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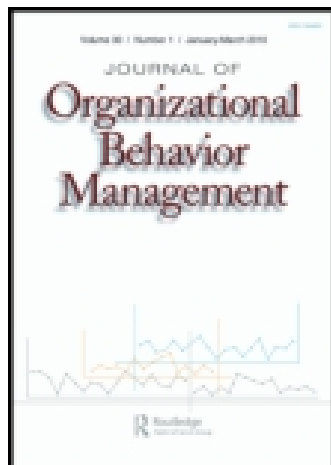
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Job Satisfaction: The Management Tool and Leadership Responsibility

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Job satisfaction's tenuous relationship to a variety of work behaviors is reviewed from the perspective of a management tool and as a leadership responsibility. It may be viewed a management tool for accomplishing certain organizational objectives related to reducing absenteeism and tardiness. However, job satisfaction's importance is neither limited to nor justified by its somewhat weak relationship to certain organizational outcomes. Rather, job satisfaction is analyzed as a leadership responsibility with effects that extend far beyond the bounds of any given organization. Some fundamental assumptions surrounding job satisfaction are reviewed, and an argument for job satisfaction as an ethical imperative that results from organizational and management practices that emphasize positive reinforcement, not aversive control, is advanced.

KEYWORDS *Job satisfaction, leadership, ethics, health*

Job satisfaction is the most widely researched variable in industrial-organizational psychology (Spector, 1997). This literature is bursting with studies of assorted antecedents, mediators, and moderators of job satisfaction. It is also filled with copious correlates of job satisfaction, such as various organizationally important attitudes and behaviors, primarily as an argument for its importance (Judge, Piccolo, Podsakoff, Shaw, & Rich, 2010; Judge, Thoresen, Bono, & Patton, 2001). The present article is less concerned with these issues, which view job satisfaction as a management tool, but rather approaches job satisfaction as a leadership responsibility, organizational leadership obligation, and ethical imperative (Hocutt, 2013; Mawhinney, 1984, 1989, 2011) and as a necessary outcome of successful organizational

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behavior management (OBM) interventions. Rather than sliding into scholasticism regarding the mensurational and definitional issues surrounding job satisfaction, the working definition adopted herein is quite simple: following Spector (1997, p. 2), “the extent to which people like (satisfaction) or dislike (dissatisfaction) their jobs,” or job satisfaction = affective response to work, workplace conditions, and the work environment.

BEGINNING WITH A QUIZ

As is common in many academic endeavors, we will begin with a quiz.

Where do adults in industrial and postindustrial societies spend the majority of their conscious, waking hours?

What is perhaps the largest influence on adults’ daily emotional well-being?

What is a substantial determinant of adults’ health, quality of family life, and community involvement?

The answer to all of the above is “the workplace.” According to the Gallup Work and Education Poll (Saad, 2014), in 2013–2014 salaried employees in the United States worked an average of 49 hr/week and 50% worked more than 50 hr/week. Hourly employees worked an average of 44 hr/week, with 26% working more than 50 hr/week. Similarly, the American Time Use Survey (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2014) showed that adults in the United States spend more time working than engaging in any other conscious activity; sleep occupies only slightly more time.

Work, the workplace, working conditions, and the daily experience of work are fundamentally important, or possibly the most critically important factors in adult psychological functioning. By extension, a parent’s work experience may also well be one of the most significant foundations of children’s emotional, intellectual, and social development, because parents’ daily encounters at work directly affect their interactions with their children when they come home. The economic benefits that work brings dictate the quality of neighborhoods, schools, and opportunities, and adults’ modeling of work-related behavior and reactions to work might serve as powerful instructions and examples to their children. Indeed, it can be argued that the workplace is the single greatest influence on human psychology in postindustrial daily life. The growing literature on work–life balance makes these points abundantly clear (Bulger & Fisher, 2012; Kossek, Valcour, & Lirio, 2014).

