Research Article

Interpretive Paradigm on the Use of Fear as Workers’ Coercive Motivation

Eketu Continue Addison, PhD
Department of Management, University of Port Harcourt

ABSTRACT

Workplace challenges are increasingly becoming detrimental to organizational health. This is more on the dynamics of workers motivation, which is expressed through commitment. This paper interpretively explores the use of fear as an instrument for employee coercive motivation. It expresses its worry and curiosity on the lopsided use of positive stimuli and the redundant application of detrimental influences. The paper contended that both gain and pain are behavior stimuli, as behavior tends to be a function of its consequences. Thus, the fear of an unpleasant consequence may compel a desirable behavior, as the expectation of a benefit will. The paper sees fear as capable of triggering serious avoidance tendencies, that can be directed to elicit motivation. The paper however contended that fear is capable of generating only continuance and normative commitment but not affective commitment. Also, it argues that the use of fear as an instrument of motivation be discriminated on context specifies, to avoid the abuse of the fear instrument, as a form of coercive motivation.

©2018, ASSJ, All Right Reserved

Introduction

Motivation is at the heart of management, particularly the practical perspective of management, which involves getting things done through and with people. This has drawn enormous scholarly attention to compliment the almost unending quest for knowledge by managers to get productive commitment from subordinates. The fundamental reason for this is that psychological state of the workers accounts for the extent of the workers readiness to contribute his effort towards the achievement of organizational goals. The psychological state of all workers represents the psychological capital of the organization, as a resource. It appears that it is in the context of this logic that companies (organization) are seen as mere dusty legal framework, without the human assets. This category of asset represents intellectual, physical and emotional competencies, desired at the workplace, and propelled or galvanized through motivation.

However, research on motivation of workers appears skewed to positive motivation, as do the theories on this aspect of management. For instance, need theories, self-determination theory; cognitive evaluation theory, goal-setting theory, reinforcement theory, equity theory, organizational justice, organizational commitment; and expectancy theory are all skewed to positive factors as motivators. Also, research attempts in both classical and contemporary investigations are found directed at tantalizing factors, such researches as. Unfortunately, explanations of how negative stimuli are employed to derive workers’ motivation appears to be neglected, therefore redundant, yet manifestation in the use of detrimental stimuli to achieve workplace motivation is becoming increasingly noticeable (Robbins, Judge & Vohra, 2010). For instance, considering the recessive economic trends, the use of fear by managers to secure workers’ contribution to organizational performance is a common management approach. Ahiauzu and Asawo (2015) contended that during recession as found in the global economic meltdown, psychological contract breaches were more at the disadvantage of workers. Also, voluntary labour turnover was found to be low during economic downturns, even in the face of workplace adversities (Eketu & Oshi, 2010).

Most unfortunately, the research redundancy on the use of fear to compel workers motivation had produced a vacuum in knowledge on the realities of its practical implications, which could have in turn enrich knowledge on this paradigm of motivation. Thus, this paper adopted interpretative research paradigm to explain the nature and consequences of using detrimental stimuli to compel workers motivation in the workplace.

Literature Review

The Concept of Motivation

Etymologically, the English noun “motivation” was developed from the Latin word “movere”, which means “to move”. The concept of motivation has been succinctly defined in Robbins, Judge & Vohra (2010) as “the process that account for an individual’s intensity, direction, and persistence of effort towards attaining a goal”  (P.215). The highlights of this definition are:
a. **Intensity:** Indicating the drive as the individual tries
b. **Direction:** Indicating the focus of organizational desire
c. **Persistence:** Indicating the sustenance of the intensity towards the organizational desire
d. **Goal:** Indicating the utmost outcome of the desired behavior.

