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Thomas H. Fitzgerald

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We should discard the dismal vocabulary of motives, motivators, and motivation and think about becoming a society of persons

Foreword

Is it possible that people cannot be "motivated"? This is certainly not a pleasant question to ponder, especially for those managers confronted with mounting problems of high employee turnover, low productivity, and poor morale. The author of this article suggests, however, that the roots of such problems go deeper than is generally recognized, and the major tenets of motivation theory offer solutions that are not quite relevant to what is going on in the workplace. Instead of thinking of employees as objects, to be manipulated by this or that theoretical approach, management must strive to effect fundamental, value-oriented changes in the structure of rationalized work systems.

Mr. Fitzgerald, who was himself a first-line supervisor, is Director of Employee Research and Training Activities at the Chevrolet Motor Division of General Motors Corporation.

Rising costs and recessionary pressures have prompted the business community, as well as administrators of public agencies, to seek economies. One potential source of savings is in labor costs, but these have resisted reduction because of the downward rigidity of wage rates and the difficulties of increasing aggregate labor productivity. The growing pressures for economy and productivity also stress other labor problems that increase costs: absenteeism and turnover, idleness and featherbedding, product defects and errors. All this is reflected in one of the more familiar questions one hears at management seminars, "How can I motivate my employees?"

Equally familiar to most of us are the recurring themes concerning the motivation problem developed by perhaps a score of business theorists and commentators. Their speeches and publications, together with a number of widely distributed educational films summarizing their views, have arrived at a common core of mid-range theory. What this theory says about employee motivation, both in diagnosis and prescription, is a significant advance from naive conceptions of "morale" during the World War II era, the discredited industrial engineering approach prior to that, and the casual omniscience of the popular press. But what, really, does it tell us?

Briefly, we are told that the concept of motivation is complex, but can and should be understood. Humans have basic physiological needs that must be satisfied, but these are supplemented by numerous other biosocial and culturally derived needs. The individual's actual movement to satisfy his needs depends not only on their state of readiness within himself but also on the objective situation in which he moves (i.e., the field containing other actors), together with his perception of the situation, which is in turn influenced by his own past experiences–i.e., successes or failures in finding satisfaction.

Seeds of doubt

In the business environment, exchanging time for money may take care of a few of the worker's important needs, but it does nothing for those other "higher" needs such as sense of competence, recognition, and so on, that emerge after he has achieved a minimum amount of security. But the work must be performed in any case, and its failure to fill these higher needs results in frustration, antagonism, indolence, and malingering.

When motivation is found thus failing, management's response may not be to throw out the carrot-and-stick theory but to conclude either: (a) that work is inherently irksome and new and more interesting carrots are required, or (b) that workers are a shiftless and lazy lot and stronger sticks are required. The first conclusion, of course, has not solved the problem, while the second is self-validating and defeatist, and leads to more controls, more resentment, more "shiftless" behavior.

What can be done? The advice of the motivator fraternity shows a remarkable unanimity and, with some minor injustice to the subtlety of individual perception and diagnosis, can be summarized in the following three counsels:

1. Enlarge or enrich [1] jobs to make the work more interesting by restoring challenge and the potential for achievement satisfactions. Employees will be motivated to perform well those tasks that are in themselves worth doing.

2. Institute training to modify supervisory style. Supervisors are encouraged to be employee-centered and to assist workers in defining and reaching their job goals. They should act as friendly helpers rather than as policemen.

3. Foster employee "participation" by encouraging workers to take part in the decision process. Participation ranges from such elementary forms as giving employees advance notice of changes or explanations of these changes to more involved forms like stating a problem and requesting employee solutions. The final phase, still largely conceptual, is for the employees themselves to identify the problems, discuss possible solutions, and then arrive at joint decisions. Under these conditions, relationships would no longer be superior/subordinate or master/menial, hence characterized by antagonism and anxiety; instead, they would reflect a refreshing mutuality, trust, honesty, and concern in a climate where organizational goals coalesce with individual goals.

