

Comparison of Process Theories to Content Theories in Motivating Workforces

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Abstract

Motivation theories have been classified into process theory and content theory in the literature. The effectiveness of each of them has been dealt with only in the textbooks and they were not experimented to see their applicability in the real workplace environment. In this essay, to observe this sort of applicability we resort to well-known Working Stiff Workplace Diaries in order to find out how WSDs as a grass root type of employees' sentiment and morale assert which particular one of the two major motivation theories. The whole ten diaries supplied by the Weblab were taken into the experiment. The methodology we have taken is that we measured the affinity of each of diaries to the two categories of motivation theories, that is, process theory and content theory. As a result, WSDs are found to be supportive towards content theory more than towards process theory. This shows that content theory prevails over process theory in the real workplace environment. Thus it seems to me that the issue such as whether process theories are superior to content theories must be reviewed and judged for its validity against these sort of real-world stories on experiences of real-world workforces. Otherwise, the discussion of the issue might result in of no use, since there would be lack or short of real world evidences of vindication.

Keywords: motivation theory, content theory, process theory

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

This essay is about how employees are motivated with what sort of tools and with which direction we can devise. If we are supposed to be involved in a war, we can think of not only top-down approach of leadership exerted by a upper-level general commander but bottom-up group type approach of promulgating motivation of lower-level employees as well. Business

companies these days confronting a severe competition are not different from a situation of wars.

These days companies are focusing on finding out factors for driving motivation of employees high enough to induce workforce perform superbly in order to be survived under the environment of ever increasing competition. This is because not only managers of company but all the constituent members of company agree that the productivity of an organization will depend upon the performance of the employees. There is no doubt that the motivation is related to the performance and satisfaction, and this is why managers investigate motivation with keen interests. And this is also why motivation theories are dealt with very importantly among the various fundamental theories that are foundation of business organizational behavior.

Going up to the early days of development of motivation theories, they were classified into the three categories of satisfaction theory, incentive theories and intrinsic theories (Handy, C. (1993)). Many theories have appeared to explain various factors behind motivation. Past studies include needs-oriented analysis such as Existence Needs/Relatedness Needs/Growth Needs theory (Alderfer C. (1969)), Achievement Need/Affiliation Need/Power Need theory (McClelland, D. (1988)), Hygiene-Motivation Dual Factors theory (Herzberg F. (1964)), Reinforcement theory (Skinner, B. (1938)), Expectancy theory (Vroom, V., Porter, L., Lawler, E. (2005)), Equity theory (Adams, J. (1963)) and etc. Each category in sequence can be summarized to be the degree of productivity is dependent upon the degree of satisfaction of employees, 'carrot' policy such as provision of various types of incentive towards employees will eventually pay off and mankind weigh value and worthiness rather than expectation of rewards in terms of monetary means as man is intrinsically different from animals. Each of these three interpretations seems to be reasonable and valid. As the research development on motivation theories progressed, satisfaction theory and intrinsic theory were combined to develop the process theory and incentive theory and intrinsic theory were combined to forge the content theory, since there was an overlap between satisfaction theory and intrinsic theory and also between incentive theory and intrinsic theory.

In the literature, amongst canonical research works in process theories and content theories date back to the Expectation Theory (Lawler, E., Porter, L. (1967)) and the Need Hierarchy Theory (Maslow, A. (1943)), respectively. Whilst process theory is a sort of dynamic nature of theory that treats enterprise as a living creature continuously evolving by seeing a group of employees as an entity of single organism, content theory is a sort of static nature of theory that basically focuses on which factors most constitute the fundamental trigger of motivation. As a factor that triggers each individual employee can be different from each other, focus on how to prioritize various factors is the key in content theories. If we classify those two theories from the viewpoint of bottom-up or top-down, process theory tends to be bottom-up whereas content theory tends to be top-down.

Comparison between process theories and content theories is not easy as there has been only descriptive means of remarks with regard to relative differences between them and no attempts of comparison have been found in a way of reflecting real world workplace

situations. Thus, we in this essay will investigate to what extent and how they can be practically applied to real world environment in order to see their effectiveness or applicability to real workplace. As motivation theories related to elevate the degree of motivation toward work and attitude of Employees, including managers, are developed in the literature they are depicted in a way that the process theories such as Locke's Goal Theory (Locke E., Latham G. (2006)), which stress more weight to individuality rather than framework for motivation for general audience, are more advanced than the content theories such as Maslow's hierarchy of needs, which deals with standard procedures and regulation that can be applied to all the employees in the company. The history of development in various motivation theories turned out that way as Locke's theory was more recent than Maslow's theory. However, there are several evidences that we need to be cautious about this sort of claim. Many cases that happen in real-world workplace tells us that if process theories are solely applied with the neglect of content theories then drastically undesirable situations could be resulted as a consequence of losing general fundamental framework for motivating employees in the corporations.

