The Office: An Industrial and Organizational Psychologist's Nightmare

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Industrial and Organization Psychology is a field that is extremely important to understanding the interactions of humans in an institutional environment, mainly that of human interaction and behavior in the workplace. For this final project we were to choose one of the listed approved movies or television shows to extract examples of either correct or incorrect Industrial and Organizational Psychological principles to reference and critique in our paper. The Office was the obvious choice. Its setting is that of a not so typical workplace where the employees often act as they should not, breaking many of the suggested behaviors defined in our text and engaging in behaviors that are often counter productive and even reach into harassment. The show is filmed as a mock documentary following the employees of the Scranton branch of the paper distribution company Dunder Mifflin. The manager of this branch often breaks social norms through his sheer awkwardness, total social incompetence or extremely large ego. All of the other characters of the show have similarly over exaggerated, and in some cases antagonistic; the individuals have personalities that often lead to morally gray situations or workplace uncomfortableness. For these and many other reasons, this show is the perfect medium to emphasize many of the concepts learned throughout our Industrial and Organizational Psychology class; nearly all of the concepts covered in our text are touched on by at least one of the episodes in The Office (though often in a manner that would be deemed incorrect or inappropriate).

In the workplace, productivity and success are often measured by getting things done. Because of this, performance is a very significant factor in the measure of the overall quality of a workplace. Performance measurement can either be done in a objective or subjective way, that is, either based on cold hard data (such as the number of paper sales by a particular employee during a particular quarter) or based on the performance reviewer’s feelings towards the person that is undergoing the performance review. In Season 2 episode 8 of the Office, the entire workforce across the company is undergoing performance reviews. At the very beginning of the episode we get a very clear idea of the type of performance review that will be preformed when Pam (the office Secretary and later salesperson) tells us “Last year my performance review started with Micheal asking me what my hopes and dreams were, and ended with him telling me he could bench press 190 pounds.” As we might expect from this TV show, the performance review to be preformed by the branch manager Micheal Scott will not be very sophisticated, in depth or based on any thing other than feeling. Throughout the episode when the reviews are preformed they are entirely subjective, those that the Micheal performs against his employees and even the ad-hoc performance review Micheal receives from the suggestion box. The problem with subjective performance ratings is that they are not accurate, “they suffer from biases and errors attributable to human judgment” (Spector 2017). These performance reviews could have been performed much more professionally using a method specifically designed to increase the accuracy of performance ratings such as The Behaviorally Anchored Rating Scale, Mixed Standard Scale or the Behavior Observation Scale. Additionally “feedback from multiple sources can be helpful for employees wishing to improve their performance” (Spector 2017). In this episode of the office, the only individual who received feedback from more than a single person was Micheal when he read notes from the suggestion box, mimicking a crude approximation of 360 degree feedback.

Closely related to job performance is Employee Motivation which can be directly influenced by Group and Team Dynamics as well as Goals for the group as a whole. Keeping employee motivation high can often be an area of much difficulty for managers. In season 8, episode 2 of the office Andy (who was once a salesman but has at this point become the branch manager) unknowingly takes advantage of a IO Psychology motivation theory to motivate his subordinates to meet the goals set by Andy’s boss (more on this in the next section). Andy offers his employees the possibility of a set of rewards for increased job performance, a classic incentive offer that is known as Expectancy Theory. Initially he was offering many un-attractive possible awards to his employees for their increased performance: after they all displayed they were disinterested in his proposed rewards, he upped the ante. This was a good tactic, because as the text tells us: if employees “do not want the contingent rewards, they will not be motivated to perform a behavior” (Spector 2017, pg 108). Andy is able to quickly determine what his employees want as a reward by simply asking them; this results in him promising to get a tattoo on his butt if they can attain 5000 points in his point reward system. As soon as the reward is established, the employees of the company go into overdrive working towards this goal. If we were to use something like Vroom’s Theory to assess the level of motivation by assigning it a particular value (Vroom, 1964), we would see a very high number as the output of our equation; Vroom’s theory assigns numerical values and considers three variables: the subjective probability that the given employee has the ability to achieve the task, the personal value of the reward to that individual and the subjective probability that the behavior will actually result in that reward (Vroom, 1964). All of these values are very high (much to our surprise in some regards). Apparently all of the employee’s had the ability to perform their job with extreme efficiency, the value of the reward is almost beyond the assignment of value for everyone in the office and the probability that the outcome of their behavior will result in the desired reward was nearly 100%. Regarding the probability of actually receiving the reward, Jim (a salesman and the office prankster), puts it best when Andy says “I think people thought I was kidding when I said that”, to which Jim replies “nah you definitely weren’t kidding, that came across loud and clear.” This shows that the perceived probability of the reward as an outcome for the employee’s behavior was 100%.

