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**Work motivation theories in practice: An experiential exercise**

**ABSTRACT**

Management students often learn about the role of motivation in influencing employee performance. However, the theories of motivation may seem abstract, and students may struggle when attempting to apply these theories to real-world situations. To help students move beyond memorization, the author designed an exercise to help students apply motivational theories to a realistic situation. Working in groups, students problem solve how to address an employee motivational issue by applying an assigned motivational theory. In doing so, they mentally rehearse how various managerial behaviors might influence employee motivation. The exercise requires little preparation and can be facilitated in face-to-face and online learning environments. While developed for an undergraduate course in leadership, the exercise would also be appropriate for a graduate course in leadership or an organizational behavior course at the graduate and undergraduate level.

**Key Words:** work motivation,motivational theory,management education, experiential exercises

**Work motivation theories in practice: An experiential exercise**

Managers seek to enhance individual and group performance through the effective use of motivational strategies (Michaelson, 2005). Motivation refers to “internal factors that impel action and to external factors that can act as inducements to action” (Locke & Latham, 2004: 388). No single theory of motivation explains all aspects of individual motivation; however, different theories shed light on why, in some situations, individuals may be more likely to behave in a manner consistent with the leader’s desires. Motivational theories can be presented to management students as a collection of tools in the manager’s toolbox. Selecting the correct tool requires a manager to understand the situation, the employee, the strengths and limitations of the different motivational strategies, and the principles of applying these strategies. According to the content theories of motivation, managers must understand the needs or unmet needs of their employees. Process motivational theories require managers to diagnose the factors that are influencing effort, the continuation of effort, and the modification of effort. Reinforcement theories necessitate the use of appropriate consequences to shape employees’ behaviors. Mackenzie Kyle (2017), author of the book, *The Performance Principle: A Practical Guide to Understanding Motivation in the Modern Workplace*, suggests thatmanagers must also recognized three things: (1) that broad assumptions based on stereotypes about what motivates individuals can lead to flawed reasoning; (2) what motivates one individual may not necessarily motivate others; and (3) the only way to find out what motivates another individual is to ask questions and observe behaviors. In other words, solving motivational issues at work involves “a complicated variety of strategies aimed at workers motivated by diverse factors, depending on their various ages, goals, affective experiences, and so on” (Michaelson, 2005: 236).

As future leaders, students can expect to encounter employee motivational issue for which there is no ready-made solution. Students require more than memorized knowledge of theory to address these challenges. Experiential exercises have the potential to allow students to develop a deeper understanding of theoretical knowledge and apply what they have learned to practice-based problems. Thus, to engage students in learning and applying motivational theory, an exercise was developed where students work collaboratively with others to creatively addressing motivational issues at work.

**Overview of the Exercise**

This exercise was developed for use in an undergraduate leadership course and uses problem-solving and small group discussion to help students learn and apply leadership theory. Other potential uses for the exercise include undergraduate courses in organizational behavior and graduate courses in leadership and organizational behavior. The exercise can be completed in one 50-minute class; however, additional time may be needed depending on the size of the class, the number of groups, and the number of possible solutions discussed. The recommended class size is up to 40 students working in groups of three to four students. The exercise can be adapted to an online environment using the group discussion tool in the course learning management system. Instructors can extent the exercise and deepen the experience in longer classes by having students act out the roles of manager and employee. Role-playing requires additional preparation on the part of the instructor and may come with additional challenges (e.g., Taylor, 2018). The role-playing option is not included in the 50-minute exercise description.

**Learning Objectives**

By participating in this exercise, individuals will (1) describe the “mechanics” of one or more of the assigned motivational theories (2) apply one or more organizational theories to an organizational problem by providing possible explanations for the individual’s behavior and the steps a leader should take to encourage the desired behavior; (3) reflect upon situational and employee factors that can influence the effective use of one or more motivational theories.

**Timing for the 50-Minute Learning Module**

1. Divide students into groups of 3-4. Distribute the workplace scenario and assign motivational theories to the groups (5 minutes).
2. Students work collectively to solve the motivational problem using the assigned theory (approximately 15 minutes).
3. Each group reports their solution (approximately 15 minutes).
4. Instructor debriefs the exercise (approximately 15 minutes)

**Instructions for Facilitating the Exercise**

Before beginning the exercise, students should be assigned a chapter reading on the topic of employee motivation. The instructor should make the appropriate number of copies of the workplace scenario handout (see Appendix 1: Sample Scenario). On the day of class, have students sit in assigned groups of 3-4 students. Distribute the workplace scenario to students and assign groups one or more of the motivational theories listed in Table 1. Maslow’s and McClelland’s theories and the ERG theory need to be broken down by individual needs. For example, when assigning McClelland Theory of Needs, I tell the group which need the employee has (power, achievement, or affiliation). When assigning Maslow’s theory, I tell the group which if any needs have been mostly satisfied.