A MANAGEMENT TOOL, BUT PERHAPS NOT A MANAGEMENT RESPONSIBILITY

To many, the “happy productive worker” is the holy grail of organizational behavior research (Staw, 1986; Wright & Staw, 1999). Historically speaking,

interest in job satisfaction stemmed from pecuniary purposes, an implicit or sometimes explicit assumption that morale and productivity were causally connected; or as the old adage goes, the contented cow gives the best milk. However, research shows that correlations of behavioral outcomes such as absenteeism and turnover with job satisfaction are low (Schleicher, Hansen, & Fox, 2011). Expecting any correlation between job satisfaction and job performance is held to be dubious at best because job satisfaction is a fairly narrow construct whereas job performance is a very diffuse construct (Fisher, 1980). Indeed, the relationship between job satisfaction and job performance has been found to be nonexistent (Bowling, 2007; Brayfield & Crockett, 1955; Riketta, 2008) to low (Iaffaldano & Muchinsky, 1985) to weak (Christen, Iyer, & Soberman, 2006) to moderate (Judge et al., 2001), with no causal conclusions regarding the relationship between the two. Nevertheless, the search for mediators and moderators of job satisfaction and various organizationally important attitudes and behaviors continues unabated, with well over 10,000 studies published to date.

A presumed job satisfaction–job performance link is ideologically convenient, especially if job satisfaction is assumed to be dispositional in nature (Staw, Bell, & Clausen, 1986; Staw & Ross, 1985). If job satisfaction can be argued to cause job performance (despite evidence to the contrary), and if it is further presumed that job satisfaction is an intrinsic internal property of the individual (as a dispositional approach holds, to at least some extent), job performance (or the lack thereof) may then be assumed to be primarily the individual's fault. According to this perspective, on occasion, a manager may be able to arrange matters so that job satisfaction (and hence productivity) improves, but if such efforts fall short, the onus is on the individual employee, not the manager, because whether or not any such change in the workplace actually alters job satisfaction is primarily a function of presumably more powerful internal factors. Of course such a dispositional approach suggests strongly that individuals who score high on job satisfaction measures should be preferred and may be selected on that basis.

Research on the potential heritability of job satisfaction lends credence to such a dispositional approach. Job satisfaction is moderately correlated in monozygotic twins reared apart (Arvey, Bouchard, Segal, & Abraham, 1989) but more highly correlated than in dizygotic twins (Arvey, McCall, Bouchard, Taubman, & Cavanaugh, 1994), which is taken as evidence for a genetic basis for job satisfaction. Such genetic determinism is often assumed to be immutable by those unfamiliar with behavioral genetics and thus is invoked as an argument against managerial responsibility for job satisfaction—simply, some people are just born that way. However, as Arvey et al. (1994) caution, the heritability correlations found in their studies are modest, and such correlations do not suggest that job satisfaction is in any way unchangeable. In addition, there is no evidence showing that any dispositional characteristics constrain the effects of environmental or organizational efforts to improve job satisfaction at all (Gerhart, 2005).

However, despite contradictory evidence, or at least evidence arguing for a more tenuous and nuanced interpretation, a dispositional approach to job satisfaction remains popular. In this case, job satisfaction may then be seen as a potential managerial tool whose efficacy is constrained not by management ineptitude but by much more potent, largely innate, employee characteristics. Furthermore, such an approach to job satisfaction removes much, if not all, of the responsibility for individual employee job satisfaction from management. That is, in a dispositional approach, job satisfaction may have some utility as a management tool, but it most likely is not a management responsibility.

QUESTIONING ASSUMPTIONS

The assumed job satisfaction–job performance causal link is questionable at best. The correlations between job satisfaction and other employment-related behaviors are modest, and causality is again muddled. Four other assumptions surrounding job satisfaction—(a) a difference definition, (b) a presumption that work must be unpleasant, (c) an equating of rewards with reinforcers, and (d) the normalcy of aversive control—may also wilt under further scrutiny.

Difference Definition

Implicit in many job satisfaction measures is an assumption of a deficit in affective reaction to work; that is, job satisfaction equals the gap between what one wants or expects from work and what one actually receives. Indeed, in one of the original investigations of job satisfaction, Thorndike (1917) explored the decline in “satisfyingness” over time: Workers were most satisfied at the beginning of work, and their satisfaction declined linearly over time until the end of the work period. This difference definition of job satisfaction may also be found in more current treatments of the topic, such as the well-cited volume by Cranny, Smith, and Stone (1992), who define *job satisfaction* as “an emotional state resulting from an employee’s comparison of actual and desired job outcomes” (p. 148). This definition begs a question: Why must work be assumed to be less satisfying than individuals may expect or desire?

