

An Uneasy Look At Motivation Theory

GEORGE S. ODIORNE

Bureau of Industrial Relations
Graduate School of Business
University of Michigan
Ann Arbor, Michigan

"I'm puzzled about the training of managers in human relations. We now train them in certain interpersonal skills, like conference leadership and interviewing. That doesn't really suit me however. It seems to me we should also be telling them some of the *inner reasons* people act the way they do. Out of such understanding of behavioral science and scientific knowledge of inward human motivation and applied psychology they should be able to solve their own human relations problems.

Well, the skills courses work. Our conferences are better, and our recruiting and interviewing is better because of the interviewer skill training. But the rest of it doesn't seem to have any effect."

This paragraph, extracted from a letter from a top flight training director points up a prevalent problem for trainers. *Has all of the talk and work on teaching motivation theory been overdone? I'd like to suggest that it has. Training should change job behavior. It has no useful purposes in teaching managers to probe in private motives.*

For more than two decades the training profession has been floundering with the problem of teaching supervisors and

managers what motivation is and how to understand it.

Ambiguity, conflicting theory, and lost time and energy in training without much discernable change in behavior in far too many cases suggests that it may be time to take a fresh look at the subject.¹

The brief made here is that we simply stop talking about the subject of *motivation* theory and turn our attention to something we can accomplish with our own skills—the changing of *job behavior*.² This article will suggest the following things:

1. The attempt to teach motivation has been a not-too-useful attempt to *teach explanations of behavior*, and it is perhaps time to quit teaching the explanations and focus upon changing management behavior itself, and the stimuli that shape it. If we can't identify what behavior we want to change we can't change it.

2. We might stop talking about motivation theory as the cure to every problem that besets the company—not because it may not be true, but because nobody knows what it is, including the behavioral scientists.

3. Most training aimed at teaching motivation ends up prompting managers to probe into the personal privacy of others and practicing amateur psychology without having a useful effect on job performance or supervisory results. That this pointless and widespread invasion of privacy is resented is increasingly apparent.

I. MOTIVATION AS PROPOSED EXPLANATION

When we observe a person acting out his role in a job, a society, or an organization we see several things:

1. We see what he does. His activity (including verbal activity) can be seen, observed, measured, heard, recorded, or even photographed as is done in industrial engineering. He scowls, he smiles, he operates his tools fast or slow, he gets to work on time, or late, he remains with the firm or he quits.

2. We also note certain forces which are working upon him. His boss is inconsistent, being a joker one day and a grouch the next. The president is an autocrat or a nice man. His colleagues warmly invite him to play bridge at lunch hour or they let him sit uninvited at his desk. He is urged to join a union or exhorted to remain aloof from it. The organizer says certain things or he doesn't.

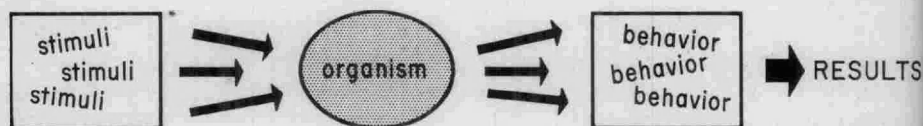
In between these two visible activities (stimuli and behavior) something is taking place apparently inside the man

which caused him (motivated) to act as he did in the face of such actions. The direction and force of activity is modified apparently by inward forces. In the diagram we see these three facets of behavior outlined.

In much of our training on motivation we have overemphasized the least manageable of these, that of the inward forces inside the person (organism) and tended to ignore the measurement of resulting managerial behavior, and more often the controlling nature of stimuli such as organization, boss, peers, and the like.

The temptation to explain these vague inward forces which modify the reaction of persons to the outward and more certain forces which press upon them is generally considered to be the area of motivation theory and most certainly has assumed a much too important and somewhat damaging role in industrial training.

1. For one thing we really don't know what goes on inside the person, since "motivation" is merely a kind of abstract concept invented from evidence taken from observed behavior, which purports to explain that behavior. St. Augustine put it "there are hidden deeps in every man which we can never probe." Modern behavioral science is more confident of its ability than Augustine but in truth has done little more than develop imaginative explanations with scant scientific bases.



Motivation theory at the present time then consists of *proposed explanations* of the behavior of people. Such explanations concern themselves with hidden forces which reside inside the man. They tacitly assume that these inner forces are the major causes of his actions as seen by others. As an exercise, every time you hear the term "motivation" used in a management speech or article substitute the two words "proposed explanation" and note the paucity of the remainder of the argument.

2. The prevalence of explanations of the inward "needs" of people owe wide acceptance to their plausibility rather than their verity in fact, or their usefulness in action.

3. The body of literature which deals with *needs* of men is not strictly speaking behavioral "science" at all, but a rather heart-warming and pleasing kind of philosophical speculation which draws on bits of evidence, combined with personal and private systems of explanation and modes of expression.

