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Importance of Employee Motivation Across Different Organizational Landscapes

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Importance of Employee Motivation Across Different Organizational Landscapes

In the United States and in most countries you must work to survive. However, as human beings what motivates us to work? For most individuals work is a means to cover basic necessities like food, shelter, clothing, among other essentials. For others work is about fulfilling one's passion. In most cases, societies shape their citizens to strive for survival, with this influence being more prevalent for some groups rather than others. For instance, growing up in the United States, almost everyone has to succumb to economic pressures. Upholding these values enforce an unhealthy work-life balance. Our society has become corrupted by capitalism, therefore as a unit our choices become limited. This distinction became evident after spending a few months volunteering/working for a small non-profit organization in Barcelona, Spain. As an American, exploring Spanish culture, cultural differences became apparent when assessing their priorities. Spain as a whole values individual wellbeing and they have boundaries when it comes to prioritizing the self rather than work. Motivation is the driving force behind our behaviors, but a lot of outside factors impact our outcomes. In this case, motivation can be analyzed in a variety of ways. This will be done with a cross-cultural analysis of work culture in the United States and Spain, using personal experiences, and research to establish the findings. Considering Maslow's hierarchy of needs, an individual working in the U.S. is held back from moving up the pyramid because of the societal standard that prioritizes an economic output over the individual's wellbeing. In contrast, the culture surrounding the Spanish workforce ensures and even encourages the individual's basic needs of survival which makes room for the individual to move up on the pyramid to reach for more self-actualization motivations.

Motivation and Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

Motivation can be defined as our instinct to accomplish a specific goal. Across cultures motivation differs based on the environment we are exposed to. Maslow's hierarchy of needs establishes that as individuals, we all have different needs that must be satisfied. In a work setting we typically work to receive some kind of compensation. The reward can be monetary or it can be the feeling of fulfillment. This concept is necessary to make a cross-cultural comparison of work motivation across employees in the United States and in Spain. Maslow's hierarchy of needs is a motivational theory that encompasses a five-tier model of human needs, often depicted as hierarchical levels within a pyramid. The intricacy of this theory can contribute to identifying major differences in both countries and help identify best practices to foster a positive space to work. The five levels include physiological, safety, love/belonging, esteem, and self-actualization. As seen on Figure 1, the pyramid begins with physiological needs, including biological needs like food, water, shelter, etc.. Then follows safety and security, which encompasses health, employment, property, family, and social ability. There is also love and belonging, which houses the innate nature for friendship, family, intimacy, and sense of connection. Next, on the pyramid, is the importance of self-esteem, with confidence, achievement, respect for others, and the need to be a unique individual. Self-actualization is located at the top of the pyramid, with the importance of morality, creativity, acceptance, and experiencing meaning and purpose. It is perceived that most people don't often reach it, due to interference from outside factors that prevent ultimate progression. (Mclead, 2023).

U.S. Normalization of Burnout in the Workplace

Overworking has been normalized in the United States, with companies prioritizing the economic output over employee wellness. I experienced this first-hand while working for a real estate company in the U.S. My co-workers and I shared mutual feelings about the constant

pressures we encountered in our workplace. There was anxiety tied to every work project, with employees being held to the highest standard at all times. This company instituted employee follow-ups, where supervisors fill out a form detailing their employee's work performance, etc... This is a common occurrence for businesses to evaluate the work ethic of employees. However, I believe this promotes feelings of anxiety and insecurities that arise from workplace pressures. It became apparent that these expectations were creating an emotional dent in workplace morale. In a society that values productivity over anything else it is easy to get caught up in this endemic cycle of overworking ourselves. Feeling emotional exhaustion there is the possibility of experiencing "depersonalization and feelings of low personal accomplishment..." (MacDonald, et al., 2014, p. 33). We were all on our way to experiencing some kind of "Burnout [which] results from chronic work-related stress. People who are burned out are emotionally drained and feel negative and detached from work, which leads to decreased performance, inhibited creativity and innovation, workplace accidents, absenteeism, and physical and mental illnesses. Burnout is widespread, pernicious, and costly to human life, firm profits, and society." (Gabriel and Aguinis, 2022, p. 183). These are the values that have been ingrained in our society, and after years of following this model it will be a difficult thing to break out from. Burnout is praised in the United States context because that means that you are working hard, which is an expectation everywhere. Dealing with excessive work projects causes more harm than good for employees.

