NOTE ON WORKPLACE PSYCHOLOGY THEORIES

Several psychological theories can help explain organizational behaviour. This note offers a brief overview of some of the most relevant theories, which may help employees and leaders to better understand organizational behaviour.

HOW WE JUDGE OTHERS, HOW WE JUDGE OURSELVES

When we observe the behaviour of others, we often try to determine if the action was caused by an internal factor (e.g., personality or mood) or an external factor (e.g., something from the environment). Morin, Jolly, and Mitchell, for example, describe *fundamental attribution error* as a mistake that people frequently make when they are trying to figure out what caused someone to act in a certain way. Generally, humans have a tendency to underestimate the impact of external factors and overestimate the impact of internal factors.[1]

Consider, for example, a colleague who is late for work. An observer might assume that the lateness is due to a faulty personality or characteristic. That is, the colleague must be late because he is lazy or because he does not care about his work (internal factors). We are less likely to think that maybe he hit heavy traffic, or he stopped to help someone in need (external factors). In the workplace, this can be a problem because leaders may be too quick to blame issues on people, even though the problem may well have been caused by factors outside of the employee's control.

When it comes to ourselves, however, we judge our own behaviour in a different way, which Epley and Dunning, for example, refer to as a *self-serving bias*. When we succeed, we attribute the win to internal factors (e.g., "I got the promotion because of hard work and persistence."). However, when we fail, we tend to blame external factors (e.g., "I didn't get the promotion because my boss doesn't like me.").[2]

THE CONFLICT BETWEEN WHAT WE THINK AND WHAT WE DO

Occasionally, employees are asked to do something that is in conflict with their beliefs or attitudes. For example, a purchasing manager may care passionately about the environment, but she has to buy non-recyclable packaging materials to meet her internal savings objectives. An incompatibility between our attitude and our behaviour (or between two attitudes) causes tension. This uncomfortable feeling is a

result of *cognitive dissonance*. Continuing the example of the purchasing manager, she faces three main choices: (1) she can change her attitude; for example, she can decide that saving the environment is not really that important to her; (2) she can change her behaviour; for example, she can refuse to buy the non-recyclable material or ask an assistant to purchase it instead; or (3) she can rationalize the situation; for example, she can determine that this little bit of packaging will not have a significant impact on saving the earth and so it is okay to buy it. Managers may benefit from remembering that when they ask employees to do something that does not align with their values, employees will experience discomfort and will be motivated to make a choice that alleviates that negative feeling.[3]

THE IMPACT OF EXPECTATIONS ON PERFORMANCE

It is easy to think that the amount of talent or ability people have will determine precisely how they will perform a task. However, a direct correlation between innate ability and performance levels is not always present. The *self-fulfilling prophecy*[4] suggests that behaviour is heavily influenced by the expectations of those around us. People tend to live up (or down) to expectations. For instance, researchers have found that teachers who were told that certain students had a high IQ spent more time with them, gave them more challenging assignments and set higher expectations. In turn, these students felt more self-confident and performed better.[5]

This can happen in the workplace, as well. For example, a manager who truly believes that her team is amazing will often see great accomplishments from the team. On the other hand, a manager who thinks her team is made up of sub-par workers will often find that they are unable to succeed. Both of these situations can happen irrespective of the talents of the team members. We can expect that leaders provide more encouragement, support, and resources to help their strongest people succeed because they believe that these investments are likely to pay off in terms of high performance. Conversely, leaders make fewer investments in people they view as weak to avoid wasting time, energy, and resources.[6] Clearly, how leaders set and express their beliefs about their employees' performance will have major implications for how they will actually perform.

PEOPLE WANT A WORKPLACE THAT IS FAIR

Humans seem to have an innate yearning for fairness in life. In a typical schoolyard, outraged cries of "That's not fair!" in response to inequitable play can often be heard. Usually that claim alone is enough pressure for rule breakers to do better. Adults also seem concerned about fairness. There is evidence that perceptions of *organizational justice*[7] can affect important outcomes, such as organizational commitment, pay satisfaction, job satisfaction, employee trust, employee turnover rate, job performance, and organizational citizenship behaviours.[8]

The research on this topic suggests that people make fairness judgments on three main dimensions:

- *Distributive justice* is the perceived fairness of an *outcome* (e.g., "I deserve the size of raise I got.").
- *Procedural justice* is the perceived fairness of the *process* used to determine an outcome (e.g., "I had the chance to explain why I deserved a big raise and my boss gave a reasonable explanation for why I got that particular amount.").
- *Interactional justice* is the perceived degree that *respect is given* (e.g., "My boss was polite and respectful to me during the whole pay raise process.").