My purpose in this paper is to express doubts about these counsels and to suggest that their general adoption will be more difficult than anyone has recognized publicly. This is not meant to imply that the counselors claim general solutions; they admit difficulties and limitations and the fact that positive motivation in some situations, such as conventional assembly lines, is remote. But their writings, films, and public addresses have an unmistakable hortatory character and require a reasoned demurrer.

My thesis is that the proposed remedies are not adequate because the seriousness of the motivation problem has been underestimated. In what follows, I shall examine some early developments in the organization of rational-

1. Some theorists distinguish between job enlargement and job enrichment; see, for example, Frederick Herzberg, "One more time: How do you motivate employees?" HBR January-February 1968, p. 53. I find, however, that little distinction is made between them in actual practice and use enlargement here as a blanket term.

ized work systems which, from the perspective of contemporary society, reflect assumptions that have become increasingly less valid and at the same time generate extensive tensions and strains. After discussing the advice commonly prescribed to mitigate this distress (the three counsels mentioned earlier), I shall offer some prescriptions of my own.

Roots of rationality

The problem of employee motivation has its origins in certain fundamental conditions of industrial society, and is magnified by the cumulative effect of historical and cultural trends. The roots of the problem are implicit in three early assumptions in the organization of rationalized work systems and will require more extensive changes in our interdependent, multidimensional systems than most businessmen, motivational theorists, and consultants would like to think.

1. Stopwatch measurement

An early assumption of the factory system involved the choice of a time frame in which certain utilitarian calculations were made. Since workers were paid a daily or hourly wage, the value of their output was computed on the same basis, while the use of the stopwatch made it possible to calculate output-value minute by minute, thereby firmly establishing utility in the short run. Production operations were rationalized to maximize output in this short run through detailed process planning and narrow division of tasks. This system simplified the tabulation of worker outputs and allowed effective control of large quantities of unskilled labor, but let us consider some of its other effects:

◇ The imperatives of short-run efficiency disrupted work group solidarities, and, simultaneously, the mass employment system and the extensive size of the plants hindered their formation; thus an important source of day-to-day, small group control of individual deviance was weakened, and the transmission and continuity of those values that make up the workmanship ethic were obstructed.

◇ Decisions on the quality of workmanship made by individual workers in the handicraft era were largely replaced by machine process control, which was made necessary in any case by the utilities of standardization and of interchangeability of parts.

◇ The vast elaboration of structure, together with the separation and, later, remoteness of ownership from management made it more difficult to identify with, or even see, the patrons of one's efforts.

It is scarcely now disputed that these dysfunctional consequences and the miscalculation of their real costs in a longer time frame are expressed in workplace problems such as employee hostility or indifference and unthinking dependency. What is important here, however, is that a narrow division of labor, churning of labor markets, and large-scale units are intrinsic parts of rationalized production systems where costs are computed in the short run (i.e., "false maximization"). Any attempt to resolve worker and workplace problems must recognize these structural sources.

2. Objective decision making

Another assumption of rationalized production has to do with what might be called the "spatial" frame; that is, the failure to foresee a widening of rational attitudes to the work force. As rationality became characteristic not only of production operations, but of engineering, investment, marketing, and management generally, calculation of objective inputs and outputs became the habitual basis for decisions. The broader effects of these decisions, however, as well as the cognitive style of the decision makers, could not long go unnoticed within the company. Difficulties arose when the same rational habits of mind infected the work force, displacing existing class and ethnic styles or causing doubts about the continuance of an earlier patrimonial solicitude.

However, the problem becomes more complicated when everyone decides to base the application of his efforts on pleasure-pain, input-output calculations as do utilitarian managers. This is especially true if, as is now the case, schedules of rewards are truncated by single rate pay systems and uniform work standards, while schedules of punishments are partly neutralized by a full employment-welfare system and the protection possible for individuals through combination (unions). Workers are transformed into job itinerants who do not identify with any one employer; the "rational" worker can blandly ask, "What's in it for me?"

