

Chapter 19

IT Managers' Narratives on Subordinates' Motivation at Work: A Case Study

Lars Göran Wallgren

University of Gothenburg, Sweden

Svante Leijon

University of Gothenburg, Sweden

Kerstin Malm Andersson

University of Gothenburg, Sweden

ABSTRACT

Little is known about managers' perception of their subordinates' motivation, especially how this perception influences managerial behavior. This study, conducted in the growing IT consultancy sector, focuses on how IT consultancy first-line managers construct their subordinates' motivation. Since work motivation is a complex phenomenon, there is variation in how managers reduce this complexity. The empirical data was collected in semi-structured interviews with six team leaders (three female, three male) and are presented as narratives. In their narratives, the female team leaders present a more transformative view of their subordinates while the male managers present a more transactional view. The authors interpret this variation in the narrations as evidence that the issue of subordinate motivation is not seen as strategically important. This interpretation cast doubts on certain assumptions in organizational psychology theory.

INTRODUCTION

When IT consultants introduce new technologies and new work routines to their customers there is the possibility that such changes will, in varying degrees, either succeed or fail. Successful change

depends not only on which new technologies and routines are selected, but also on how they are implemented so that the customers accept them. A significant factor in gaining such acceptance relates to the construction of the change agenda – there are numerous possibilities. Some change

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-1954-8.ch019

agendas are based on certain general concepts such as Total Quality Management or New Public Management, while others build on Organizational Development ideas that address the importance of employee participation. In still other agendas, because of need for more dramatic organizational restructuring, organizational culture issues dominate.

However, regardless of the specific change agenda selected, in the IT consultancy environment, IT team leaders need to understand what motivates their subordinates – the IT consultants – who have to convince their customers to accept the proposed changes. This particular work motivation issue, “the knowledge of the other’s motivation”, has not been deeply researched. The focus of this study is IT team leaders’ conceptions of their subordinates’ work motivation.

According to Lawson and Shen (1998), managers benefit significantly from a sound theoretical understanding of subordinates’ motivation. In addition, as Steers, Mowday, and Shapiro (2004) note, given the radical change in work contexts in recent decades (e.g., globalization, rapidly changing technology, constant renewal of skills, extensive customer interaction and a labor market that is highly sensitive to economic swings) managers increasingly need to realize that subordinates’ motivation is an important contributing factor to the overall success of organizations. For that reason, researchers in organizational psychology ask important questions about how such managerial knowledge can be acquired and used.

The key question is: “What are the best ways to motivate subordinates – intrinsic (satisfaction and flow experiences), extrinsic (money and other benefits), or a mix of these rewards systems?” (Lawson & Shen, 1998, p. 12). For managers in an IT consultancy environment this question is especially relevant because of the increase in the number of knowledge workers whose commitment is critical to organizational success. To answer this question, we need to know what conceptions

managers working in these new contexts have of employee motivation.

In basing our research around this question, we note our study’s resemblance to McGregor’s (1960) investigation of workforce motivation in which he proposed that understanding such motivation was a fundamental requirement for leading and controlling employees. McGregor’s study led to his well-known dichotomy in attitudes toward workforce motivation – Theory X and Theory Y. These theories distinguish between two contrasting assumptions on employee motivation: Theory X assumes that lazy employees require strict control and Theory Y assumes that self-motivated employees will exercise self-control. McGregor’s use of the narrative form in describing workforce motivation, albeit in a very different context from our study (the factory floor vs. the customer workplace), is an inspiration for this study.

We also recognize the complexities in this type of research. Knowledge is acquired by constructing it from diverse sources and knowledge of complex issues, such as motivation, that change over time. We understand, in narratives, people use sensemaking, which Weick (1995) identifies as the process whereby people understand their experiences. We caution that in sensemaking, which is a complicated activity, temporary truths may appear as conceptions.

THE IT CONSULTANCY FIRM

In an IT consultancy firm there is typically little direct contact between the IT managers (the team leaders) and the IT consultants (the subordinates). After the IT team managers assign the IT consultants to the customers, the IT consultants locate to the customers’ place of business where they are under the supervision of the customers. In this increasingly common professional workplace, where consultants tend to work independently from their statutory employers, managers must

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