Typical such cases can be found in the cases of loss of motivation in customer service call centre receptionist and in utility company worker in the Working Stiff Workplace Diaries, WSD for short (Weblab, <http://www.weblab.org/workingstiff>, also Valentino, D. (2014)). Those two cases vividly shows that without establishing solid foundation of work motivation on basis of the content theories in a company for a some finite number of years the application of process theory-based motivation framework could bring disasters of total collapse of morale in motivation as if the motivation framework is something like a pagoda built upon sands ground.

1.2 Motivation

It is not strange to indicate that the real workplace stories appeared in WSD are typically the showcase-window type of canonical examples of all the various motivation theories we can have encountered in the literature. They are vivid real world textbook type of examples of all sorts of motivations employees and managers may possibly take. WSD is especially valuable for any students or scholars who are interested in observation on organizational behaviors. WSD comprises of eleven different stories written by that many employees in various sectors of workplace, e.g., high-tech engineers or utility company temporary workers, workers confronting and experiencing merger and acquisition and etc. Although exact author of each story is hidden in the literature of WSD, artificial touches on original manuscripts are hardly found in the diaries to show the truth and trustworthiness of them. Thus it seems to me that the issue such as whether process theories are superior to content theories must be reviewed and judged for its validity against these sort of real-world stories on experiences of real-world workforces. Otherwise, the discussion of the issue might result in of no use, since there would be lack or short of real world evidences of vindication.

1.3 Objectives

The aim of this essay is to explore whether there are real world examples that could support for or contradict to the premise that process theories are in fact superior to content theories.

For this aim, the all the ten cases of reality work related stories appearing in WSD will be described first in a way of summarizing the key characteristic of story, and investigation will then be made to see if there would be any other significant and meaningful examples that are relevant to the issue in this essay. For this objective in mind, we selected stories of which a length of a story is longer than at least ten pages and as a result ten stories have been identified. Subsequently we investigated a document of more than one hundred pages long to analysis the applicability of process theories and content theories to real workplace situations.

2. Research Methodology

Thorough reading of Working Stiff Workplace Diaries took a couple of weeks time. We then qualitatively categorised each of diaries towards a specific one of drawers, either to process theory or content theory, to match the tendency of content of the diary.

Then the occasions of tendency towards either process theory or content theory is summed to find out the cumulative tendency. We then derived whether the whole stories in WSD mostly advocate to which side of theories, i.e. process theory approach or content theory approach.

3. Implication of Motivation Theories in Real-World Workplace

Analyses on the implication of two major categories of motivation theories will be attempted in this section on basis of the episodes in WSD.

3.1 Customer Service Call Centre Receptionist

This is definitely the most typical real-world example that lack of standard and general disciplines with regard to the descriptions of jobs in an enterprise could bring demotivation of subordinate employees, affected by mismanagement of managers. Thus, this case let us aware of the importance of content theories in real-world workplace.

3.2 High-Tech Technical Writer

This is the one in which content theories and process theories both are not applicable for motivating managers and their subordinate employees.

3.3 Utility Company's Temporary Worker in WSD

This is another example that illustrates the importance of existence of universal and general guidelines even under the circumstances of unfamiliarity like mergers and acquisitions.

3.4 New York City Secretary in WSD

This is the same category of context to the case of a receptionist at customer service call centre. Lack of standard for job descriptions for the job of secretary leads her confusion on where to focus in performing her temporary job.

3.5 Northwest Assistant in WSD

This is the one that raised alarm to managers about how much it is important for managers to exploit the promotion for motivation of their subordinates at the level of individual. The assistant in this episode finally quit her job and had to find her new job as a receptionist with

income much lower than her previous job. Thus, this case clearly shows that were process theories applied to the assistant in the episode then she might have not quit her job.

3.6 Midwest Middle School Teacher

This is the one that shows employees can be purely personally motivated by themselves regardless of circumstances, even discouraging, they might encounter in the course of performing their jobs. The teacher in this episode believes that teaching is her lifetime job. Thus, this case is the one that supports the importance of both content theories and process theories.

3.7 Minnesota Police Officer

This is just the replica of the case of Midwest middle school teacher in that police officer has personal complacency and satisfaction with his job.

3.8 Boston Café and Flower Shop Worker

This is the one that worker does not satisfy with her level of income and therefore decided to take a new job of private investigator although the new job is considered to be insecure.

3.9 Illinois Casino Worker

This is the one that worker never satisfies about his working environments but had to continue to stay loyal to his job with the satisfaction on the level of income.

3.10 New Orleans Bartender

This is considered to be just almost replica of the case of the flower shop worker above.

