

# A Practitioner's View of "Motivation"

*Robert Hershey*

Why is it that when a company wants people to direct their purchasing behaviour in a certain direction, they turn to advertising agencies for the agencies' expertise in *persuasion* but when they want to direct their own employees' behaviour in a certain direction they call it *motivation*? To the psychologist, the distinction is not merely semantic. Motivators, or more precisely intrinsic motivators, come from within. Motivators prompt you to do something for its *own* sake.

The thrust of what follows is that if people can be convinced of a certain argument, it might lead to intrinsic motivation.

Persuaders are communications, verbal or behavioural devices which encourage the kind of behaviour or attitude that the persuader (the manager), but not necessarily his subordinate, desires. Even psychologists might call techniques such as wage incentive plans extrinsic motivators, but I believe that no manager can truly motivate another person although he/she can persuade subordinates to behave in a certain way. Sometimes though, the persuaded behaviour is found to be desirable by the persuadee and he/she does repeat the behaviour out of intrinsic motivation. Persuasion can sometimes precede motivation. We speak of people who are originally indifferent or negative about a certain activity, getting "hooked" after being persuaded to try fishing (at the oddest of hours, no less), for example.

In our thinking, a production or sales incentive plan is not a motivator, it is a persuasion device. It does not make a machine operator produce more for the sheer pleasure of being highly productive, unlike the professional baseball player who delights in producing as many hits as he can. What an incentive plan does say is: if you turn out

more pieces, you will have more money to spend at the end of the week. Of course, the management does not care what it is called as long as it gets more production, and we have no argument with an incentive plan if both worker and management are happy with it. The problem arises when managements come to believe so firmly in their so-called motivation techniques and theories that they incorrectly attribute the behaviour they see with the attitude ("highly motivated") they impute to the source behind that behaviour.

The very term "motivation", in its shopfloor context, implies that workers are not intrinsically inclined to behave in the way in which their managers would want. And what are some of these desirable behaviours which managers would like to see in their subordinates? They would like them to:

- produce as much as they can;
- come to work every day;
- be on time;
- be safety minded;
- be cordial, civil, etc.

If we are honest with ourselves, we will admit that we cannot make people *want* to do these things but we might be able to persuade them to do so, as is the case in successful incentive and profit-sharing plans. This is not to say that organizations ignore human resources persuasion techniques. Here are some current analogous examples.

To get consumers used to their product, in the hope that the more one uses a certain brand, the more likely that it becomes one's regular brand, there's the "buy two, get one free" technique. The incentive plan counterpart is that if one sees that more money can be made, one becomes accustomed to that level of income and has to sustain a certain level of output to maintain that level of income.

To demonstrate its commitment to the consumer beyond the point of purchase, the marketer will give a (lifetime) warranty. To demonstrate its commitment to its employees beyond the point of hire, the organization gives a pension plan.

To gain the goodwill of its customers, the public relations department will contribute to the arts and sponsor charitable events. The human resources department will for its employee "customers" host a Christmas party, run the company picnic and raffle off the Thanksgiving turkey towards the same end.

The "free sample" is given to "try us out", as is the summer intern programme offered by the prestigious law firms (at irrational salaries) to the outstanding students of next year's graduating class.

Madison Avenue plays to the fantasy life of the consumer with themes of sex, beauty and good times, as does the corporate recruiter with themes of promotions, perks, opportunities and a corner office.

Good service is an ever-present advertising theme (e.g. Federal Express's "when it absolutely, positively has to get there on time"). Organizations provide their employee "customers" with similar services — employee assistance programmes, company cafeteria, and more recently, day care facilities and, paradoxically, outplacement services.

The ever-present, *low, low prices* marketing theme has its recruitment counterpart in *excellent salary*.

The bandwagon technique of "Join the millions of Americans who..." has its counterpart in today's corporate omnipresent "team" and "teamwork" entreaties.

First, note that most of the above have to do with things which organizations *do*, not with ideas that pertain to values or facts. Second, let us recognize these techniques as persuaders, not motivators. And what is the bottom line of what managers want to persuade their subordinates to do? They want them (the subordinates) to *expend energy* — either muscular or psychological energy — for their (the management's) objectives. (For some insights into how service employees such as flight attendants, Disney employees, bill collectors and others expend the energy to maintain outward serenity in the presence of internal turmoil, see[1]). That is what producing more, not being absent or late, observing safety and civility rules and so on, is really about — *expending energy on something in which one may not be particularly inclined to engage*.

If this be the case then, *as practitioners*, we do not need one more theory of motivation, we need better insight into the psychology of advertising. We can take some tried-and-true product advertising techniques that have been found to be effective and use them in a human resources and management context. But before we do that, the point must be made that, as a practical matter, our vocabulary and attention require a shift from the motivation jargon of needs, expectancy, two-factor theories, etc., to an emphasis on communications practices, because persuasion requires the transmission of information. For all their worth as classroom fodder in organizational behaviour courses, our observations of managers fighting the daily business battles are that they do not stop to ask themselves which motivation theory is most applicable to a given decision-making situation.

Research[2,3] pertaining to these motivational theories demonstrates only modest and infrequent success as practical solutions for those few who do attempt to relate practice to existing theories of motivation. However, the revolution in desktop publishing now permits even a medium-sized company to publish a house organ. Videocassette recorders are more commonplace than fax machines, while pay stub inserts, posters, banners, bulletin boards, training programmes, as well as brown bag lunch-time sessions, are still easy to put into practice. These are some of the *media* available to organizations to get their message out. Once the choice of media is settled, the questions of what is to be transmitted and which persuasion technique(s) will be the most efficacious is addressed.

