Motivation Theories and Their Applications

Motivation is a critical component to management and therefore has been the focus of much research. There are many differing schools of thought concerning motivation ranging from antiquated, modern views such as the carrot-and-stick approach to more enlightened, post-modern views which center around meeting deeper, intrinsic needs. Organizations can be categorized into three types: Low Cost, Global Competitors, and High-Involvement (O'Toole & Lawler). I will explain how each type of organization has a motivation approach to fit its model.

To begin, Low Cost organizations are characterized by a strong division of its workforce: a relatively small, well-paid management in control of a large, under-paid pool of low-skilled laborers. Low Cost organizations typically employ a reinforcement approach to motivation. This approach basically ignores the needs of employees and works only to modify employee behavior to that which is desired by management. Reinforcement simply provides positive rewards to employees who exhibit desired behavior in an attempt to have those behaviors repeated in the future and also provides consequences to employees who do not behave in a desired way. This system of rewards and consequences is commonly referred to as the "carrot-and-stick" approach. This was the prominent motivation theory of the modern era, but it continues to thrive today despite mounting criticism.

Next comes Global Competitor organizations which share some similarities with both Low Cost or High-Involvement types, but generally are characterized by low-to-medium-skilled laborers performing monotonous, routine tasks. Global competitors, like low cost organizations, are very focused on cutting costs (especially labor costs) in order to provide the cheapest products to consumers. A job design approach fits best with this type of organization. This approach is focused on increasing employee motivation by modifying the task environment from one of repetition and boredom to one of variety and autonomy. Job enrichment is used to incorporate responsibility, recognition, and personal growth into the tasks performed in order to meet the more intrinsic needs of the employees (D&M 502). This motivational method can be a powerful tool to assist employees in developing themselves and finding meaning in their work which can lead to greater involvement, morale, and lower turnover, which helps employees and the bottom line.

Finally we come to High-Involvement organizations which are characterized by going above and beyond what is required by law to cultivate a supportive community for its employees through meeting their needs on virtually all levels. I believe that a two-factor approach would be the best fit for this type of organization. This approach deals with minimizing negative hygiene factors which can cause dissatisfaction among employees and maximizing motivators which can increase the satisfaction level of employees. Important motivators in this approach which work well for High-Involvement organizations include achievement, recognition, responsibility, personal growth, and the nature of the work itself (D&M 489). These motivators empower the employees and can lead to higher engagement in their work since they are more satisfied and feel a sense of belonging and value.

Managing styles will vary greatly between the previously mentioned motivation theories. Management that uses a reinforcement approach will continue to dangle carrots and other such extrinsic rewards to encourage desirable behavior and poke with a stick when the behavior is undesirable. Management using a job design approach will need to carefully analyze the tasks being performed by employees and fully understand how the tasks can be modified to make them more enriching and satisfying. Managers employing the two-factor approach need to be able to provide satisfaction like the job design approach but also ensure that negative hygiene factors are kept to a minimum while instituting positive hygiene factors.