4. Lessons Observed From All the Cases in WSD

From the ten cases of episodes in WSD, only one example in which the Northwest Assistant is dealt with turned out to advocate the superiority of process theories over content theories. In contrast, there appears to be more number of cases that once universal and general guidelines are provided on basis of content theories the employees might have been averted from being demoted in their levels of motivation to a serious extent, as we can notice from the cases in Sections 2.1, 2.3 and 2.4. This indicates that in real world situation we rarely find cases in which process theories prevail over content theories although according to the literature such prevalence is presumably granted to be valid.

5. Absence of Universality and Generality in Job Descriptions in Enterprises

The most canonical example to sense the importance of content theories is that we are typically living in the days of 'No Standard Manuals' for the descriptions with regard to jobs in enterprises. If we note that most enterprises experience their failures in information system due to lack of well-predefined job descriptions, the establishment of common ground of conducting jobs or business processes is of utmost importance ahead of practicing motivation of some particular managers (Scott and Vessy, 2002: 45,4).

What matters most is that by not providing the precisely defined job descriptions the

employees just got lost about exactly where to find for materializing their basic motivations in performing their jobs. Subsequently this leads them to loss of finding the link between their jobs and the data they must deal with in conducting their jobs. This in turn leads to unexplainable cause and effect between them and the data construed in this way is far from finding any clue with regard to the issue of direct linkage between a particular part of business action or behavior to the data to which the action or behavior is connected. This sort of mismatch or mislinkage adversely bring anomaly in data design, and once anomaly is brought in that again brought another anomaly, thus a series of design anomalies consequently causes a substantial data inconsistency throughout the entire database in the enterprise. Inconsistency in turn causes unnecessary data redundancy, both syntactic and semantic, and the redundancy accumulated in this way causes the problem of data ‘obesity’, in which the ratio of redundancy becomes beyond control of database administrators in terms of data retrieval time and data quality integrity. Therefore, the enterprise information system is judged failed as it turns out to be unable to meet quick enough access time and correctness of data, answered for the queries raised toward it.

Furthermore, if we note that investment of some tens of millions of dollars is normally exercised for the upgrade of information systems in the large organizations every three to five years, the persistent lack of such a standard job descriptions for all the subordinate employees brings a significant degree of waste of budgets in enterprises. It is reported that some 85 percent of milestone level of major information systems such as customer relationship management subsystem fail and its background reason of failure is never different from the practice of persistent lack of business descriptions (Bygstad, 2003:16,4). This suggests the application of content theories must come first at enterprise-wide level ahead of application of process theories, as an addendum for especially instigating enhancement of some particular employees or managers, for successful operations of enterprises.

6. Limitations of Process

If process theories were to apply to the staff or employees in real-world business organization, it is suited to high-level managers or a few lead employees as it mainly addresses motivation at the level of individuality rather than at the level of establishing an organization-wide common ground of motivation in general. It is crucial to note that it has revealed that the all the players in Leicester City were motivated to win their matches by deeply engaging themselves with various tactics that the team will take for every match with the common software tool provided on the platform of iPads. This clearly advocates the theories in which most of the team members must have benefited from content theories rather than process theories.

7. Conclusions

It seems that probably finding real world cases in which process theories prevail over content theories will not be easy. From the observations made in this essay, it would be fair to say that rather than the issue of superiority between those two approaches it might be crucial to investigate to see whether there would be some precedence relationship between those two categories of theories. What has been found in this dissertation is that, although process

theories seem to be a paradigm of more advancement than content theories, the truth in real world not turned out that way.

Although the practice of elevating the level of motivation for employees at the level of managers is considered to be more crucial than the corporate-level motivation of entire organization, the lack of framework for business job processes could lead to serious degradation of level of motivation for entire population of subordinates. We have observed from so many cases of working stiff diaries that unless there is a general fundamental job descriptions that the subordinate employees can refer to and execute in conducting their jobs inconsistency will prevail in either lower level of employees or upper level of employees throughout the organization. Therefore, formulating the general discipline for conducting business job processes so that the documentations on the discipline is ready to be distributed to all the employees in the organization must be precedent to any attempt in promulgation of employee's motivation. All this kind of efforts amounts to prove that the usefulness and significance of content theories over process theories in the real workplace.

So the real crucial issue is that rather than deciding which one is more superior than another we must be cautious in applying solely process theories with the premise that application of content theories may be unnecessary. As far as the cases investigated in this essay, application of content theories is mandatory and necessary in any organization as a solid foundation for establishing the fundamental level of motivation for all the employees. Thereafter, the application of process theories can be conducted for enhancement of the level of motivation for managers and possibly for certain subordinates, not necessarily be all the population of them, carefully sampled out as desirable candidates for process theories to be applied to, as sort of icing on the cake. For example in the case of English Premier League Champion Leicester City, process theories are better suited to the head coach Mr. Claudio Ranieri or a prominently talented striker Mr. Jamie Vardy in particular but they are not suited to every member of players.

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