But there is a further infection: that is to say, the spread of "competitive" attitudes to the managers and supervisors of the work force. The ethos of competition—of one against all, of individual maximization—belongs, properly speaking, to entrepreneurs and among entrepreneurs. When it spills over into the work force (or is even cultivated there by management that naively asserts it as a general good), it leads to a self-perpetuating cycle of suspiciousness, blaming and reprisals, withholding of information—either bad news or necessary facts—errors, defensiveness, and more distrust (although admittedly, one hears less of that competitive bravado with the growth of a systems approach to management).

3. *Rigid value system*

Perhaps the most important assumption concerns the availability of certain *nonrational* elements necessary to the work force, and implicit in the operation of rational organization as we know it. That is to say, the personality traits and values (orderliness, accuracy, neatness, punctuality, specialization of knowledge in a career path, success striving, deference to rank and authority, predictability, impersonality, reliance on rules and procedures, etc.) that "fitted into" the needs of rational bureaucracy so well, were not seen as possible *variables* but as a natural, continuing "given"—as was the society that bred these traits, the culture which was saturated with them.

Clear evidence to the contrary, of course, existed in anthropological reports of other societies in remote places, but now such evidence is widely available here in our own society. The lack of a temperament impelled toward assiduous effort or habitual striving for ever higher goals and the incomplete internalization of certain aescetic values and normative controls appear not only as an "exception" among ghetto blacks (who explicitly reject them) or the alienated white youth in the street culture, but increasingly in other sectors of society as well.

That there is now a widespread indifference to, or even contempt for, authority, both as "idea" and reality (ascribed status, deference, the legitimacy of externally imposed sanctions, tradition) has been widely reported. A persistent populism and egalitarianism, reinforced by the spread of empirical or "scientific" attitudes and demystification of "divine right," "natural law," and so on, seems to be responsible for the change. Professionalization of knowledge also increasingly strains against the authority of rank.

A further difficulty with this third assumption has been noted by Charles Reich in his book, *The Greening of America.*[2] He points out that the rising volume of industrial production, which is the inevitable result of successful, rationally organized enterprises, must be disposed of by means of a pervading and utopian advertising, which in turn is gradually disrupting industry's own foundation, the work force.

Workers, regularly instructed as consumers in a ceaseless acquisition of goods and services, lose their willingness to bear with the common drudgery. The offers of independence, the encouragement to self-aggrandisement, and the persistent flattery they experience as audience all contrast unfavorably with the discipline and the subordination which they experience as employees. Work loses its "religious" character, its centrality as the locus for the self. It is replaced by a sort of populist hedonism, ranging from compulsive accumulation to the new connoisseurship.

Even if consumption were not thus stimulated, human beings are not satisfied with constant rewards—unlike Professor Skinner's pigeons, one grain at $T_1 \neq$ one grain at T_n. The escalation of human wants, once satisfaction is achieved, produces a continuing problem. As workers "use up" their material shelter-survival needs, they seek such intangibles and unbuyables as freedom and autonomy (one might add, following Baudelaire: beauty, clarity, luxury, and calm). These, obviously, are incompatible with the life of organized production.

A realistic reappraisal

Questions seem to leap from a recognition of the increasing vulnerability of the foregoing assumptions, especially the third assumption. Will it be possible to continue to operate "efficient," closely synchronized, and interdependent organizations if change in the personality-culture system continues in the same direction? Put in another and more value-oriented way: How much personal freedom is *possible* in a hierarchical, bureaucratic authority system? At what point does individual style become incompatible with order?

2. New York, Random House, 1970.

To push it further, what is the potential for becoming an authentic self in a system characterized by well-defined role behaviors and role expectations that inherently demand reification and internalization?

Other questions, however, are at issue here: Are job enlargement, training, and employee participation realistic approaches to solving the new—as well as the old—motivation problem in industry? Are they practical? Will they work? It is to these counsels that we now turn.

The enlargement counsel

Job enlargement is more modest than participation, less ambitious in its objectives, and apparently easier and less disruptive "to do." This prescription also has more substance than the talk therapies of the training-climate approach to motivation. While there is some empirical validation of the value of job enlargement, I am skeptical over its applicability in a wider variety of work situations and, more importantly, over a longer period of time.