Kreitner & Kinicki (2010) view the concept of motivation as representing “those psychological processes that cause the arousal, direction, and persistence of voluntary actions that are goal directed” (P.258). Here, the authors have added that motivation involves psychological process, which implies internal processes in the mind of the individual, arousing voluntary or self-determined actions. On the concept of motivation, Armstrong & Stephens (2006) have a less theoretical, but relatively more practical view that, motivation is concern with the factors that influence individual to behave in certain ways.

However, from the discourse above, motivation entails arousing a desired behavior with some intensity, persistency, and directing such behaviour towards a definite outcome. It also implies that the arousal may be internally generated (intrinsically) or externally triggered (extrinsically), but certainly resulting to a psychological mechanism that accounts for an individual’s voluntary behavior. This implies that the behaviour is voluntary and rather deterministic means that the individual has an option, be it aroused by gainful or detrimental stimulus.

**Theories of Motivation**

Motivation appears to have received a relatively broader theoretical exposition in management and specifically organizational behaviour literature more than any discourse. A broad spectrum of theories of motivation in terms of content and process paradigms, are directed at explaining how individuals are motivated in organizations.

**Need Theories**

These theories anchor on the premise that the human need is the drive of the individuals’ behaviour. In this theory compartment are:

- **Abraham Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs**

Five level needs involving – basic and safety needs (lower level), and social, ego and self actualization need (higher level); Mc Clelland’s need theory involving – need for achievement, need for affiliation and need for power; Herzberg 2 factor theory, involving - motivators and hygiene factors; and Clayton Aldafer ERG theory, involving - Existence, Relatedness and Growth. Robins, Judge and Vohra (2010) contended that need theories lack valid explanation of motivation, as such none has widespread support, although McClelland’s appears to be stronger.

- **Self Determination Theory:** This is also known as self-efficacy or social cognitive or social learning theory developed by Albert Bandura. The general statement of the theory is that an individual’s belief of his capacity of performing a task influences the extent of his real performance (Robbins, Judge & Vohra, 2010). Thus the higher one’s self efficacy, the more confidence one has to succeed (Bandura, 1997). It implies that self confidence elicited from self-efficacy can generate a multiplicity of positive outcomes, with a spiral effect in employees with high self efficacy. In making the self-efficacy theory efficacious in the workplace, Bandura (1997) proposes enactive mastery, vicarious modeling, verbal persuasive and arousal as ways of application.

**Goal-Setting Theory:** The goal-setting theory compliments the self-efficacy theory. It is a way by which managers help their subordinates achieve high levels of self-efficacy. The theory states that workers’ performance improves, when managers set difficult and specific goals for job or task (Locke & Lathan, 2002).

This goes with the manager communicating his confidence in the workers. The Robert House’s Path Goal Theory clearly gives a guide on how goal setting enhances self-efficacy as a motivational model, Robbins, Judge & Vohra (2010) argue that clear and difficult goals lead to higher level of employee productivity, supporting goal-setting theory’s explanation of employee productivity. Goal setting thus is a cognitive model presupposing that purpose directs behavior.

**Reinforcement Theory:** This provides a behaviouristic philosophy that reinforcement conditions behaviour, drawn from Skinner’s broader concept of behaviourism, that behaviour follows stimuli in a relatively unthinkable manner (Yousef, 2002; Ozag, 2006; Skinner, 1971 and Robbins, 2008). The theory sees behaviour as environmentally determined. It ignores or relinquishes the inner state of man, but gives it all to external stimuli as causes of the individual’s actions. Thus, behaviour is a function of its consequence. The real or perceived consequence strengthens behaviour and causes it to be repeated (Locke, 1968; Robbins, Judge & Vohra, 2010).

**Equity Theory and Organizational Justice**

The equity theory developed by J. Stacy Adams states that, “individuals compare their job input and outcomes with those of others and then respond to eliminate any inequities (Robbins, Judge & Vohra, 2010: 233). The comparison produces one of three possible outcomes: inequity due to quality in under reward, equity due to equality in reward and inequity due to over-reward. The equality produces almost a neutral state of mind; under-reward generates anger; while over-reward creates guilt. The last two outcomes create negative tension which triggers the motivation to do something to correct it (Adams, 1965; Brown, 2003; and Robbins, 2008). Also, the comparison may involve four referents (self-inside, self-outside, other-inside, and other-outside).