Spain's Holistic Approach to Work

Spaniards establish clear boundaries to maintain a healthy balance between their work-life and personal lives. Contrary to the U.S. approach of anything work-related being indispensable, Spain has a different outlook on this system. The culture is centered around doing

things for yourself and securing your happiness. For the most part this applies to what Spaniards choose to do for a living. Regarding Maslow's hierarchy of needs, Spain is a country that encourages their citizens to strive for self-actualization. I experienced this while I spent some time living in Barcelona, Spain. I volunteered at a small non-profit organization that was composed mainly of volunteers. During this time I was able to see the importance of seeing and feeling purpose in the things I was doing. There was more to life than work, sleep, and repeat. It was an instant change that allowed me to experience a different perspective to work. "Voluntary work might also serve gainful employment, e.g., if biographically or professionally relevant qualifications and skills are to be acquired through voluntary work...It is conceivable that volunteer work is to be understood in a compensatory way to gainful employment: Some people are so satisfied with and grateful for their work (and their lives) that they want to give something back to society through voluntary work." (Güntert, et al., 2022, p. 2). Overall, this is something that I witnessed in Spain. A large majority of people appeared content with their professional careers, and set a strong emphasis on giving back and volunteering.

While working for the non-profit organization, I was asked about my life in the United States. I told my peers that most of my life revolved around work. This sparked the realization that Spaniards are allowed to experience purpose, meaning, and inner potential, because the culture allows for it. The following are some of the determinants Spaniards focus on when choosing how to spend time at work and outside of work. "Significance Means the "perceived impact of personal action, or non-action." Purpose refers to the "availability of a direction, serving as a compass when it comes to making decisions and choosing goals." Coherence describes a "sense of comprehensibility and consistency." Belonging means "perceiving oneself as part of something larger than the self, as having a place in this world.'" (Güntert, et al., 2022,

p. 6). These are some of the few key factors that give us insight into the motivators that drive Spaniards, and how they differ to U.S. standards. My observations at the non-profit in Barcelona are indicators that most of my peers were volunteering their time and efforts to help the surrounding community because they genuinely wanted to give back without expecting anything in return. This is a different experience to what I have encountered living in the United States.

Cultural Analysis of Work Environments

Considering the implications of Maslow's hierarchy of needs, it is evident that the lower needs on the pyramid are the focus for U.S. culture. Dealing with workplace pressures leaves little room for the higher level needs. People are concerned about how their work performance will impact their paycheck. "The undermining message to an even broader audience, including the claim that "pay-for-performance [PFP]...usually doesn't work and often causes harm" (Pink 2009, p. 9) and that one of the "deadly flaws" of PFP is that it "can extinguish intrinsic motivation" (Pink 2009, p. 57). Thus, the idea that PFP does not work, or is even harmful (e.g., to intrinsic motivation and creativity), has been widely communicated." (Gerhart and Fang, 2015, p. 491). We are confined to seek a paycheck and not truly consider whether we are passionate about our job. When I worked for the real estate company my pay depended on my performance. My motivation was to work at least forty hours a week, to earn a full-time employee salary. I was concerned about making enough money to cover my basic living expenses, I was not thinking about whether I enjoyed my job or not. Employee motivation encompasses more than just encouraging employees to receive a paycheck. Pay for performance models are harmful because they desensitize employees, and program them to only be concerned about meeting their lower needs like securing food, shelter, and maintaining their employment.

On the contrary, Spain allows for a more versatile lifestyle that hones in on values like being in touch with a deeper sense of self. Spaniards are able to participate in meaningful activities that provide positive contributions to society. The non-profit organization I worked for is a testament to this statement. The volunteers did not receive any monetary compensation for their work, but they remained consistent with coming into work. “The main resource we invest in volunteer work is our time, and this, unlike money or reputation, is in principle non-renewable. Secondly, volunteer work is deeply social. Bailey et al. (2019) call this a paradox of meaningful work: One must be with others to get to oneself: “meaningfulness arises in the context of self-fulfillment and self-actualization, yet it is dependent on the ‘other’ for its realization.” (Güntert, et al., 2022, p. 6). Their motivation is tied to the meaning of their work. As volunteers, we were not subjected to overbearing evaluations from supervisors, and teamwork was heavily encouraged. The work environment is on a different spectrum. These cultural differences between work environments point out key factors that must be evaluated in order to create positive conditions for employees and volunteers to prosper.

Importance of Workplace Wellness to Allow for Self-Actualization

Workplace wellness is critical to boost and maintain employee morale whether it is a for-profit or non-profit entity. Curating job satisfaction is a starting point to ensure the wellbeing of employees. “Job satisfaction is an employee’s level of positive emotional orientation toward their job (Price, 1997), or “the feelings a worker has about his [or her] job” (Smith, Kendall, & Hulin, 1996, p. 6). Job satisfaction is, generally, the overall sentiment that one has for their job... [and it is a] strong predictor of productivity.” (MacDonald, et al., 2014, p. 33). When employees/volunteers are in a positive setting they are more likely to be engaged with the outcome of their work and the mission of the institution they are a part of. Maslow’s hierarchy of

needs establishes the lower level needs as being the most essential. However, when the higher level needs are met, the individual is more likely to be at ease.