There is probably little disagreement anymore about the desirability of eliminating as much as possible of egregiously repetitious operations, much as we correct poor lighting or dirty lavatories. In fact, in both shops and offices, a really repetitious job is an obvious candidate for automation or computerization. But after the more monotonous jobs are eliminated, we arrive at a wide range of operations where perception, rather than objective reality, is crucial.

Individuals differ vastly in their need for variety, responsibility, and competence, just as they vary in their need for independence or security. The job Jones finds moronic and insufferable is okay with Smith, yet too much for Brown. Restructuring and/or enlarging jobs are brave attempts to fit the job to the man, but *which* man? Do we have different sets and sequences of the same operations for people of varying competence, interest, and drive? Does turnover, then, imply continued rearrangement?

The school solution would reply: it's a matter for employment and placement to select similar people. But, of course, things don't work out that neatly in practice. Additional investments must also be made to broaden employee skills to meet increased responsibilities, although it is not yet clear whether employees will (a) expect greater compensation for this, or (b) be satisfied with increased psychic income.

It is obvious, however, that management's present flexibility in reallocating unskilled labor without loss of training investment would be reduced.

Finally, as time passes, one cannot but wonder how much of the added challenge remains, whether the broadened responsibility persists in its motivational propensity, or the worker merely paraphrases the well-known question, "What have you enlarged for me lately?" (How else to explain the faded motivation of those with amply challenging jobs—say, bored executives, doctors, or college professors?)

The training counsel

A second prescription for improved motivation —to enhance supervisory style and the climate of communication through in-house education and training—shares limitations similar to those cited for job enlargement: it does not get at enough of the basic incongruence between individual needs and organizational goals.

The fact that there is *some* congruence can be readily admitted, but this does not change the tension that exists anymore than does the recognition of the inconsistency of certain needs within the individual himself. The difficulty is that attention to improving attitudes and undesirable behaviors is usually directed at surface symptoms, without significant attempts to correct the underlying source. If a group of supervisors behave in a bossy, condescending, and insensitive manner, it is rarely because anyone *told* them to act that way, but because of other influences in the organization that are just as real as talk. For example:

◇ The system of selecting supervisors from the work group may make it clear that one type of personality will succeed, but others will not.

◇ Supervisory styles are perpetuated by modeling, and by the success of those who learn from the successful models. Attitudes about what is really important are conveyed not only by the official mottoes on posters, but in every conversation, in every inquiry and direction.

◇ An invidious system of monetary and status rewards must of necessity produce relative deprivation for some workers. The resulting competition to achieve rewards (or avoid deprivation) tends to encourage withholding of information and a lack of trust. Blaming, scapegoating, and defensiveness follow.

◇ Punishments and reprisals for deviance or poor performance in themselves provide satisfactions to those who have made the sacrifices necessary to self-discipline.

◇ Dependency is often cultivated at the lower levels because it is thought to ensure predictability of actions.

And so it goes. If we want to change all that, we have to ask (here, in behavioral terminology), "What are those forces in the situation that reinforce specific behaviors while acting to extinguish others?" Even where the supervisory attitudes themselves are found to be a cause of the motivation problem, change may be difficult because these attitudes are linked in with larger value systems—the belief that a supervisor should be dominant, assertive, even truculent, is supported by a more general mythology of masculine authority and prowess, and by a leadership imagery borrowed from athletics or the military.

Structural considerations: The failures of other attempts to change attitudes, as, for example, in efforts to eliminate racism in this country, have led to a reorientation of tactics of change toward more substantive methods; that is, to get inside "the black box" of institutional and organizational process. The lesson of that experience, however, is not necessarily that talk cannot change attitudes for the better, as well as encourage those who are ready to change. Some things are good in themselves, and a management that promotes a decent concern for employees' integrity, growth, and well-being should not have to look to an economic payoff as justification. The point here, however, is that education in itself has limited potential for producing and sustaining improvement unless changes, consistent with officially sponsored values, are also made in process and structure.

The participation counsel

While participatory management is often urged by corporate liberals these days as the most desirable avenue of change, analysis of its dimensions and their implications for contemporary organizations suggests that it is questionable whether participation can correct pervasive apathy and indifference, let alone provide an unqualified good.