Interestingly, not all dimensions have to be high for employees to have a perception of high organizational justice. One high dimension can, in some cases, compensate for other low dimensions. For example, if interactional justice is high, employees might still feel a sense of fairness even when distributive and procedural justice seem to be low. This means that leaders can often mitigate the damage that comes from unjust conditions simply by treating employees with respect.

SOMETIMES WE LEARN TO JUST GIVE UP

When people face a situation they do not like, the most common response is to try to do something to make things better. However, if they find that they have little control over what happens, they may simply stop trying. This is called *learned helplessness*. This decision to accept aversive circumstances may hold even when it becomes possible to actually change things. For example, imagine a workplace where employees are unhappy about the way the work is distributed. The employees complain to their boss and even to the human resources manager, and although the people in power may agree with the employees, nothing ever changes. Over time, the employees who stay with the job learn to accept the poor conditions.[9]

One day, a new boss comes in and notices that employees do not seem to be satisfied. She asks for the employees' input into how the work should be distributed, but the employees do not offer any suggestions because they don't believe anything will really change. After being unsuccessful on getting any input, the manager gives up because she thinks the employees do not really care about work distribution practices. In essence, when employees learn that they have little control over their environment, it can be hard to get them to believe that they can make a difference.

THERE ARE SEVERAL DIFFERENT TYPES OF POWER

Power is about influencing people to do something they would otherwise not do. This is a critical skill in the workplace. Effective managers have to convince employees to complete unwanted tasks, persuade colleagues to work together, and talk leaders into providing resources. Researchers studying this topic suggest that there are five main *dimensions of power*.[10]

The first three types of power are connected to the individual's formal role in the organization: (1) coercive power is based on the ability to punish someone if they do not comply. For example, a manager can withhold a promotion or dock pay if an employee does not follow direction; (2) reward power comes from the ability to bestow positive benefits on employees; for example, a manager can give praise or a bonus to those who do what they are asked to do; and (3) legitimate power is connected to the authority inherent in a person's role; for example, employees may listen to the direction given by a manager simply because of the person's higher position on the organization's hierarchy, even without a threat of punishment or promise of reward.

The last two types of power stem from personal characteristics: (4) expert power is influence that comes from having special knowledge; for example, when our tax accountant tells us that we cannot make certain deductions, we do what she says because she understands the tax code better than we do; and (5) referent power is influence because of admiration; for example, an employee who is well-liked by his peers is often able to influence their behaviour.

Perhaps counterintuitively, research has shown that personal sources of power (i.e., expert and referent) are the most effective. They have been found to be positively related to employee satisfaction with supervision, performance, and organizational commitment.[11]

DECISION MAKING IS NOT AS LOGICAL AS IT MIGHT BE—WE ARE PRONE TO ERRORS

A common assumption is that logical people make decisions based on a rational process (e.g., collect all data, consider many options, choose based on a cost/benefit analysis). The research is clear, however, that many of our processes are heavily flawed. Following, find a list of some of the biases that negatively influence our decision-making.

Stereotypes help us deal with the vast complexity of our world by providing shortcuts to making decisions. Rather than looking at the characteristics of an individual, we save time and effort by assuming they are similar to others in the group of which they are a member. The problem is that these generalizations may not tell us anything at all about the individual person. For instance, if all of the accountants you have known are quiet and diligent, that does not mean the candidate you are considering hiring will be the same, even if she has an accounting designation. Thinking group membership is always connected to certain characteristics often leads us to make poor decisions.

Although we think that we objectively gather information prior to making a decision, what really happens is we selectively gather data. *Confirmation bias* is when we search out and prioritize data that supports our preconceived notions and ignore information that contradicts our choices.[12] This is very common.

Sometimes we tend to stick with a decision even though there are rational reasons to change our minds. This *escalation of commitment* happens when there is a fear that changing plans will result in a loss of sunk costs and embarrassment from admitting a mistake.[13] The focus is on what has already been paid, rather than the benefits that may come with a change. As an example, imagine a person who has made a decision to choose a college major because that is the one that his parents prefer. As time goes on, the person finds it more and more difficult to extricate himself from the chosen path, even when the evidence suggests this is not the right major for him. After 'putting in so much time and effort,' the person decides to follow the unwanted profession for the long term rather than starting over with something more suitable.