Goal setting is a very popular method of motivation in the work place; nearly all places of employment involve some sort of goal setting. The goals of individuals or groups can be closely linked with the behaviors of that individual or group and for this reason they are known as proximal constructs. Goals can either be very specific, or very open ended. In the case of the episode the incentive (the same episode covered in the last paragraph), the goal given by Robert California (Andy’s boss, the CEO of the company) to Andy was very specific: “Last quarter we saw four percent growth; double it.” The objective given to Andy is very clear, and the perceived fear of losing his job proves to be a very strong incentive for Andy. The resulting behavior from the Scranton Branch Manger is extremely performance oriented, rather than learning oriented; he begins to focus his efforts on enhancing the performance of his workforce in able to reach Robert’s goals. He does this with the incentive detailed in the previous paragraph. This is likely because the incentive is something Andy inherently links with achieving the goal, probably because it is a tried and true method dating back to Pavlov and his dog. From Robert’s point of view, using this goal to incentivize Andy was a great idea. With a clear defined task and the vague threat of termination, Andy had no choice but to work hard and come up with some way increasing growth and reaching the goal Robert set forth.

Safely in the workplace is a very important consideration – we go to work to be productive, not to get hurt. Not only are workplace accidents harmful for the employee themselves, but they are also significantly costly to the organization. More than $250 billion is spent annually in the United states (Leigh, 2011), much of which is paid by the employers and insurance companies of the organization (Spector, 2017). According to the text, “a major difficulty in preventing workplace accidents is getting the cooperation of employees in using the appropriate safety equipment and engaging in safe behaviors” (Spector, 2017). This is exactly the problem that befell upon Dwight in Season 2 episode 4 of the Office, The Fire. In this episode Dwight, who is a salesman and the Fire Marshall for his floor of the building, is attempting to get his coworkers in the office to treat seriously the idea of a fire and acknowledge the importance of being prepared for it. No one listens to him, so he takes it upon himself to ignite the threat of a real fire to get everyone to understand the importance of Fire Safety training (and possibly also to help boost his ego). Dwight proceeds to light a fire in a waste paper basket in the adjacent room, and smoke soon begins to fill the office. After the fire is noticed by Pam, Dwight attempts to lead everyone to safety but a panic ensues as he is not able to lead the mob in an organized matter. This is likely because the office was unprepared, and had not gone through safety training as they should have. The safety climate, that is the shared perception by employees that safety devices and precautions are important, of the office was no where nearly as high as it should have been . Having rigorous training over the dangers of a fire and the expected behavior of the employees should one erupt would likely have lead to significantly more organized and safer behavior when Dwight lit his fire (though not many people in the office would have likely taken training very seriously).

Many of the situations that occur in the office could easily be considered as harassment. Micheal is a common perpetrator of harassment, though it is often in the form of ethnic harassment, he has also conducted sexual harassment on many occasions. He often makes derogatory comments, ethnic jokes and excludes target individuals from particular employee interactions or events based on their race; these are the three components that the book lists to define ethic harassment (Spector, 2017, pg 309). In Season 1 episode 5 of The Office, Micheal challenges the employees in manufacturing to a game of basket ball. When constructing his team, he makes many assumptions about how good some of his employees would preform, completely based on their race. Right off the bat, he walks in to the office and says “Lets put together a starting line up. Stanley.. Of Course,” assuming that Stanley would be very good at basketball because he is black (an assumption that proves to be incorrect). And then when Oscar offers to play, Micheal responds with “I can use your talents come baseball season” which obviously he says because Oscar is Hispanic. Both of these comments are derogatory and insulting towards his employees and completely based on stereotypes of the employee’s races. There are numerous other examples of this behavior, and this is just one of the ways in which Michael abuses his power as manager.

Sexual Harassment is also very common throughout the series. In the first episode when Micheal introduces the secretary, Pam, he says “If you think she’s cute now, you should have seen her a few years ago.” The text tells us that “an isolated comment or simple request for a date is not harassment,” (Spector, 2017) but one can assume that this is not an isolated incident. The next example is an even stronger example of sexual harassment (though it did not come from the mouth of Micheal). Jan, Micheal’s boss at this point in the series, comes into the office to discuss the possibility of downsizing the branch to Micheal. During this meeting, the phone rings and Micheal answers it on speaker, allowing both of the other attendees to the meeting (Pam and Jan) to listen. The man who is on the other end of the phone begins talking about Jan and says “I’ve been meaning to ask her one question, does the carpet match the drapes.” This comment is very clearly unwanted on Jan’s part; not only that but the comment could have created a hostile and intimidating work environment for Jan. Watching this I am surprised that the employee was not reprimanded and the entire experience was shrugged off so significantly, it is likely because this is a show and blown out of proportion. Though the text does tell us that “for supervisors there may be a higher threshold for perceiving their behavior as sexual harassment,” which could explain Jan’s behavior, or lack there of.

Knowledge of Industrial and Organizational Psychology principles and the ability to apply them to the workplace can lead to being an individual not only more satisfied with one’s work experience but also more productive and attractive as an employee. The Office serves as a prime example of what not to do in the workplace, it violates many of the suggestions given by our text. The staff at Dunder Mifflin neglects and persecutes its Human Resources department and somehow manages to maintain productivity and health within the workplace. As with most television shows, the situations presented in The Office are often unrealistic, usually in the way in which they are resolved. Though even with this considered, the office has merit. It does expose many awkward and uncomfortable situations that are bound to come to rise in any workplace. For this reason, this show is the perfect medium to emphasize many of the concepts learned throughout our Industrial and Organizational Psychology class; nearly all of the concepts covered in our text are touched on by at least one of the episodes in The Office, even though they were not mentioned in this paper.

References

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