Organizational justice as related to equity is an overall perception of what is fair in the workplace with respect to distributive, procedural and interactional justice. This tends to draw a bigger picture of perceive fairness in organizational affair than the rather restricted view of equity on pay (Robbins, 2008 Adams, 1965). The more individual perceived justice in distribution, procedure and interaction, the higher, the individual is motivated.

**Expectancy Theory:** Vroom’s expectancy theory of motivation is one of the widely accepted models. The theory stipulates that the strength of an individual’s tendency to act in a certain way depends on the strength of his expectations of the specific outcome and its attractiveness (Vroom, 1964; Adams, 1965; and Armstrong & Stephens, 2006). Thus, a worker works harder when he has strong expectation of a specified outcome that is very attractive to him. This psychological process links individual effort to personal goals, through individual performance and organizational rewards.

However, contemporary research on worker’s motivation tends to adopt different nomenclatures but all directed at explaining the productive engagement of the worker (Robbins, 2008). For instance, such concepts and constructs as: organizational commitment, organizational citizenship behavior, job satisfaction, employee involvement, pro-social...
behaviour, organizational justice, equity, employee voice etc. are variables with a common organizational denominator (Ahiauzu & Asawo, 2014; Monbarg, 2018; Ejekwu, 2018; Okaome, 2012 and Eketu & Needorn, 2014). Ahiauzu and Asawo (2014) demonstrated in a study involving “unwavering hope and worker’s commitment in the Nigerian manufacturing industry” and contended that spirituality at work engenders productive commitment. Okaome (2012) found that leaders’ emotional intelligence significantly persuades affective commitment, positively among bank workers in Nigeria. Similarly, Eketu and Needorn (2014) examined the association between organizational justice and workers commitment, with the finding that justice begot affective commitment of workers. Such typology of commitment was found to be most related to productivity commitment (affective commitment) than continuance and normative commitments.

The identified variables on workers motivation are often associated with such predictor variables as leadership (McGregory, 1960; Kopelman & Prottas (2000); impression management (Eketu & Amah, 2013); Organizational justice (Eketu & Needorn, 2014) talent management (Eketu, 2015).

From the foregoing, it shows that the dominant research paradigm on workers motivation focuses on the positive factors that influence motivation. Research on detrimental factor such as fear; appear to be lacking (Robbins, Judge & Vohra, 2010). Yet managers seem to motivate workers using fear as a stimuli, most of the time (Kreitner & Kinicki, 2012). The intrigues of fear as a stimulant to workers motivation, has inadvertently become a redundant concept in the literature on motivation.

Fear as a Motivator

Fear is one of varieties of emotion among anger, contempt, enthusiasm, envy, frustration, disappointment, embarrassment, disgust, happiness, hate, hope, joy, love, pride, surprise and sadness (Robbins & Sanghi, 2006 and Ben-Zeer, 2000). Fear is a negative expression of feeling as a response to a real or perceived threatening stimulus. The negative import of fear makes people generally try to avoid it by any means. Fear as a motivator has received less theoretical concern than practical application. The founder of American Management Services George Cloutier contended that “fear is the best motivator”.

He further stated that it is an art of insanity to believe that managers’ love elicits performance. Robbins, Judge & Vohra (2010) acknowledged that the topic on fear as a motivator is seldom discussed, but it is a reality. It is also a reality, that love begets undue tolerance, and could be abused at the expense of organizational performance, because excessive love induces laxity and unseriousness in the workplace. Behavior conditioning theories tend to be founded on the premise that behavior is a function of its consequence (Robbins & Sanghi, 2010 and Skinner, 1971). The fear of the detriment to do the undesirable may therefore be the function to make one do the desirable. Thus, both positive and negative consequences tend to motivate employees at different circumstances. Considering this disposition, the view of Armstrong and Stephens (2006) that motivation is concerned with the factors that influence individuals to behave in certain ways, holds serious relevance. This view encompasses not only workers needs or expectations in positive motivational factors, but also unexpected negative factors that can drive a worker to increase productivity.

