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Commentator

Authors

Article

Steven W. Hays is Charles L. Jacobson Professor of Public Affairs, Department of Political Science, University of South Carolina. He specializes in public administration, with special research and teaching interests in human resource management, organizational theory, and judicial administration. He is a frequent contributor to leading journals in the field, and he has written or edited seven books, including Managing the Public Organization (with Cole Blease Graham) and Public Personnel Administration: Problems and Prospects (with Richard Kearney).

E-mail: Steve-Hays@sc.edu

Public Administration Review

Steven W. Hays*
University of South Carolina

Perry, Mesch, Paarlberg

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

As Professors Perry, Mesch, and Paarlberg amply and aptly document, there is indeed a massive research record on the factors that promote and impede motivation among civil service employees. The topic's fundamental importance is self-evident, but perhaps has never been more pressing than at the current time. With the pending retirement of so many position incumbents, coupled with severe difficulties in recruiting the best and brightest, government is at a huge disadvantage vis-à-vis the private sector in attracting and retaining an aggressive and enthusiastic workforce.

Moreover, this problem increasingly will be compounded by the loss of the few advantages that the public sector once held over

business and industry, including generous retirement systems (which are quickly being phased out) and job security (which is under assault in at least half the states, most local governments, and through reorganizations of the federal agencies). Meanwhile, unrelenting pressures for greater accountability and productivity are occurring precisely at a time when both extrinsic and intrinsic incentives are ebbing. Specifically, pay and fringe benefits generally are not keeping pace, and the joy of working in the "public service" is becoming less relevant with fellow citizens so quick to blame government and "bash bureaucrats" regardless of the circumstances. Nor is this grim picture helped by the fact that workers who are motivated by a public service ethic now have a major

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new employment option—the rapidly growing nonprofit sector that adds more positions each year than all government jurisdictions combined.

Within this overall context, an argument could be made that *THE* most important conundrum of the next decade is to figure out how to motivate (a term that I use expansively to include recruiting and retaining) civil servants. My objective in this commentary is not to react to each of the "baker's dozen" truisms emerging from the research record. Instead, I'll merely offer an assorted collection of observations and opinions that are based more on experience than on any reading of the motivation literature. Additionally, I'll try to embellish the authors' arguments by referring to various human resource management (HRM) practices that appear to be gaining ground in public agencies and that underscore some of the conclusions arising from the motivation research.

Basically, my argument is that my reading of the motivational research literature, combined with Professors Perry, Mesch, and Paarlberg's "review of reviews" of that literature, suggests that progress in aligning research findings with practice is occurring. My reading of this research and analysis, plus my experience in consulting on personnel management issues over the years, also tells me, however, that motivation is not nearly as complicated as the literature suggests. Indeed, it frequently boils down to leadership.

A Simplified Theory of Worker Motivation

With all due respect to the many researchers who have probed the depths of human motivation, my humble opinion concerning the topic is somewhat akin to what might be found in many of the "popular press" management books that come and go with unre-

lenting regularity. On the basis of 30 years of teaching HRM and organizational theory and behavior, it seems that the most valuable motivational lessons arise from child psychology. Perhaps the best summary of this approach is implicit within Paul Hersey and Kenneth Blanchard's conception of situational leadership theory. In blending various classical motivational models (e.g., Organizational Behavior Modification and Path-Goal Theory) by such scholars as Robert Blake, Frederick Herzberg, Abraham Maslow, and Jane Mouton, the authors boil down the essence of leadership and motivation into a simple postulate: managers need to set clear and measurable goals for their subordinates, encourage the accomplishment of those goals, and reward (or occasionally sanction) employees who perform according to expectations. Anyone who has been teaching or practicing in the field for more than about 15 years will recognize this as the basis of "One Minute Management" (henceforth referred to in this commentary as OMM), a very popular fad that raged for a few years before being supplanted by Total Quality Management (TQM), Theory Z, or some other concoction that enjoyed its few months (or years) of fame. If my cynicism about the faddish nature of management theory is showing, it is not by accident.