At other times, we tend to believe in our ability more than we should, but we are not aware of this *overconfidence bias.*[14] Most people consider themselves better than average, and those whose intellectual and interpersonal skills are weakest are actually the most likely to overestimate their abilities.[15] This overconfidence may prevent us from collecting extra data or making plans to deal with obstacles that can arise.

Finally, when making decisions, we are more likely to weigh heavily information that is readily available, is emotionally stimulating, or that came to our attention most recently. Instead of basing our decisions on comprehensive data, the *availability bias* means that we focus on information that is called to mind more easily.

HIGH PERFORMANCE CAN LEAD TO RESENTMENT

Envy, which has been defined as "pain at another person's good fortune,"[16] is a common emotion that comes from unfavourable social comparisons. When we look at people who have what we desire, it can

cause us to feel pain and discomfort with our own state. Humans have a basic drive to reduce pain, so when we feel envy, we are likely to take steps to reduce the unpleasantness.[17] Responses may include challenging oneself to achieve the position of the other or, alternately, undermining the person we envy to bring them down.[18]

Tall poppy syndrome[19] is when those who are envied are "cut down to size" by jealous onlookers. This means high performers may be sabotaged or undermined in their efforts. Leaders have cause to be concerned by such practices that attempt to disempower successful employees, potentially lowering their productivity and well-being.[20] High achievers can help reduce negative attention by demonstrating humility, and working to contribute to the performance of their co-workers. It can also help when leaders build a strong group identity so that the success of one member is reflected within the entire team.[21]

Envy also has a negative impact on the person who feels it, as it can lower their self-esteem and performance.[22] Researchers have found that there are a number of things we can do if we are feeling envious.[23] It is important to acknowledge to ourselves what is causing the envy. When we pinpoint what someone else has that we wish we had, that is giving us data on what we value. Instead of resenting the other person, it may be possible to put our efforts towards building that skill/ability/resource for ourselves. It may also be useful to compare ourselves to our past selves rather than to other people. And, we can remind ourselves of everything we do have, rather than focusing mostly on how others have more in certain areas.

PERSONALITY TRAITS INFLUENCE ACTION

One factor that may influence how people behave is their personality. The most widely used framework is likely the *Big Five Personality Model* which suggests there are basic dimensions that determine most human action.[24] Knowing something about a person's personality can allow us to predict how they will act, and we can expect that these traits remain relatively stable over time.[25]

Each of the five dimensions can influence work behaviour.[26]

- Conscientiousness is about being dependable, and it is the best predictor of job performance. Employees who are conscientious put in more effort, have more drive, and are better organized. On the negative side, conscientious employees may struggle to be creative because of their focus on set goals.
- Emotional stability is a measure of someone's ability to be calm under stress, and is most related to life satisfaction and job satisfaction. People who score low on emotional stability are considered neurotic, and may have difficulty dealing with unexpected changes in the workplace.
- Extraversion is about getting comfort from connecting with others, and predicts performance in jobs that require a great deal of personal interaction. Not surprisingly, extroverts are more likely to emerge as leaders in groups. However, introverts tend to be more thoughtful and reserved.
- Openness to Experience is a personality dimension that reflects curiosity, and suggests the ability to be adaptable and creative. People who are open are more likely to prefer autonomy and will often be agile learners. Those who are low in this dimension may prefer the familiar.
- Agreeableness is about deferring to the needs of others, and predicts performance in jobs that are interpersonally oriented (e.g. customer service). Agreeable people are usually liked by others, are more apt to follow rules, and are more likely to engage in helping behaviour.

In recent years, there has been some effort to add a sixth personality dimension to the Big Five framework, namely "Honesty-Humility." People who score high on this dimension place a high value on justice and modesty. Those scoring low on this dimension are more likely to be seen as deceitful and pretentious.

EMPLOYEES ACT ACCORDINGLY WHEN THEY THINK THEIR EMPLOYER CARES ABOUT THEM

A high level of *perceived organizational support* (POS) happens when an employee thinks that their company values their work and cares about their well-being. People are more likely to feel supported when rewards are distributed fairly, when employees have an influence on decision-making, and when supervisors try to help employees satisfy their needs.[27] According to the norms of reciprocity, when we experience favourable treatment, there is a felt obligation to respond in kind.[28] Therefore, employees who feel supported by an organization may want to help the organization meet its goals in return. Evidence supports this theory, in that employees who feel supported by their employers are more likely to repay the benefit by having higher affective commitment, better performance, and lower withdrawal behaviour.[29]