Current fashions in proposed explanations of behavior

The plausibility and clarity of an explanation of human behavior such as the "needs" theory appears to depend upon the extent to which it affords satisfaction to the largest number of people. The popularity or fame of the explainer is clearly a part of its value as explanation. Thus, motivation theory is best when it meets some demand for assurance on the part of a large number of people. When a "nice man" utters an explanation it is more likely to be accepted as scientific than an explanation emitted by an unpleasant person.

What assurances are met by current motivational theories by the social sciences or behavioral sciences? The first is that democracy in the work place is intrinsically — perhaps morally — better than autocracy or order giving. Thus, if motivation can be explained as consisting of basic needs for physical, ego, social and self actualization, arrayed in a hierarchy, the conclusion is obvious. To get people to produce more you must motivate them by meeting these needs. The logic is irrefutable if we accept their premises about "needs" as fact. What better way to gain acceptance for such inner-glow inducing assumptions and moral philosophizing than to garb them in the clothing of "behavioral science"? It is a minor caveat that such speculative postulates are not in fact science at all but moral philosophy rooted in the saporous aura of its adherents.

Please be assured, I favor participative management as I'm confident you do (especially for ourselves) over autocratic styles. I think most professors and professional people share this with you and me. I am however slightly concerned that your hunch or mine should be disguised as a science, when really it is an assumption which restates an event, theory or doctrine in terms of my current interests and aversions. I would go further and say that I think that democracy at work is laudable since it prepares people for better citizenship—beating those packaged company courses on "good citizenship" by a country mile for improving our political fibre. That participative management *always* improves production I doubt.

Yet my hunches, assumptions and private values hardly deserve to be classed

as "science" even "behavioral science" which is admittedly at the less tangible end of the science spectrum. If I so classify my philosophies I am perhaps misusing both science and the practitioners who might depend upon me to act as broker of the behavioral sciences to the fields of policy and action.

Why then do behavioral scientists so vigorously sell their moral philosophies so blithely to the training environment of business management solemnly labeled with the brand-name of science? This science posture grows in part out of frustration over failing to really learn very much about motivation. Like the alchemist of the middle ages (an analogy which sadly depicts the present state of behavioral research) the motivation theorist fondly hopes that the most current explanation is in fact justified by his experiments. Such a hearty desire to succeed leads many of our behavioral scientist friends to realize that an explanation, to be successful, must be stated in terms that seem ultimate, and impossible of further analysis.

Many of the senior men in the field, such as Douglas McGregor, Mason Haire, Norman Maier and others have warned against over-reliance upon current knowledge, but apparently explanation is thirsted after in some kind of search for assurance by trainers and managers. Much of the pit into which we fall, we ourselves have excavated.

I wouldn't suggest that current explanations are false, merely that they are unproven, and may not last. I would further urge that when you rely upon training managers in motivation theory you see it for what it really is, a course of proposed explanation which should be regarded with suspicion, be

critically evaluated, and discredited where your own experience reveals it to be less than ultimate in explanation.

From the viewpoint of the trainer who hopes to improve the performance of managers in his organization a more pointed summary might be germane.

If you wish to change managerial behavior you will do a better job if you define what job result is sought, and what behavior you want, and give your trainee the knowledge and skill necessary to apply it. *The rest is in the hands of his boss, the organizational culture, the organizational climate, his peers and his subordinates.*

If you have concluded that all of these forces are arrayed against the use of the behavioral skills you plan to teach your supervisors I would suggest you forego the training. It will simply prove to be an exercise in conflict creation. The old saying in training "understanding's not enough" can be expanded to cover the situation: "Understanding behavior by having an explanation that's plausible but unproven can be misunderstanding."

II. THE SPARSE KNOWLEDGE OF MOTIVATION

The number of safe generalizations we can acquire from the behavioral sciences is far smaller than we are led to suppose by many of the behavioral scientists themselves. Endless arrays of footnotes attached to positive statements of principles have led many unwary personnel and training men to infer falsely that there is actually a large body of generality for which there is some sizable amount of scientific evidence.

A close examination of the behavioral research on *motivation* is indicative of

this condition, although it is probably weaker than some other fields of study. What does the research in motivation really tell us, based on the scientific studies? Here are a few of the more reliable findings of behavioral research:

1. *Physical motives* are more easily measured, predicted, and controlled than others. Here we learn that:

- food deprivation leads to mass activity of the organism to obtain and eat food.
- continued intake of narcotics leads to increased activity to obtain and use them.
- sleep deprivation brings temporary deterioration of behavior.
- harmful and painful stimuli will increase avoidance of activities.

