("What do you just love to do? It doesn't matter whether the activity is at home, at church, or at work, what gives you joy?"). From the discussion that

follows, we work together on structuring activities that both add to the overall organizational goals *and* can be incorporated into the design of the job.

Approaching job design in this way means that each person knows there is something in her job especially suited to her and at which she is likely to excel. In addition, I have employees share these designs with the staff in open meetings, and I greatly encourage collaboration among the employees of my group. In doing so, my aim is to use collaborative goal-oriented job design as a *cross-training* mechanism. It has been my experience in taking this approach, for example, that employees who are technical experts in software incorporate the expertise of other employees who are experts in process, facilitation, and collaboration.

Finally, in my experience, lessening the moderating variables between job design (however pursued) and performance improvement depends on upper management support. Frequently today, public agencies ask their employees when redesigning positions to take on extra jobs, tasks, and skills. In the process, they are asking public employees to acquire extra training, as well as a "think outside the box" attitude. Doing so, however, means that rewards for these extra efforts must be seen as valued and supported both at the top of the agency and at upper management levels.

Conclusion

My thanks to *PAR* for the opportunity to comment on this paper. It was an interesting exercise to match my 20 years of managerial experience with prior research on motivation. One perspective that I strongly share with the authors is that we need better measurements in the public sector to be able to determine what works and what doesn't when it comes to motivation. As noted

above, my experience also suggests a variety of factors that practitioners and researchers also might consider as mediators or moderators of the impact of various motivational tools. These include time elapsed between work and reward, presence or absence of continuous feedback, the extent of employee involvement in job design, and whether or not performance is celebrated. My career in public service also suggests that researchers might refocus a bit in certain ways. For example, they might look at the relationship between the nature of evaluations and performance. They also might try to assess the relationship between how employees working on teams perceive how their superiors value and use their input, and then relate that to both immediate *and* later performance. To be so in the dark about public sector motivation is distressing and requires attention by practitioners and researchers alike.