Public Service Employee Motivation

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Public Service Motivation Research Paper

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Abstract

Public service motivation is an area of research that varies as widely as the employees trying to be motivated. Knowing what your employees want is an integral part of effective motivation. Short of effective motivation, how does a leader know what methods to use in order to motivate the employees within the organization? Fiscal management must be taken into account because public service employees’ salaries and benefits are paid with tax revenue and the current economic environment has caused revenues to remain stagnant. Yet, employees still demand regular pay increases in order to maintain their lifestyles. So, how does a leader effectively manage these situations? Public service motivation (Bright, 2011) is one method that may be utilized to solve this dilemma. Public service motivation allows an employer to target individuals with a high predisposition to public service. The logic behind this theory is that employees who are attracted to public service work have a greater proclivity to remain on the job. Job satisfaction is one of the main areas which can increase retention rates and an area in which public leaders must focus their efforts. A management style that allows for a democratic approach, when possible, is one method a leader may employ to increase job satisfaction.

Leaders must set the example. That is, they must model the way and show their employees through direct action the standard they are expected to meet. Leaders must also develop their employees to become future leaders by coaching, counseling and teaching them how to excel in their chosen career field. Finally, leaders must ensure follower accountability. This can only be completed by holding employees accountable for their actions, and at the same time making sure the leader remains accountable for his. This confirms to all employees that a commitment to the organization and its overall mission is essential for success.
Introduction

The area of public service employee motivation is one that has always intrigued and somewhat frustrated me. Finding what motivates an employee is as diverse and difficult a task as can exist, I believe. The reason for this is due to the vast differences in individual personalities and individual expectations that people exhibit. Motivation is important to leaders at all levels, whether private business or public service, because employees are the people who make the business “go”. They are the ones who interact with the public by responding to criminal complaints, fire alarms and scheduling visits for those incarcerated. They are the doers, while the managers and/or leaders are the thinkers. Failure to get the employee base on board with the organization’s vision and mission is certain to meet with disastrous results. It is a leader’s responsibility to solicit and appeal to a common purpose and make the work interesting (Kouzes & Posner, 2002) in order to effectively recruit new employees, retain the employees he currently has, and train them to become future leaders of the organization.

I believe that in public service, more so than in private business, a leader’s preconceived notions of employees is paramount in the style and expectations he exhibits in his personal interactions. The reason for this is that public service employees have inherently higher job security components than do private sector employees (Caldwell, 1978). With entire state and federal agencies devoted to fighting for employment rights, a bureaucratic nature which is unparalleled in private business, and union involvement which now has more public employees in unions than ever before (Greenhouse, 2010), employees rightfully should be attracted to public service jobs. Nevertheless, does working in public service have all of the benefits it seems to possess? Unfortunately, the answer is “no”. In fact, research has shown that efforts to
recruit and retain young adults to replace retiring workers are not going well (Bright, 2008).
Inevitably, this will result in lower job satisfaction since employees who are not devoted to their work will leave their employment with increased frequency. The result will be higher turnover once the employee is able to find another job more suited to his liking. A cyclical pattern begins to emerge since the high turnover results in lower satisfaction from the workers who remain. They, in turn, look for other employment where they believe higher satisfaction is possible.

How do we break this cycle of motivation erosion? Measuring public service motivation is one way in which individuals with a pre-disposition to public service work may be targeted as those best suited for this career (Perry & Wise, 1990). It would stand to reason that these individuals’ needs are directly in line with the public service work, so they have a greater chance of becoming tenured employees who can bolster the organization’s turnover reduction efforts. After all, according to Bright (2008), employees display higher levels of job satisfaction, and lower levels of job turnover, when their needs are met. Matheson (2012) carries this notion further with his assertion that work motivation can be divided into two streams: psychological, which focuses on employee characteristics, and sociological, which focuses on the organizational environment. Matheson (2012) asks if motivation is a biologically based factor or if it is a product of the social environment. Frankly, I would argue it is both and the amounts of each can vary widely based upon the individual in question. Whether it is for an ethical reason, a sense of duty, or a drive to help others and society in general, Bright (2011) surmises an individual may have “a predisposition to respond to motives that are grounded uniquely in public organizations and institutions” (p. 12). By ascertaining whether public service motivation can make an individual commit to certain job choices in public service, then testing for these traits, can determine which individuals will have the most probable success in their chosen job. Public
service administrators should take note that individuals with high levels of public service motivation are attracted to public careers in general and they should communicate the fact that all public occupations have a service connection towards the betterment of society (Bright, 2011). This should allow for all individuals who wish to serve others to fulfill their public service career desire.

I believe that employee motivation is essentially the same as making a cake. As long as you have the basic ingredients - flour, eggs, sugar and oil, how you alter the cake to your specific taste is up to you. Employee motivation, like a cake mix, can vary depending on the taste and texture desired. As long as all of the basic ingredients are present - job satisfaction, sufficient pay, social relationships and meaningful work, then the motivational methods can be fine-tuned. As long as you have all of the required elements, you can change them to your (or your workers’) liking. However, finding the leader who can make a cake that everyone likes is extremely difficult. Lancaster (1986) summed up this point beautifully when she stated that studies show on average, most employees work at only two-thirds of their capacity. Creating an environment that inspires employees to work at their full capacity is a challenge to leaders and managers everywhere.