The key idea in OMM is to "positively reinforce successive approximations"—that is, to support and encourage workers as they learn their jobs, acquire skills, and become proficient. An essential element of this simple formula—one that was not adequately addressed in the original books—is that reinforcement involves both extrinsic and intrinsic elements. Being told that you're doing a good job is certainly gratifying, but it doesn't mean much if not subsequently reinforced by something that is more tangible. This facet of the motivational equation seems best explained by *expectancy theory*,

or VIE (Valence, Instrumentality, Expectancy) theory. To be both productive *and* motivated, employees need (a) to have a personal goal or objective in mind (valence), (b) to believe that the desired goal will be available when it has been earned (instrumentality), and (c) to believe with reasonable certainty that they are capable of accomplishing the tasks required to achieve the desired goals (expectancy).

When applied to most public personnel systems, the dilemmas are obvious. Merit systems are especially ineffective at rewarding workers who perform admirably, thereby destroying any "instrumentality" that might be needed to encourage productivity and motivation. Stated more succinctly, most merit systems have long operated like seniority systems, rewarding time in service through annual raises that anyone with a pulse "earns" at the end of the fiscal year. As public personnel systems strive to transform themselves, this weakness can be overcome. At present, however, the situation that I have described still prevails in far too many state, local, and federal settings. Within such a context, the fact that increasing numbers of workers either become apathetic or seek other employment opportunities should be a surprise to no one.

In the well-known typology advanced by Anthony Downs in his classic, *Inside Bureaucracy*, public agencies retain larger and larger numbers of *conservers* (workers who are satisfied by security and the opportunity to be left alone) and drive out their *climbers* (the inherently motivated and focused workers). An argument also could be made that public organizations often generate low "expectancy," because they do not provide their workers with adequate tools to perform effectively. Examples might include antiquated work systems, inept managers, or excessive caseloads that preclude even the

most minimal attention to professional details. This phenomenon was in part the genesis of TQM's popularity during the 1990s, since that approach to management emphasized *fixing the system* rather than tinkering with individual workers.

Elaborating on Simplicity: Some Heretical Thoughts About Motivation Theory

The basic perspective on worker motivation advanced above can be embellished by a few additional observations that will undoubtedly disturb some *PAR* readers and probably lead to accusations that I am a heretic. First, I believe it essential that managers recognize that some fraction of their workforce *cannot be motivated*. Although the motivational literature typically assumes that *every* worker can be "switched on" through effective leadership, I beg to differ. Having consulted in many settings in which I was asked to help solve a "problem employee" situation, it has become painfully evident to me that a small percentage of individuals simply do not respond to supervisory influences. The only solutions are to (a) create recruitment and selection protocols that screen these individuals out before being hired, (b) enforce (and perhaps extend) probationary periods so as to increase an organization's chances of ridding itself of such workers once they are identified, or (c) teach managers the skills needed to terminate "permanent" (protected) workers even in settings with strong worker protections. I realize that this is harsh, but I too often have witnessed the carnage created by one or two incompetent workers in an otherwise productive organization.

Second, the importance of *equity theory* must be emphasized. According to this approach to human motivation, and as noted by Professors Perry, Mesch, and Paarlberg, every worker weighs his or her status and rewards within the organization in the con-

text of how similarly situated workers are being treated. If there is a discrepancy between how one *expects* to be treated relative to others, then that person's job satisfaction (and probably motivational level) will be low. This problem is easily exemplified by the pervasive phenomenon of salary compression in government. Because market forces inflate salaries more quickly than legislative bodies raise the wages of incumbent employees, new workers often are paid only a few dollars less (or perhaps even more!) than loyal and competent workers with many years of experience.