Fear as a worker motivational stimulus takes various forms, all sharing the possibility of a common reaction whereby, the worker tries to increase his productivity to avoid a known negative consequence. For instance, the fear of job loss; the fear of salary cut; the fear of promotion loss or to be demoted; etc are all threatening stimulus which workers try to avoid. Robbins, Judge & Vohra (2010) contended that, “instilling in employee a fear that if they shirk, they will lose their jobs, is one way to accomplish that monitoring (to secure motivation). Without fear, people would do as they wish and that rarely includes working hard if they feel they don’t have to”. In a related argument, the commitment expected from a worker can be sustained through deterrence based trust. Robbins (2008) contended that deterrence based trust is based on fear of reprisal if the trust is violated. The implication of sustaining the commitment of an employee in a deterrence based trust is to sustain the fear of an available negative consequence in the circumstance of possible distrust or violation. For instance, deterrence based trust will be effective only to the extent that deterrence, detriment or punishment is possible and will be actually imposed if the trust is violated. Robbins (2008) clearly stated that to be sustained, the potential loss of benefit from the other party must outweigh the benefit potential that comes from violating expectations. Further implication is that, the potentially harmed party (the manager) who will be short-changed by the worker’s lack of commitment must be willing to introduce harm as a consequence or retribution to the worker acting distrustingly or against obligatory commitment.

It is thus crucial and logically clear that the bond which sustains fear as a motivator lies in the authority held by the boss (manager) and the punishment he can impose if the worker fails to fulfill his job related obligations. Related to the manager’s use of deterrence to inflict fear on the subject (worker) to elicit and sustain the desired behaviour, is McGregor’s (1960) Theory X. The assumptions associated with Theory X presuppose that the worker sees work as punishment. Thus, hate and could avoid it as much as possible. In this instance, the manager looks at the worker with suspicion, increases his presence, supervision and threat to compel the worker to work (Kopelman & Prottas, 2000). Also, in its entirety, the use of threat to inflict fear as a potent motivator is clearly expressed in negative reinforcement. Judging from the general statement of that reinforcement theory that, behaviour is a function of its consequences, negative consequences appear to arouse stronger tendencies of avoiding an undesired behaviour or behaving in a desired way.

Conclusion and Implications

Fear is undoubtedly a potent motivational factor. It involves exposing the subject to detriment that threatens his comfort, hope, resources, position etc. The fear of the detrimental consequences of an undesired behaviour paradoxically compels the subject to behave desirably. For instance, where a worker fail to show desired commitment, the fear of such negative consequences as dismissal, reprimand, salary or wage cut, suspension, redundancy, demotion, lost of promotion etc, tend to compel such a worker to be rather committed. Because of the psycho-mechanical nature of fear as an instrument of coercive motivation, it may not be that potent in all situations or in a very long run. It may be suitable where the worker’s choice of alternative are strictly limited, leaving him with costly options as escape route. The use of fear may only elicit temporary commitment which cannot get to the affects of the subject. It, thus means that fear as a motivator can only dwell in the realm of the workers’ obligatory and calculative commitment. The worker therefore will be motivated because, it is normative of a worker to show concern on his work, as an issue in the psychological contract.
Also, the worker shows continuance commitment because he has calculated that there is yet none better option. The reality about workers motivation is that excessive love and tolerance is taken for granted, degenerating to platitude, weakness and laxity, while the introduction of fear balances the expectation and avoidance between pain and gain. Thus pain and gain motivate, but at different circumstances and intensity.

References