**Table 1**

**Motivational Theories**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Content Theories | Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs  Alderfer ERG theory  McClelland Theory of Needs  Herzberg’s Two factor theory. |
| Process Theories | Equity Theory  Expectancy Theory  Goal-setting Theory |
| Reinforcement Theories | Positive Reinforcement  Negative Reinforcement  Punishment  Extinction |

Instruct students to first arrive at a shared understanding of how the motivational theory works. Next, they apply the assigned theory or theories to the scenario by providing a possible explanation for the individual’s behavior along with the steps a leader should follow to motivate the employee to perform more responsibly. Lastly, ask students to identify reasons why the theory may or may not work given the facts of the situation. Tell students they have 15 minutes to solve the motivational problem. While students are interacting, move among the groups and answer any questions that arise. If a group finish early, assign the group another theory to apply. After 15 minutes, begin a large-group discussion by having each group report on their assigned theory. The instructor should provide clarification in the event students incorrectly explain or apply the theory. Next, debrief the exercise by asking one or more or the following questions.

*What did you learn about motivational theory from completing this exercises?* Student responses will vary; however, students typically state that it’s important to understand your employees or have good relationships with your employees if you want to know how to motivate them. Students also tend to recognize that in order to apply some of the theories, the leader needs to have access to desired rewards or the ability to meet the needs of the employee. In some instances, students disagree with the theory and provide alternative suggestions for motivating the employee in the scenario. For example, one student stated during a debriefing, “*a manager needs to punish undesirable behaviors not ignore them!*” Next, ask the following question: *What motivates employees to perform well in their roles?* This question evokes lots of answers. Extrinsic rewards such a pay, promotion, and recognition are often the first rewards mentioned; however, students also tend to recognize the motivating effects of intrinsic rewards such as performing meaningful work, fulfilling one’s mission, having autonomy or control over an assignment, and helping other people. Also ask students, *which theory aligns best with your personal experiences being motivated or motivating others?* Again, a multitude of responses are shared, and it usually becomes clear that there are differences among the students concerning what trigger motivation. This discussion serves to reinforce the idea that one motivational theory does not fit all situations and all employees.

**Student Reactions**

Work motivation theory is a topic commonly taught in organizational behavior and leadership. This exercise was developed to help students develop a deeper understanding of motivational theory by applying theory to a workplace scenario. Student reaction is anecdotal. Students seem engaged throughout the exercise, and most students participate in the small and large group discussions. Most groups correctly describe the “mechanics” of one or more of the assigned motivational theories, correctly apply one or more organizational theories to the organizational problem, and provide appropriate explanations for the individual’s behavior and the steps a leader should take to encourage the desired behavior. During the large-group discussion, some students can identify situational and employee factors that can influence the effective use of one or more motivational theories.

**EAM Session Description**

Participants will be invited to break into groups of three, provided a handout which contains a workplace scenario involving and unmotivated employee, assigned one or more motivational theories, and asked to apply the theory to the fictitious situation (10 minutes). Each group will explain to the rest of the participants how to motivate the employee given the facts described and the mechanics of the assigned motivational theory (15 minutes). The exercise will be debriefed via a large-group discussion (10 minutes) with any remaining time used for comments and suggestions.

**References**

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APPENDIX 1

**Workplace Scenario**

You are the assigned group leader of a special project team at work. One of the members of your team, Alex, seems to lack motivation. Alex rarely participates in team meeting discussions and often shows up to meetings unprepared. You do not directly supervise Alex, nor does your boss. Alex is your organizational peer from another department, chosen by someone higher up in the organization to be on the special project team.

You know that your success as a team leader will require all of the team members to be fully engaged in the project; therefore, you need to figure out what to do to increase Alex’s motivation.

Using the \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ motivational theory, provide a possible explanation for Alex’s behavior.

What steps should you follow so that Alex is motivated to perform more responsibly and contribute to the team? *Make sure your recommendations align with your assigned motivational theory.*