Work Is Unpleasant

Perhaps one reason for this deficit definition of job satisfaction may be an assumption that work is, or must necessarily be, intrinsically unpleasant. An early investigation of job satisfaction (Thorndike, 1917) clearly proceeds from such an assumption, which may have been the case a century ago. Similarly, the Marxist critique of the capitalist system holds that work in the

industrial world will be inherently unpleasant because of the alienation of the worker from the product of labor, the act of producing, and the worker as a producer; or in behavioral terms, a lack of immediate consequences such as positive reinforcement for work. Skinner (1986) called this “estrangement” from work, a condition in which a worker is separated from the positive reinforcement that may accrue from work activities. Implicit in Marx’s critique and made explicit in Skinner’s is a recognition that work in the absence of positive reinforcement will be unpleasant and furthermore such a lack of positive reinforcement will necessarily lead to a system of aversive control. This analysis raises a question: In a postindustrial world, must such estrangement (in Skinner’s terms) and its attendant aversive control systems continue?

Rewards Are Reinforcers

Many researchers and most of the lay public believe that job satisfaction causes job performance (Bowling, 2007). The entire “satisfaction causes productivity” argument leads to the inevitable conclusion that in order to increase productivity, one must increase satisfaction, and if satisfaction is largely equivalent to happiness or morale, the path to productivity involves making people happy. In this view, a surefire way to make people happy is to reward them. Unfortunately, even if this were to be the case, managers are not particularly accurate when it comes to identifying or predicting what employees may find rewarding (Wilder, Harris, Casella, Wine, & Postma, 2011; Wilder, Rost, & McMahon, 2007; Wine, Reis, & Hantula, 2014), possibly because employee preferences for rewards vary over time (Wine, Gilroy, & Hantula, 2012; Wine & Axelrod, 2014; Wine, Kelley, & Wilder, 2014). Hence, a well-intentioned effort to increase morale may backfire if the rewards offered are not in fact rewarding to the recipient; or more to the point, if such “rewards” do not in fact reinforce behavior. This confusion of rewards and reinforcers may also underlie the pernicious “rewards undermine intrinsic motivation” myth (Mawhinney, Dickinson, & Taylor, 1989), but there may be a grain of truth here. Rewards that are in fact reinforcing do not undermine motivation, but rewards that are not reinforcing may be the culprit (Eisenberger & Cameron, 1996). Finally, a reinforcer, by definition, strengthens behavior; specifically, it strengthens the behavior that precedes it. If people are rewarded, what behavior (if any at all) is reinforced is questionable; however, if work-related behavior is reinforced, that behavior will be strengthened, and people may be happier. Reinforcement is rewarding, but reward is not necessarily reinforcing. Must this confusion continue?

Normalcy of Aversive Control

Skinner (1986) pointed out that work for wages that do not directly reinforce behaviors will inevitably lead to a system of aversive control (see also

Abernathy, 2014). Seemingly ubiquitous aversive control in organizations may lead people to believe that such a system is preordained or normal. An organization exists as a formal means of behavior control; a Hobbesian perspective on organizations would argue that employees consent to such control in exchange for a paycheck because without it an organization would devolve into disorder and chaos. That is, it may not be possible to be productive without aversive control, which is akin to a Marxist critique of an industrial system. However, as Skinner (1955, 1975) observes, it is possible for people to be productive, happy, and free, but this requires an erosion of aversive control in favor of positive reinforcement. A major contribution of the positive behavior support movement (Tincani, 2011) is that teachers can control or even eliminate challenging behavior in classrooms through establishing a culture of positive reinforcement, rather than aversive contingencies, the point being that aversive control is aberrant, not customary. Why cannot this model be extended to formal organizations?

