THEORIES OF MOTIVATION

When it comes to motivation models, there are normally one or two 'classics' that immediately spring to mind: Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, for example, or Herzberg's Motivation-Hygiene Theory (these will be explored on your programme). In reality, however, a whole raft of psychologists and social scientists were at work throughout the 20th century, developing their own theories of motivation. Although lesser known than the ideas of Maslow and his contemporaries, these models provide valuable insights into what motivates people at work. Here we take a look at some of these theories and their implications for leaders and managers.

The Hawthorne Effect

In the 1920s and 1930s, Harvard professor George Elton Mayo conducted a series of experiments at the Hawthorne Western Electric Plant in Illinois. He began by investigating the effect of light on employee productivity, but soon started to experiment with other variables. In one study, a small group of employees was asked to take part in a special experiment. They were asked to work as a team, in a separate room away from the main factory, with the support of a supervisor. Before the experiment started, the subjects were allowed to select a small number of co-workers to join their team. Over the course of the experiment, the supervisor
consulted the participants about their working conditions and subsequently made a number of changes, such as introducing breaks, free meals and shorter working hours.

The Hawthorne Western Electrical Plant c.1920

While many of these changes had a positive impact on productivity, the experimenters found that there was no direct correlation between the type of change introduced and the workers’ output. This led them to attribute changes they saw in productivity (including a massive improvement when the factory workers returned to their original working conditions) to the fact that the subjects knew they were being studied and had been made to feel ‘special’ by the attentions of the experimenters and their supervisor.

In the years that have passed, the results of Mayo’s Hawthorne experiments have been subject to a good deal of debate. Parsons in particular (1974) argued that the workers’ skills might have improved naturally over the course of the experiment, or as a result of the feedback they received from their supervisor. [1] Nonetheless, the Hawthorne Effect and its overarching principles continue to provide a useful reference for managers seeking to understand employee motivation.

Mayo’s experiments indicate that supervising employees in a supportive manner can have a positive impact on productivity. While it’s important to avoid a ‘micro-managing’ approach, the Hawthorne Effect indicates that an entirely ‘hands-off’ management style might not necessarily be effective either. Instead, a balance needs to be struck between offering employees support and guidance, and affording them an appropriate degree of autonomy. In addition, the workers in Mayo’s experiment had been allowed to work in a far more social, team-based environment than that of the main factory, with a
generally positive impact on productivity. This highlights the value of fostering a team-based culture and encouraging team members to build effective working relationships with their managers and with each other.

Equity Theory

Equity theory, proposed by psychologist John Stacey Adams in 1963, is based on the principle that employees are motivated when they feel their ‘inputs’ at work are matched by the ‘outputs’ they receive or experience. [2] Adams defines these inputs and outputs as follows:
Equity Theory states that employees are most likely to be motivated when they perceive their inputs and outputs to be in equal ratio. If employees feel that their inputs outweigh their outputs, however, they experience what Adams calls ‘negative tension’ and are likely to become disgruntled, unproductive and unmotivated. According to Adams these employees are often driven to address the balance themselves. This might mean finding ways of increasing their outputs (e.g. seeking a promotion or a salary increase), reducing their inputs (e.g. putting in less effort) or even seeking new employment altogether.

Adams’ theory highlights the importance of fairness in the workplace and the potential impact it can have on employee motivation and staff retention. It also indicates that while employees expect something back for the effort they put in, this doesn’t necessarily have to be a financial reward. Responsibility, reputation and respect, among others, are all highly valued non-financial outputs that can help to create the required balance for employee motivation to thrive.

As a leader or manager, it’s important to ensure, wherever possible, that employees’ inputs are matched by their outputs. It is also vital to know how employees perceive their inputs and outputs to be balanced. You may wish to speak to
team members about this in your one-to-one meetings, using Adams’ inputs and outputs to structure your conversation.

**Expectancy Theory**

Developed by management expert Victor Vroom in 1964, Expectancy Theory seeks to explain why individuals are motivated to choose certain behaviours over others. [3] Vroom proposes that there are three governing variables at work here:

1. **Expectancy** – the extent to which a behaviour or action is anticipated to help the individual achieve a certain performance outcome (i.e. will doing this help me achieve my goal?)

2. **Instrumentality** – the anticipated reward (financial or otherwise) associated with the behaviour or action (i.e. if I do this, how will I be rewarded?)

3. **Valence** – the value of the anticipated reward to the individual

According to Vroom, individuals use these variables to identify the ‘motivational force’ (MF) of each potential behaviour or action, and then select the option with the highest MF value. Vroom devised the following equation to illustrate how MF is calculated:

$$\text{Motivational Force (MF)} = \text{Expectancy} \times \text{Instrumentality} \times \text{Valence}$$

Expectancy Theory helps us to understand the unseen forces that drive people to choose certain behaviours or actions. Like Adams’ Equity Theory, the guiding principle is that people are motivated by the prospect of a return on their efforts, whether this is a desired performance outcome, financial reward (such as a salary increase or bonus) or something less tangible, such as reputation and status.

While employees are unlikely to knowingly calculate the motivational force behind each course of action, Vroom’s equation can still prove a useful tool in the workplace. It suggests that managers need to strengthen the motivational force of the behaviours and actions they advocate. This involves articulating a clear performance outcome for
the employee in question (i.e. doing X will help you to achieve Y), ensuring the reward is something the individual will value, and making the nature of that reward explicit.

Goal-Setting Theory

Goal-Setting Theory is based on the principle that human behaviour is driven by the desire to achieve goals. Developed by psychologist Edwin Locke in 1968, the theory states that employee performance is more likely to improve when goals are put in place. [1] The theory states that goals should be challenging – but achievable – and specific; vague or ‘easy’ goals will do little to boost performance. According to Locke, employees are most likely to achieve goals they set themselves, rather than those that are set for them by their manager. Feedback is also central to Locke’s theory; individuals need to know how they have performed so they can set – and meet – their goals more effectively in the future.

Over the years, Locke’s ideas have been embraced by leaders and managers the world over. SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, time-bound) objectives are one of the best-known tools for defining individual and organisational objectives alike, and many organisations encourage employees to set their own goals as part of their performance management process. SMART will be something we explore in your programme.
Summary

Mayo, Adams, Vroom and Locke might not always be the first motivation theorists that spring to mind, but, just like their better-known contemporaries, such as Maslow and Herzberg, their models and ideas offer valuable insights into employee motivation. Mayo’s Hawthorne Effect suggests that a supportive, team-based environment and a caring supervisor or manager can have a positive impact on productivity and morale. Adams and Vroom, meanwhile, highlight the importance of fairness and remind us that people are generally more motivated when they feel their efforts are being rewarded in some way. Finally, Locke proposes that effective goal-setting holds the key to motivating employees. These models might not be the most famous, or widely taught, but they occupy a legitimate place in the field of motivation theory and continue to inform leaders and managers today.