2. *Acquired, social, secondary, learned or psychogenic motives* are less centered in the individual himself and may be considered as true under *certain circumstances*. (That is, they are not *basic motives* but are situational.) For instance:

- we try to obtain things we like.
- primates will seek stimulating activity.
- new things get more attention than old.
- animals expend energy to get variability.
- children and monkeys like physical fondling.
- all primates associate with one another.
- some primates dominate others.
- first born children conform to groups more than those born later and so on.³

The nub of the problem for the industrial trainer is that most of the findings which are reliable are useless be-

cause they are so obvious. Those which tackle the real problems lack the precision to definitely state any rules or uniformities which are not situational in nature. Common insights are vested with the cloak of science. Indication is stated as if it were proven. It lacks the requirements of a science that its details be public. "Our findings in three anonymous companies reveal that larger firms have lower morale than smaller firms," for example, never mentions the firms, nor the details of the study. The findings are not replicable in another firm, or even the same firm at another time. The approach to finding the basic truths of motivation in business are not systematic, does not employ common definitions in the same way from time to time, calls indication proof, and relies excessively on correlations without making it clear that the reasons for the correlation are not readily apparent in the figures themselves.

As an explanation of human behavior on the job, motivation theory is based on the assumption that there is some order and uniformity that characterizes all of that behavior, when in fact nobody has proven such a thesis. Motivation theory is often concerned with right and wrong. However laudable this may be from the viewpoint of Biblical or ethical values, it is not a scientific value and for that reason many of the explanations we have been teaching have been useless for *prediction and control* of job behavior.

Industrial trainers, like management teachers in the colleges, are brokers of behavioral research. In that capacity we have an obligation to our clients—the managers of today and tomorrow—we train and educate. We must not teach

them the uncertain as if it were certain. We must not promulgate plausible explanations as valid scientific truths. Situational findings should not be promulgated as generalities that fit *all* situations.

Above all, the trainer in industry, like the management teacher in the business school, must be increasingly critical of the caliber of research being conducted by the more fundamental researchers who conduct the experiments.

When a behavioral scientist generalizes beyond his data, presuming to report proofs where he may in truth only be reporting indications, it is our responsibility as brokers and policy shapers to correct his interpretations in the light of what we know of the business situation in our firm and of the world of action.

Most trainers, and unfortunately too many management professors, vacillate between the roles of uncritical accept-

ance and arbitrary rejection of behavioral research. Perhaps the best guide to the use of behavioral research for the trainer in the coming decade would be: *learn more about behavioral research, and use it less.*

III. THE GREAT ASSAULT ON PRIVACY - THE END OF UNIQUENESS OF MAN

Perhaps the most damning case which can be made for the overutilization of the proposed explanations of behavior with which we have become obsessed as laymen, is the widespread invasion of personal privacy, and the increased scorn for the uniqueness of every man.⁴

This uniqueness in man is made up of all the manifold personal qualities that distinguish him from every other man, and from being a number. Pictured as successive stages of human freedom it might be pictured in the following way:

STAGE 3	Every person is a unique human	— <i>So am I, and we respect and assist one another</i>
STAGE 2	The other person is like me, but inferior	— <i>I understand, predict, teach and control him</i>
STAGE 1	The other person is an object	— <i>I may use him as I would a chair, or other object</i>

The behavioral sciences have strived hard to move us up from the lower to the second level. In the process they have vigorously blocked efforts to achieve the higher level where the *thou* becomes equivalent to *I* in importance.

Early capitalism and all of the totalitarian countries adhere to the lower levels. Many employment situations today are based on this premise. Modern

behavioral science suggests that by understanding behavior we can cause people to become "ego involved" in their work. They see a scandal in men who see their work as simply a job to be done during the day, who "alienate" themselves from their job at night when they go home. This involvement can be done by the devices of teaching every manager who directs others some ready

methods of probing the inner motives of people. This gives the manager tools for predicting and controlling through accommodating administrative arrangements to meet these needs and watching expectantly for the higher productivity. Very often, when the boss is watching for the productivity that his amateur psychiatry predicts will be forthcoming, he gets it! The reason for this isn't that his psychiatry work; more likely it is because his expectations are worn on his sleeve that everyone rightly interprets this as a polite form of order and hops to it.

Direct orders, autocracy, and demands for specific behavior delivered for fair wages are much more honest than a kind of complex and involuted anxiety game which goes beyond job performance, and permits the boss to press into private likes and dislikes, weaknesses and plain damn foolishness in his subordinates that bear little relation to the results he is paying for on the job.

Can corporate employees retain uniqueness

One of the key questions in suggesting that companies and their training programs eschew imparting skills in exposing individuals is whether or not the corporation and the individual can live together.

If the corporation assumes responsibility for raising mature individuals (whatever that is) it assumes a power and responsibility over private folly, and uniqueness that goes beyond even the family, the church, or the university. All of our institutions because they're so defined, provide something to members that they apparently can't find alone. The army, the church, and the profes-

sional society all have one thing in common with regard to their members: they limit their individual power of discretion. The corporation alone apparently has the strength to make with its employees a bargain that permits a man to retain his uniqueness as an individual at the same time he earns his money.