Although corporate success has many roots, Frederick Crawford, former Chairperson of TRW, in recalling the heydays of the original Thompson Products Company when their revenues went from \$4.4 million to \$340 million, said:

I think it all stemmed from decency and good communications. I held mass meetings every 60 days... I'd call them in and tell them what we were doing and what our challenges were. I had a rule that every division manager must talk to employees at least once every 90 days. We started a regular newspaper. We used bulletin boards. We talked about what we were doing in letters we mailed at home. We published a special edition of the annual report for employees. I spent a lot of time on the shopfloor with small groups of employees[4].

Years of product advertising research tell us that there are many effective approaches to

having a message accepted, notwithstanding the fact that not everyone who is exposed to a highly creative advertisement buys the product. Some messages are purely educational, some are emotionally tinged and others contain elements of both.

### EDUCATIONAL MESSAGES

Persuasive educational messages are delivered on the premiss that, if the target population comes into new information, it could result in an attitude change which would result in a behavioural change.

It is inconceivable that a military commander would deprive his troops of any intelligence concerning the strengths or weaknesses of an enemy, or that the manager of a professional sports team would deprive his team of such information prior to an engagement. Yet, the corporate "troops" on the line are not similarly informed. They rarely know their company's market share, return on investment or other financial data, much less those of their competitors. If their competitor is foreign, are they told about some of the liberal overseas practices and regulations pertaining to tax abatements, subsidies, pollution and safety standards? Further, in making reference to overseas competitors, one need not apologize for using non-stereotypical messages which tap powerful nationalistic emotions in describing the threat of foreign hegemony as it relates to job security issues. (For an elaboration of this approach, see [5].) Do the "troops" care? If they were educated as to how the consequences of these overseas conditions affect their job security, they would surely care.

Sophisticated companies budget funds for orientation programmes for new employees in order to familiarize them with the company's history, products, mutual responsibilities and so on — all in the hope of improving employee identification with the organization, in the belief that identification will result in "motivation". Yet, I am unaware of any corporate induction that uses this opportunity to explain what the company is up against in terms of its markets.

### PERSUASION TECHNIQUES

Whatever messages a company chooses (e.g. foreign competition, strangulating environmental restrictions, etc.) and whatever media it chooses (e.g. house organ, pay inserts, etc.) research from persuasion and product advertising studies demonstrates the general effectiveness of the following approaches:

- *Opinions by experts* are persuasive[6]. Speeches, video clips or quotations by leading government officials, college presidents and think-tank economists fit this requirement.
- *Testimonials* by trustworthy, credible people who are similar to the target audience, as well as emotionally attractive to them, have high believability[7]. A much-promoted well-liked employee who has risen through the ranks is a better spokesman for the company's fairness practices than the chairman of the board.
- *Repetition* of the message has been shown to increase the amount of times a target audience thinks about a product[8].
- *Twenty reasons why...* — many studies demonstrate that successful persuasion frequency is enhanced as the number of arguments presented to the target audience increases[9].
- *Fear* — research shows that intended fear-provoking messages often fall short of their goal (e.g. smoking will increase your chances of having cancer), however, where the fear was actually induced, the message was effectively persuasive[10].
- *Multiple sources*, independent of each other but in support of a particular message, have been shown to be persuasion effective. This is particularly true if, in addition, the sources present different arguments to uphold a viewpoint[11].
- *The use of citations* of the sources for the evidence presented in a message can increase the credibility of even non-expert spokesmen[12].
- *Examples or case histories* are more potent persuaders than statistics[13].

The above sample barely touches on what is known about the psychology of persuasion but it is presented in the hope that line managers and human resources practitioners, in particular, will appreciate that their colleagues in the advertising department (or industry) have tools that can be useful in areas other than product promotion. Specifically, that an organization can promote or reinforce what it considers desirable attitudes and behaviours among its employees by using the same persuasion tools utilized by advertisers. However, one cannot simply use this sample "by the numbers", so to speak, because there are interactions between some of them. For example, the effects of liking a particular message source, which

normally enhances persuasion, can be overridden by the effect of its lack of credibility.

### THE RELATIVITY ISSUE

We have previously raised a relativity issue in our study of morale[14]. That is, morale from whose standpoint — management's or the workers'? For example, when a crew mutinies, is morale high or low? In the case of motivation, it is equally true that the same event (e.g. high productivity) is attributed to a different source by management and the worker.

Let the reader decide if the following dialogue is an absurdity or a paradox.

A group of workers are engaged in a lunch-time conversation:

How can we motivate management?

You mean how can we get them to really, really want to give us more pay?

Yes, that's what motivation is — when you really, really want to do something because you believe in its desirability.

Why don't we give them more and better production. They always say they believe that good performance should be rewarded.

Yes! That should do it!

Note that these workers are attempting to effect a change in management's behaviour by directly engaging management's belief system. Management will *want* to give them rises, they say. Although managers constantly use the phrase "motivating workers", I have never heard the phrase "motivating management" from the rank and file. As we noted at the outset, management persuades workers to demonstrate certain behaviours wanted by the organization and calls it motivation. However, *workers can actually motivate management* to act in its own (management's) desired interests by their behaviour — the successful settlement of a strike, sick-out or work slowdown which permits the welcome resumption of normal business operations but also results in more liberal wages and benefits. Workers call it persuasion.

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Robert Hershey is Professor of Management and Psychology at the US Merchant Marine Academy, Kings Point, New York, USA.

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