Motivation Theories

Motivation . . . or motive for action

We all need a motive for action, or motivation as it is normally called, and to be a winning team means that individuals in the team need it by the bucket-load. When times get tough and the pressure is on, it will be down to the commitment and energy of individuals to deliver a consistent level of service no matter what.

Take a few minutes to list what you personally consider to be the most effective motivating forces. Your ideas will probably include:

- A sense of achievement
- Being in control
- Enough money
- Being able to develop and grow skills
- Being recognised
- Team working
- Standing out from the crowd
- Something really challenging

We are all different and respond to different stimuli, so what motivates one person may have the opposite effect on someone else.

Classic Motivation Theories

There is an enormous amount of material available on the web on motivation so we will not duplicate it here, but there are several classic theories about motivation and it is worth spending some time outlining them. The models most often quoted are:

- Herzberg’s hygiene-motivation theory
- McGregor’s Theory X and Theory Y
- Maslow’s hierarchy of needs.

Herzberg’s Hygiene-Motivation Theory

Frederick Herzberg’s theory is based on studies into job satisfaction at work. He concluded that there were essentially two types of forces in operation:
Motivators and ‘Hygiene factors’

Motivators are the influences which cause people to feel more satisfied with their work and include:

- The satisfaction of a job well done
- Praise for doing well
- Being trusted with important tasks
- Increased responsibilities.

He also recognised the existence of what he called hygiene factors which, if absent, would demotivate people. The interesting aspect is that their presence, even in abundance, does not provide a motivational force. The hygiene factors include:

- Company policy
- Pay and working conditions
- The working environment.

In summary, Herzberg proposed that lasting motivation would only result from job enrichment.

McGregor: Theory X and Theory Y

Douglas McGregor was a contemporary of A. H. Maslow and his theory on motivation was related to Maslow’s hierarchy of needs (see below). McGregor’s theory consisted of two sets of assumptions about people and motivation: Theory X and Theory Y.

Theory X – The Conventional View

His research concluded that management’s traditional view of the workers was based upon the following assumptions:

- Management is responsible for organising all aspects of production – money, materials, equipment and people.
- People must be directed, motivated and controlled by management and must modify their behaviour to fit the organisation’s needs.
- The average person is lazy by nature and works as little as possible.
- People lack ambition, dislike responsibility and prefer to be led.
- The average worker is self-centred, and indifferent to what the organisation wants.
- People are resistant to change, gullible, and not very bright.

Conventional organisational structures, managerial practices and policies reflect many of these assumptions. McGregor felt that management, by direction, failed to provide sufficient motivation of human effort towards achieving organisational objectives.
It failed because direction and control were ineffective in an era when people’s physiological and safety needs were reasonably satisfied and whose social, ego and peak achievement needs were predominant.

Theory Y – a New Perspective

McGregor therefore advanced a different theory of motivation, based on what he considered were more meaningful assumptions, which included:

- People are not by nature passively resistant to organisational needs – they become that way as a result of conditioning within the company.
- Most people can be motivated, have potential for development and the capacity for assuming responsibility.
- These characteristics are not put there by management, but managers have a responsibility to ensure that people recognise and develop them.
- The essential task for management is to create an environment in which people can achieve their own goals best by directing their own efforts towards organisational objectives.

The Maslow Hierarchy of Needs

Following studies in the 1940s, Abraham Maslow suggested that there was a hierarchy of needs through which human beings progressed.

Level 1: Physiological Needs

The process started many thousands of years ago when *homo sapiens* was just emerging as a separate species. The most basic need that any individual had then was simply to stay alive until the next day. People quickly realised that if they did not eat or drink, they tended not to last very long. So the first level in the hierarchy of needs is the requirement to stay alive by satisfying basic physiological needs like eating and drinking.

Level 2: Safety and Security

Having survived till the next day, individuals started to realise that the bright red ball in the sky appeared again after the period of darkness. So as well as surviving for one period of light, people began to think it might be useful to think ahead a bit.

And so the concept of safety and security started to emerge. The only difficulty was trying to avoid being eaten by the hordes of predatory animals roaming around the plains who were also trying to meet their first level in the hierarchy of needs.

As a result, individuals started to take precautions over the way they lived and moved, and this, no doubt, prompted the development of bodily clothing, weapons, a residence (even if temporary) and
fire. We have now progressed from the first level, meeting physiological needs, to the second level, assuring safety and security.

**Level 3: Group Membership**

By this stage people had started to realise that there were benefits in working together with some of the others they encountered on the plains. Not only could larger numbers keep the sabre-toothed tigers at bay, but catching other animals for food was much easier if you worked in teams. It was also enjoyable to sit around and discuss the day’s events.

So the third level of need gradually developed – associating with others and enjoying belonging to a group.

**Level 4: First Among Equals**

Humankind gradually developed the social customs and rituals we all take for granted. However, although belonging to a group was all very fine, just now and then it was nice to be recognised as being something special – for example, perhaps to hold the record for the number of sabre-toothed tigers caught this moon.

This led to the fourth level in the hierarchy of needs. Once accepted as members of a group, people nonetheless felt the need to stand out from the crowd and be recognised as someone special.

**Level 5: Peak Achievement**

What’s left? The final stage is to achieve something really stunning or significant.

Just visualise the surprise when the gaggle of hunters returned with the day’s catch of sabre-toothed tigers to find one of the tribe rolling out a circular stone. Imagine his or her frustration in struggling to explain how this new invention, called the ‘wheel’, would transform their lives.

Achieving this final stage often makes people risk all that has gone before. For example, think of individuals who are prepared to risk their lives to achieve specific results (for example, round-the-world solo yachting, or climbing precipitous mountains). It is obvious that these individuals, while striving to achieve the highest level of human achievement, do so to the prejudice of the lower levels of the hierarchy of needs (notably safety and security).

**Look Around You**

Now you understand the basics for the three main theories; just look around your organisation and see how they are manifested.