For such a happy circumstance to occur the corporation and its officers and managers must see the relationship as an economic one.

a. The company which defines the behavior of people on the job, then pays well enough for that behavior that the individual can be himself off the job is doing more to protect uniqueness in its people than most other forms of institution.

b. The company which teaches its managers to intrude into the motives of its men, is arranging for its employees and managers to be controlled in their whole life not merely at work. Whether it succeeds in this domination or not, the end result must always be a mutual invasion of the individual's privacy by his co-workers slightly above him in the hierarchy.

c. Since the trained psychologist *knows* that he is dealing in proposed explanations, and constantly focuses his attention upon behavior, his role is quite different than the multitude of amateurs who are taught to ignore behavior and results and leap vigorously into generalities in dealing with people.

Leave Psychology to the Psychologists

The latter point brings us to the question of the role of the professional psychologist. Some might interpret the foregoing as a part of the current popu-

lar attack upon that professional group. Vance Packard and others have attributed the "Naked Society" to the professional activity of this group. I would differ with him on identifying the causes of what he views with such distaste. The professional psychologist is trained to study behavior and uses generalizations as a shorthand for a wide collection of specific behaviors. The amateur product of training programs in "motivation" skips the behavioral content and starts to apply the generalization. The psychologist has standards of confidentiality of information, of reliance upon his tools that takes their limitations into account, and is suspicious of his own findings. The trainee fresh out of the training department course makes unqualified interpretations, uses his observations indiscriminately, and relies heavily upon his lay judgments in a field which he has had scant training.

The major difference between professional psychologists and amateurs lies in their use of adjectives such as "initiative," "drive" and the like. To the professional each word implies a repertory of specific behaviors. The amateur merely connects generalizations in which one adjective is defined by another adjective. The first verbalization is explained as a second verbalization with no hard behavioral reference in mind. The result is chaos.

The strong mental illness bias of motivation theory, and the depth to which much training in motivation theory goes, is akin to the first aid instructor supplementing his course with a few informative lectures on surgery. The temptation to pick up a scalpel and practice may be irresistible to some, especially when

they are not warned that there is a difference between applying band-aids and performing major surgery. Amateur group therapy must fall into the same category.

Summary

The theme of this article has been to question the practice of training supervisors and managers in motivational theory. The company has duties to be performed, skills to be applied, and jobs to be done. There are useful economic goals for training.

It is no invasion of privacy to ask that a man behave productively at work for the pay he takes from the firm if he makes the choice freely. Nor is it an invasion of his privacy to ask that he acquire behavioral habits and skills which will help him to perform those tasks well. This is some distance removed from the kind of training which arms him to prove the motives of others and expose his own, and to apply to everyone his little repertory of canned explanations.

The ill effects of such training are dual in nature. In assuming that others' inner nature can be so simply explained he loses his own respect for his private reflections. His taste for the development of uniqueness in himself is stunted by his packaged little dogmas about his inner nature. The enrichment of his own uniqueness is a product of being left alone by those who have some power of persuasion over him and accepting responsibility for his actions.

Is this uniqueness of every man important? I suggest that it is. The training program which helps one man diminish it in others does no service to

either party. The right of people to be privately wrong headed, fuzzy minded, cantakerous or brilliant for motives which occur to them at the moment to be suitable is part and parcel of individual freedom and uniqueness that the world all too often suppresses today.

Isn't it time we stuck to our business and simply teach people how to do their jobs better, rather than equipping them—at the same time suggesting to them—that motives are company property?

An Existentialist Model for Training

From the practical business viewpoint, as well as a philosophy that stresses a hands off label on personal privacy, the doctrines of existential philosophy seem to be most pertinent.⁵

- Man is responsible for what he is, including his own existence.
- An individual chooses and makes himself, and it is impossible for him to transcend his human subjectivity.
- Man is condemned to be free, and once he is thrown into the world

he is responsible for everything that he does.

While we might engage in some disputes over the complete application of Sartre's statement that "man is nothing else than the ensemble of his acts," it is nevertheless a better course of action for the trainer and the manager than its opposite which we have pursued over the past two decades in training. Its polar opposite would conclude in opposition to the above that: "The company, not the manager will decide what he knows, doesn't know, and should know. The company will remove his subjectivity in guiding his behavior by tossing it into a common pot. His dependence will be stressed rather than his freedom, and he is to be relieved of responsibility for deciding whether or not to react to stimuli as his subjective will dictates."

When an existentialist views behavior, he says that the actor is responsible for his acts (and for changing them). If he is given reasons for changing and does so, the responsibility for his acts are still his own.

The trainer becomes less godlike, and more mortal in the process.

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