Leaders who wish to see changes within the work environment must include diversity, not only among their employees, but also among their personal experiences (Hansen, 2011). Kouzes & Posner (2002, p.261) confirm this assertion with their second lesson with regards to sources of power that “The most well-connected individuals are those who have played the greatest variety of roles in their lives.” Leaders with diverse backgrounds who do not type cast themselves as a one industry wonder are capable of leading a wide array of organizations, both public and private. This diversity of leadership will allow for, according to Hersey, Blanchard &
Johnson, (2001) legitimate power, due to past leadership experiences, and information power, due to experience leading in turbulent times which any leader with a diverse background is sure to experience. According to Jackson-Palmer (2010, p ii) “To lead during turbulent times may call for excellent leadership, which may cause a paradigmatic shift from hierarchical forms of leadership to leadership that transforms the leader, the follower and the organization.” Leaders who have the wherewithal to survive turbulent times have a diversity of knowledge which can be a motivator of others (Cifuentes, 2013).

Punishment is a natural part of public service, I believe, due to its inherent feeling of job security which sometimes can be taken advantage of by employees (Orozco, 2011). However, proactive study should be made for problems that reoccur within the organization. A leader who fails to identify reoccurring follower disciplinary issues may be neglecting a responsibility to clarify policy or procedural issues that may be at the root cause. This is outlined by Hersey, et al., (2001) in their three competencies of leadership. These competencies state a leader must diagnose the situation to be influenced, adapt their behavior to meet the situation, and communicate in a way that others can understand and accept. Providing clear and effective communication to employees is a clear cut strategy to motivation (Schmitz, 2011).

A leader’s pre-conceived notions of employees can have either a positive or negative effect on the style of motivation utilized. Theories X and Y, created by Douglas McGregor, have diverging perceptions of employees and can have a profound effect on the style of motivation a leader employs. Theory X states that employees are inherently lazy and must be closely controlled and supervised (Hersey, et al., 2001). Theory Y, assumes that employees are competent and capable of performing their jobs adequately. I would argue one cannot be a hybrid Theory X and Theory Y simultaneously. According to Turner (1988), employees perform
best when they feel they are in control; not when they feel controlled. Theory X controls employees. Theory Y allows them to feel in control. Further, Turner (1988) also contends that the best organizations have a team spirit that encourages employees to be the best and to commit themselves to the team and the mission.

Leadership that trusts employees is paramount; however, only those employees who have earned that trust should it be freely given. Sandhya and Kumar (2011) state the top organizations are on the top because of their care for their employees. Most employees, from my experience, want to be trusted. Leaders who follow Sandaya and Kumar’s (2011) strategy of empowering an employee will no doubt give the employee a sense of achievement. To further this point, leadership has a profound affect on organizational culture (Schein, 1992) so any leader who exhibits superior service to the public and develops a strong sense of professionalism and pride in the organization will be not only successful, but effective. Allowing the involvement of employees in the organizational decision making processes can show employees that they can make mistakes without fear of reprisal. A culture which is free of fear can only serve to motivate employees (Elisha-Sauders, 2009).

Ensuring the morale and welfare of public service employees is one of the most important aspects of public service leadership, in my opinion. Moral leadership requires an ethical construct (Kouzes & Posner, 2002) that should never be taken lightly. Personal soul searching is an obligation for leaders, and any leader who does not study his industry or his peers is doing his organization a disservice. Turner (1988) reinforces this idea by stating that before you can inspire others, you must inspire yourself and leaders who embody a commitment to reinforce a personal optimistic notion will positively influence the way they view everything.
There are significant implications for prospective leaders with regards to the area of public service employee motivation. Additionally, prospective leaders would be well served to study the implications of ineffective motivation of public service employees. Studies have shown that low morale among employees is a major cause of burnout and negative job satisfaction (Bright, 2008). The costs associated with recruiting and training new personnel are said to be $7,525 per employee (Lambert & Hogan, 2009), and high turnover among staff further decreases the typical low morale characteristically observed in an organization. In order to provide for effective motivation, leaders must remember the three C’s as stated by Turner (1988): commitment, change and control. First, leaders who wish to motivate their public service employees must solicit a commitment by their employees to doing their jobs efficiently. Second, is the notion that leaders must be adept at portraying to their employees that the process of change is a challenge which should be embraced. Finally, leaders must make certain that employees feel in control of their job, not that the job controls them. Sandhya and Kumar (2011) take this notion one-step further by stating that employees need to feel in control of their job both physically and psychologically.

When an employee leaves his job, the relationships built by the employee are suffered and lost according to Sandhya and Kumar (2011). Turnover leads to more turnovers because the loss of the employee is felt throughout the organization as coworkers are left to pick up the slack. Goodwill within an organization plays an important part in employee retention and recruiting. By maintaining high employee retention rates, leaders can motivate potential recruits by showing a secure environment (Sandhya & Kumar, 2011). Time lost on finding a new employee, training him, and then hoping he can attain the efficiency of the employee who left is cause for concern. One way to alleviate this is to make employees feel like they belong and that they are an integral
part of the workplace. Leaders must study and refine strategies that reduce anxiety, insecurity and stress (Sandhya & Kumar, 2011) in order to improve retention and productivity.

In today’s public service culture whose slogan should be “doing more with less,” managing reduced revenues and keeping open employment positions unfilled to reduce personnel costs are a constant throughout the industry. Public service administrators must seek out the highly qualified, if not the moderately over qualified, to fill the open positions within their organization.

Works Cited


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