Obviously, this creates a major violation of one's sense of fair treatment (equity) and leads to wholesale motivational problems among the existing workforce. To illustrate the potential impact, I will recount an anecdote that was shared with me by one of public administration's major figures of the twentieth century who is now deceased. Over a few glasses of bourbon, this individual recounted how he found out that one of his colleagues—another instantly recognizable name in the field and also now deceased—was making \$1,000-per-year more than he was making. The disgruntled professor called another university that was at least as prestigious as his present employer, asked for a job, and was instantly hired the very same day. Several important lessons emerge from this anecdote, but the most blatant is that money has both instrumental and *symbolic* meaning. To forget the symbolic element is to risk a highly demotivating environment.

A third observation is that worker motivation cannot be meaningfully discussed without considering the critical role played by leadership, as my fellow commentators and the *PAR* article suggest. Of the problem employee cases that I have been asked to investigate over the years, the majority easily

could be traced to the fact that there were hierarchical failings that either caused or exacerbated the situation. Most often, the chain of command had failed to articulate goals and objectives for employees, and had systematically ignored the need for feedback and reinforcement. At its worst, managers engaged in favoritism, abusive interpersonal behaviors, and/or outright lying and duplicity.

Milder forms of mismanagement leading to motivational problems include inattention, insincerity, and the breaking of promises that have been made to workers. While bad managers cannot be blamed for all or most of the motivational problems in government, they undoubtedly contribute to a significant share. Evidence of this fact can be found in the Office of Personnel Management's employee attitude surveys, which regularly suggest that at least one-third of the workers are troubled by their supervisors' handling of some basic responsibilities. Clearly, any effort to identify the precursors to motivation in government ought to include a leadership evaluation element. And, more importantly, public agencies face a tremendous challenge in recruiting and equipping a leadership bench that will be able to weather the storms that will blow through government in the upcoming decades.

In sum, my view of worker motivation is far more basic (OK, simplistic!) than is suggested by the voluminous research documented by Professors Perry, Mesch, and Paarlberg. Nothing that the authors have said strikes me as being wrong, and they appear to have done a comprehensive job of analyzing the literature. I suppose my essential argument is that—while certainly a very complex construct—human motivation need not be unduly obfuscated by tangential concerns. Ultimately, most employees want to contribute significantly to the organization's

mission, they desire to make a difference, and they respond appropriately to effective leadership.

As has been noted repeatedly in uncounted books and "how-to" guides, the precursors to a motivated workforce are largely the types of skills that work in any interpersonal setting. Leaders with good personalities are more likely to be successful than those who are not similarly blessed. The behaviors that are most advisable for good leaders include: (a) clarifying goals and expectations between oneself and all subordinates; (b) recognizing and, to the extent possible, rewarding good performance; (c) treating all workers with respect and dignity; (d) providing workers with the requisite tools and skills to perform adequately; (e) making very few promises and keeping those that are made; and (f) adopting a human *resource* perspective in which workers are viewed as the organization's most critical asset. I realize that this sounds similar to books such as *Everything You Need to Know You Learned in Kindergarten*, but fortunately or unfortunately, it may be as close as we can get to the Holy Grail of worker motivation.

Promising Signs from the HRM Field

Having provided my very unsophisticated view of worker motivation, I can now turn to a slightly more concrete account of developments that relate directly to the lessons offered by Professors Perry, Mesch, and Paarlberg in their review of reviews of the motivation literature. Their analysis of the literature focuses on four elements of the "traditional performance paradigm: employee incentives, job design, employee participation, and goal setting." While current reform efforts in public HRM systems do not touch on all these topics equally, they do provide some promising trends on several dimensions.

Foremost among the HRM trends offering hope in improving worker motivation (and consistent with the research findings reported by the authors) are the developments surrounding job design and worker participation. As two of the factors that have been most closely linked to motivation through empirical analyses, it is gratifying that old strategies of defining jobs and arranging career systems are finally dying off. In particular, the narrow approach to job classification that has predominated in government for over a century is being transformed through *broad banding* and other efforts to introduce a rank-in-person mentality to the old rank-in-job government bureau.