Of course, much of the advice is noble, urging the development of an improved climate of communication, trust, acceptance, mutuality, and so forth; but it is often unclear how, objectively, these attitudes are to be brought about and maintained. Also an open question is whether any significant percentage of the work force even wants to participate, other than perhaps for the novelty of doing so.[3] Although the advocates of this prescription for motivational health have failed to supply many important details of actual implementation, it is not hard to surmise what new difficulties might evolve.

Pressure for more involvement: Participation is not a simple or linear gradation of acts. It means more, for example, than giving accurate information, listening to responses, answering questions, seeking advice or ratification. It may mean interactions with groups of employees, as well as one-over-one relationships. The subjects of participation, moreover, are not necessarily restricted to those few matters that management considers to be of direct, personal interest to employees, or to those plans and decisions which will benefit from employee advice. Neither of these positions can be maintained for long without (a) being recognized by employees as manipulative or (b) leading to expectations for wider and more significant involvement—"Why do they only ask us about plans for painting the office and not about replacing this old equipment and rearranging the layout?"

Once competence is shown (or believed to have been shown) in, say, rearranging the work area, and after participation has become a conscious, officially sponsored activity, participators may very well want to go on to topics of job assignment, the allocation of rewards, or even the selection of leadership. In other words, management's present monopoly—on initiating participation, on the nomination of conferees, and on the limitation of legitimate areas for review—can in itself easily become a source of contention.

Potential for disruption: Another difficulty with participation has to do with organizational effectiveness. The dysfunctions of bureaucratic systems are now well known, while the motivational potential of employee involvement is, if yet unrealized, at least widely anticipated. But the dysfunctional, disruptive effects of participation on rationally organized systems should not be ignored either. Before embarking on participatory management, advocates should consider the following points:

3. See, Robert Dahl, "The Case for Worker Control," New York Review of Books, November 19, 1970.

□ It is not at all clear how the highly variable competence of employee participants can contribute to the solutions of corporate problems that have specific technical constraints, even though these employees are affected by the results. As the store of knowledge expands (and becomes more opaque) along with the need for its accurate application, organizations rely increasingly on experts and professionals, and it may in fact be true that the girls on the carton-folding operation really have nothing to contribute to almost anything important about running a container company. Once again, meritocracy confronts democracy.

□ The scale of contemporary industry makes the implications of decisions, and the interaction of their effects, hard to foresee, although the need for precision is now greater. At some point the "critical mass" of large organizations is reached where their manageability even by the few—much less the many—becomes questionable. The closely linked, synchronized, interdependent nature of the numerous subsystems that now comprise large organizations would appear to make serious participation questionable not only in its technical aspects but in its goal-directed behavior. Inevitably, participation to any significant degree will cause indeterminacy and delay, loss of consistency and coherence, diluted and compromised objectives.

□ Although it hasn't been discussed much yet, when blacks and women finally integrate supervisory and mid-management ranks, they may coalesce into identity groupings to seek representation. We already have examples of teachers, college students, welfare recipients, and others who have been demanding the right to participate as groups to help determine not only conditions within the system but its operation and outputs as well. Aside from the real costs in reduced effectiveness (partly balanced, of course, by better motivation, higher output, less waste, and so on) the impact of this new participation on the process and structure of management, though hard to estimate, must be anticipated, because what is really involved is politics, the conscious sharing of control and power. History does not offer many examples of oligarchies that have abdicated with grace and goodwill.

Once again, all this is not to imply that because gross efficiency and productivity may be reduced, we should not proceed toward alternatives. Given the goal of maximizing utility, however, there does seem to be a necessary trade-off between precision, on the one hand, and motivation through participation, on the other hand, and we shouldn't assume that we can have it both ways, just as we now admit that we can't have both full employment and price stability. The amount of each we want (or can tolerate), the location of the best trade-off point, is a matter of experimentation and calculation. Viewed from a wider perspective, it is also entirely possible for organizations to pursue new, multiple, even divergent goals, although the trade-off problem then becomes much tougher, involving basic values, or as they say these days, "priorities."