Employee motivation is important in assessing job satisfaction. Efficiently supporting employees and volunteers must be a top priority for all organizations. “Companies without systems to support the wellbeing of their employees have higher turnover, lower productivity, and higher healthcare costs, according to the American Psychological Association (APA). In high-pressure firms, healthcare costs are 50 % greater than at other organizations. Workplace stress is estimated to cost the U.S. economy more than \$500 billion dollars, and each year, 550 million work days are lost due to stress on the job. Another study by the APA claims that burned-out employees are 2.6 times as likely to be actively seeking a different job, 63% more likely to take a sick day, and 23% more likely to visit the emergency room.” (Moss, 2019, p.3). If the adequate support is not provided for employees or volunteers it can cause detrimental effects. There is a direct correlation between workplace stressors and the health of employees. Aside from valuing productivity and economic output the health and safety of employees must be a top priority.

Leadership Styles in Relation to Employee Motivation

Leadership styles play a significant role in workplace engagement for employees. The third tier of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs focuses on esteem needs (Figure 1). This level highlights the human need for achievement, accomplishment, and dignity. The time I spent working in the United States and Barcelona, I observed that both workplace settings needed to establish better communication channels with their employees. To maintain employee satisfaction we must feel a part of the entity. Leadership should not be centered around giving orders. “First, decision authority is often limited to a few managers, and centralized

communication slows decision-making processes as the result of a limited exchange of information (Bunderson 2003; Song and Thieme 2006). Second, decision processes may become less transparent, undermining the employees' trust in the organization (Adler 2001; Tsai 2002). Third, both centralized communications and less transparency reduce employee motivation to see the potential value of innovation and change (Birkinshaw et al. 2008; Engelen 2010).” (Janka, et al., 2019 p.1365). Employees deserve the respect to be taken into account in all aspects of their work. If there are discrepancies between management and employees, productivity will be impacted along with workers feeling left out.

Exactly, what role does leadership play in characterizing employee behavior, motivation, and output? From my experience working in both countries the praise given to employees was generalized for the most part. It is necessary for people in leadership positions to communicate to their subordinates that they are doing a good job. For instance, while working in the U.S. the feedback received from our supervisors was given through our work performance assessments every three months, but there was no feedback in between. This caused anxiety among employees. We did not know if we were in good or bad standing with the company. In Spain volunteer assessment was somewhat different. They had a more independent model where there was little feedback given. As volunteers, we knew we were working and completing the tasks we were assigned, but we had no idea if we needed to improve anything. If we received feedback, which was rare, it was directed to the team as a whole and not individualized. In both settings there needed to be an adjustment with the acknowledgement to employees. Maslow's hierarchy of needs focuses on esteem needs, which are necessary factors needed to complete the third tier in the pyramid.

Recommendations

Understanding the intricacies of workplace dynamics is imperative to support employee motivation. With sufficing the needs of employees they will be more likely to reach their full potential. Maslow's hierarchy of needs establishes key factors when it comes to unlocking basic human needs. In a work setting these needs must continue to be met. The United States and Spain both have differing values when it comes to employee motivation. However, there must be further investigation into the normalization of harmful habits in the U.S. to upkeep production quotas. In the U.S. we must take a step back from spreading ourselves too thin and acting like it is normal. "Neuroscientific research provides insights into why multitasking is problematic. The prefrontal cortex, responsible for executive functions, plays a crucial role in switching between tasks (Miller & Cohen, 2001). When individuals switch tasks, there is a "switch cost" at the neurological level, involving reconfiguration of neural networks, which takes time and cognitive resources. Furthermore, multitasking has been shown to increase the production of the stress hormone cortisol, as well as adrenaline, which can overstimulate the brain and hinder performance (Arnsten, 2009)." (Roberts, 2023). When we force ourselves to focus on a multitude of things at once we are impacting our health in the long-run. Maslow's hierarchy of needs allows us to determine that as individuals we need more than work, eat, and sleep. Spain's more holistic approach to work is a step in the right direction. The layout of the culture allows Spaniards to thrive and do more with their spare time. Society motivates them to find meaning in the tasks they choose to complete, whether it looks like working or volunteering. Living this change drastically impacted my perspective of living in the United States. Why do we prioritize work over our own wellbeing? At the end of the day, we end up causing ourselves negative consequences. As a society we must evaluate our motivations, and make sure that we give ourselves the opportunity to reach our self-actualization motivations.

Conclusion

Empowering employees should be the ultimate goal. Motivation in employees impacts more than company output. Employees are human beings that deserve high quality treatment. Maslow's hierarchy of needs, allows us to see what constitutes human needs, and the importance of reaching self-actualization. This motivational theory brings to light prevalent issues that must be addressed. The United States must work to improve the quality of life for its people. It is unacceptable that most individuals only have time to focus on the lower needs of the pyramid. Although Spain and the United States have different societal values, we must attempt to create work environments that foster positive energy. At the end of the day we rely on people to carry out certain tasks in society to continue progression.

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Figure 1.

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs



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