TASKS OUTSIDE OF AN EMPLOYEE'S JOB DESCRIPTION CAN HAVE A BIG IMPACT

Job descriptions are good at listing the basic tasks that are required of a position, but organizations need employees to go above and beyond that list. When employees decide to engage in activities that are not required, but that contribute to the workplace, this is called *organizational citizenship behaviour* (OCB). This may include helping others, volunteering for extra work, avoiding conflict, and tolerating work-related nuisances with grace. The evidence suggests that employees are more likely to engage in OCBs when they have high job satisfaction, perceive the workplace as fair, have high organizational commitment, and perceived leader supportiveness.[30]

CONTRACTS GO BEYOND THE THINGS THAT ARE WRITTEN DOWN

Terms of employment are often defined in an employee contract, but the informal, often unspoken, obligations that exist between an employee and the employer can be very influential, as well. This type of agreement is known as a psychological contract,[31] and is mostly implicit and only infrequently discussed. Theoretically, thousands of items may be included in a psychological contract. The psychological contract, for example, may lead an employer to expect that an employee will work diligently even when unobserved, look for ways to save the company money, and protect the reputation of the organization. The employee may expect that promotion opportunities will be made available, that raises will follow good performance, and training will be provided. These things may be expected, even though they are never stated out loud.

Psychological contracts serve a number of functions.[32] It is impossible to address every consideration in an employment contract, so a psychological contract can fill in any missing pieces, thus reducing insecurity for the employee. A psychological contract helps to direct employee behaviour, as the employee weighs obligations against expectations. And finally, since the psychological contract is bi-lateral, it can give the employee a sense of influence over the employment relationship and working conditions.

When an organization neglects to act according to these (often hidden) expectations, there can be negative repercussions as the employee will feel that the exchange relationship has been violated. Outcomes can

include feelings of betrayal, higher turnover, lower trust, lower job satisfaction, lower organizational commitment, and fewer organizational citizenship behaviours (OCBs).[33]

THEORIES OF MOTIVATION

We Won't Try Unless We Think We Can Do the Job and That It Will Lead to Rewards that We Value

One of the most widely accepted theories of motivation is *expectancy theory*. This model argues that the way we act depends on what we expect to happen and how much we want that outcome. There are three key relationships in the theory:[34]

- Relationship between effort and performance: (e.g., "Will my attempt to do something actually lead to a particular outcome? Do I think that if I try to complete a financial analysis that I have the skills to do that properly?")
- Relationship between performance and reward: (e.g., "If that task is completed, will I receive recognition for doing it? Do I think that if I complete the financial analysis my boss will notice and give me praise?")
- Relationship between reward and personal needs: (e.g., "If I get the reward, will it mean much to me? How much do I really care if my boss gives me praise?")

The theory argues that all of these relationships have to be positive for an employee to be motivated to perform.

People Look at What They're Getting or Giving and Draw Comparisons with Others

According to *equity theory*, an employee will assess what he is getting from a job (e.g., salary or recognition) and what he is putting in (e.g., education, effort, or experience) and compare this ratio to what others are experiencing, both inside and outside the workplace. This is related to distributive justice perceptions, as described earlier. If the employee thinks that his ratio is roughly equal to others, he will likely be satisfied. If others have a less-favourable ratio (i.e., they bring more to the table than they get), he will feel guilty. If others have a more-favourable ratio (i.e., they bring less or get more), he will feel a tension that will lead him to try and correct the imbalance.[35]

Imagine an employee, for example, who makes $75,000 per year and thinks that it is a fair salary based on the amount of work he does and his experience level. In other words, he thinks that the outcomes (i.e., what he gets) are relatively equal to the inputs (i.e., what he puts in). One day, the employee finds out that someone else inside the company (internal equity) or at another company (external equity) is making $85,000 per year for roughly the same job and effort level. The information causes that employee to be dissatisfied with his pay level, leading him to take steps to reduce the inequity. The employee's steps may include asking for a raise (i.e., increasing outcomes), reducing his level of effort (i.e., reducing inputs), or trying to find a new job that pays more fairly (i.e., finding equity between outcomes and inputs).[36]

CONCLUSION

The list of relevant workplace behaviour psychological theories presented in this note is not exhaustive, although these are some of the most accepted models. Leveraging this knowledge can help us to better understand how and why people act the way they do in an organizational setting. This knowledge can be especially useful to leaders who are responsible for managing organizational behaviour.

ENDNOTES

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