Conclusion

It may be that the question, "How do I motivate my employees?" is not quite relevant to what is going on. Truth is sometimes damaged in the process of analysis and reconstruction, and concepts can easily become more "real" than the reality from which they were cut. When transplanted from the laboratory, the language of motivation may become subtly elitist by suggesting that the employee resembles a captive rodent in a training box equipped with levers, trick doors, food pellets, and electric grids. Talking about a majority (perhaps, in fact, a minority?) of people and how they live as being "motivated" may provide only a pretentious terminology which deflects understanding.

When a man gets up in the morning, we can say this act is a conditioned response to the stimulus of an alarm, but that doesn't *tell* us anything important. To say he is motivated by hunger may be true, but perhaps he is not hungry and thinks instead, "Seven o'clock; *time to get up*." What he does the rest of the day may have much the same toneless character of going from one thing to another and getting by. This may very well be the way it is for a great many people, at least during the time they spend in the shop or the office, because most of what they really care for is in other places and at other times. A few of them may not even care strongly for much of anything, almost anywhere. Is it just possible that some whom we employ *can't* be motivated?

Some alternatives

I am aware, following a critique such as this, of expectations for suggesting alternatives. They can be offered so as not to deny my wider meliorism; yet their statement should not distract from the main thrust of the argument presented here: the problem of employee motivation is rooted in certain fundamental conditions of industrial society, and its solution will require costly and extensive changes in our interdependent, closely linked systems. Just as most of the signs point to a pervasive consumerism, environmentalism, and governmental surveillance in the market economy, so we should anticipate a persistent alienation of industrial and business manpower in relation to its employers.

What can be done; what is being tried? At very little cost we can avoid giving offense or being intrusive. Merely talking with people also does a lot of good, although it does not seem to be easy for many managers. Here is a brief overview of other possibilities:

◇ Inexpensive means such as emblems, slogans, contests, and sets of monogrammed glasses function as attention getters, but their transference value is always speculative.

◇ Praise and approval can produce temporary improvement of individual effort.

◇ Company-sponsored recreation and house organs are also comparatively cheap and seem to have a positive effect on some of the people part of the time.

◇ Money is recurrently popular as an incentive for more and better work, but the general decline of piecework and profit-sharing plans testifies to the experience that these monetary incentives are not really effective in practice, due in part to intervening variables such as employee perception of an ambiguous means-ends relationship.

◇ Reducing the size of a productive or service unit seems to increase identification and improve motivation, but may introduce inefficiencies (especially as viewed by traditional costing methods) with no assurance of net gain.

◇ Stripping away the baroque elaborations of office may result in loss of the mystique of authority, but it could help create the conditions for unity.

Increasingly more expensive than the foregoing —in original investment as well as in maintenance—are mixes of "training" to improve skills and climate, of job enlargement, and of organizational development and participation. All imply substantial alterations in the way organizations are wired together and in communication and controls. They will eventually involve examination of reward and succession systems, priorities, and ends. Participation especially, as pointed out earlier, not only may start out as an unpleasant ride for those who are accustomed to being fully in charge, but also may become one from which it is increasingly hard to dismount.

What is needed is not merely the "willingness to confront change" (already a safe thought-cliché) but a commitment to go beyond changes in structure and procedures. What may even be required is relinquishing certain behaviors and beliefs, such as an ideology of certitude and constraint, a habit of objectifying people because of ranking or role ascription, or a style of address characterized by cant and bravado—difficult to give up, but not impossible.

We have seen progress in other areas where we once would not have expected it. We look back now at personality testing, slightly incredulous at its colonialist mentality and its banality of concepts, wondering how we could have been taken in by its promises of penetration and mastery. Similarly, perhaps yet in our time, we will be willing to discard the dismal vocabulary of motives, motivators, and motivation and start to think seriously about how to go about becoming a society of persons.

> One man that has a mind and knows it can always beat ten men who haven't and don't.
>
> George Bernard Shaw
> *The Apple Cart* (1929), *Act I*