About 35 states have collapsed the number of job classifications and broadened pay grades to some extent. These steps allow managers to move employees around with greater flexibility and encourage better skill fits and increased opportunities for workers to engage in diverse and challenging activities. Other common innovations include flexible work schedules (used in every state and most local governments), enhanced supervisory authority over reassignments (a routine practice outside of unionized settings, but one that can be misused by misguided managers), and systematic means of soliciting employee input on critical mission-specific tasks.

PAR readers may be interested to know that this latter initiative is exemplified by a Michigan program that creates an ongoing computer dialogue between supervisors and their subordinates. Through a software program developed by an external consulting organization, the arrangement allows a constant flow of communication between the actors concerning such topics as evaluations of performance levels, suggestions from supervisors on needed improvements, oppor-

tunities for subordinates to make requests for additional skills or resources, guidance on what steps subordinates should take to qualify for the next promotion, and provisions for the upward flow of advice and/or feedback concerning needed changes at lower organizational levels.

This is by far the most highly developed approach to fostering supervisor-subordinate communications, but represents only one instance of many imaginative efforts that are now taking place. In addition to the old "suggestion box," many jurisdictions have assembled formal "change teams" to solicit opinions from all workers and channel them to management. *PAR* readers should know that an excellent case to examine in which this approach is being used involves Sacramento County, California. Additionally, the fact that more and more public work is being conducted by *teams* rather than through disjointed individual efforts is symptomatic of a promising change in the public workplace ethic.

Notably, these HRM developments touch upon six of the 13 propositions noted by the authors (four through nine). An obvious caveat that applies to ongoing efforts to solicit and use employee participation is, of course, that hell hath no fury like employees consulted and then ignored. One need only consider the comments of my fellow commentators Susan Cappa, Donna-Bea Tillman, and Robert Tobias to appreciate how important it is to recognize this fact. The mere solicitation of input can easily backfire if it is not perceived as being given credence or weight by decision makers (another indication that the quality of leadership is an essential ingredient in the motivation recipe).

Another source of both optimism and concern emerges in the area of employee incentives. Overall, the picture is not very bright

due to outsourcing, depressed pay increases, rising health costs, and similar developments. However, there are signs that *group productivity* measures are gaining footholds in some locations. The attractiveness of this approach to compensation and reward comes from two (if not more) directions. First, the existing ability of managers to document and report individual levels of performance for all subordinates is abysmal. Therefore, measures of group or program output offer a reasonable, if not preferable, proxy for individual evaluations.

Second, because of the attention that has been devoted to program productivity and measurement over the past 20 years, managers probably know a lot more about *aggregate* measures than they do about individual employee outcomes. When coupled with 360-degree evaluation programs, or simply peer review and/or client surveys, managers have a more comprehensive picture of performance than has heretofore been possible. Nonetheless, while the drift toward group incentives is thus evident, it is not yet pronounced in most locations.

Conclusion: Some Progress, but a Call for Simplicity

In conclusion, let me say that a compelling argument can be made that public personnel systems are gradually coming into closer alignment with the research findings on worker motivation. Whether by design or through happenstance, reinvented merit systems comport with at least ten of the 13 motivational lessons advanced by Professors Perry, Mesch, and Paarlberg. While certainly a reassuring trend, the primary point of this brief commentary, however, is that the motivational puzzle may not be all that complicated in the first place. The key element—effective and enlightened leadership—is probably the most direct yet elusive path to motivation. Knowing what motivates

employees is one thing, but actually practicing those behaviors may be the ultimate challenge.

Further Readings

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***Editors' Note: This commentary was authored by Steven W. Hays alone and not with Richard Kearney as noted in PAR's table of contents. The editors regret our error.**