JOB SATISFACTION AS A MANAGERIAL RESPONSIBILITY, ORGANIZATIONAL LEADERSHIP OBLIGATION, AND ETHICAL IMPERATIVE

Organizational leaders and managers are responsible for the work environment. This is self-evident. It is also codified legally. Managers can be held civilly liable for harm to employees from a host of work environment malfunctions from negligent hiring ("Hidden Liability," 2013) to sexual harassment (Zachary, 2014). Sometimes organizational leaders and managers can be held criminally liable for workplace accidents (Pryor, 2014). These legal examples underscore two fundamental facts: Demonstrated control of the work environment confers responsibility for the work environment, and employees do not surrender their basic human rights when they enter the workplace. Employees have the right to not be harmed physically by the work environment. Their physical well-being must be protected. Employees have the right to not be harassed sexually or ethnically in the work environment. Their psychological well-being in this respect must be protected.

Responsibility Revisited

A meta-analysis of 485 studies showed clearly that job satisfaction is related to a myriad of health outcomes, including cardiovascular disease (Faragher, 2005). Higher job satisfaction is negatively correlated with occupational injury rates (Barling, Kelloway, & Iverson, 2003), perhaps bringing job satisfaction into the realm physical harm prevention. A large-scale panel study showed that employees high in job satisfaction have both higher subjective

and objective health indicators (Fischer & Sousa-Poza, 2009). Tying both the organizational and social benefits, research shows that job satisfaction is highly negatively correlated with sickness absence (Böckerman & Ilmakunnas, 2008; Munch-Hansen, Wieclaw, Agerbo, Westergaard-Nielsen, & Bonde, 2008; Roelen, Koopmans, Notenbomer, & Groothoff, 2008, 2011). Sickness absence is a combination of both employee self-report of illness (or perhaps willingness to go to work) as well as the presence of physical illness. When faced with an excusable inconvenience such as a snowstorm, employees low in job satisfaction are more likely to be absent (Mawhinney, 1989); it is likely that the same result may occur if employees low in job satisfaction awaken with equivocal evidence of an illness. But furthermore, not only is job satisfaction associated with the behavioral manifestation of illness in terms of absence, but low job satisfaction is also associated with increased common infection (Mohren, Swaen, Kant, van Schayck, & Galama, 2005) as well as natural killer cell immunity (Nakata, Takahashi, Irie, & Swanson, 2010). That is, low job satisfaction may make employees more likely to fall ill and then more likely to be absent when symptoms of sickness are experienced.

Job satisfaction as a social good (or lack thereof) extends beyond the workplace into the family and community. Low levels of job satisfaction are related to depression and burnout (Faragher, 2005; Ybema, Smulders, & Bongers, 2010), which may diminish the degree to which individuals engage constructively with their communities and families. Indeed, job satisfaction is a major factor in work–family interface and life satisfaction (Simone et al., 2014). Job satisfaction level is correlated with marital satisfaction and also with affect at home, and the more highly integrated individuals' work and family roles, the more pronounced the positive and negative effects become (Ilies, Wilson, & Wagner, 2009). The negative spillover is real and destructive, for example making spouses too burned out and exhausted to talk to each other in the evening (Hewlett & Luce, 2006). It does not require a large inductive leap to see how such exhausted employees are much less likely to interact with their children, help with homework, participate in community activities, or do much of anything beyond watch television and self-medicate.

Organizational Leadership Obligation

Ensuring safety and preventing harassment are managerial duties. These are the bare minimum. The degree to which job satisfaction may contribute to certain organizationally important outcomes may then become the degree to which job satisfaction is seen as a management tool. This is barely over the minimum. In both cases, people are treated essentially as commodities to be used and risks to be mitigated, not as human beings. The managerial charge may well begin and end within the boundaries of the organization, but the leadership responsibility extends beyond the confines of the

organization into the society and culture at large. Management's responsibilities to the organization are well delineated; however, there are equally important implied duties to employees. The argument herein is not that managers and organizational leaders are obligated to transform the workplace into an adult amusement park, nor is it another call for corporate social responsibility. Rather, the argument is that demonstrated control of the work environment implies a management responsibility and leadership imperative to use this control not only for the good of the organization but also for the greater social good. Improving organizational productivity and efficiency is a social good. Promoting occupational health and safety is a social good. Accomplishing these in a positive manner is also a social good. Emotionally healthy employees are a social good. Management is about working in the present; leadership is about striving for the future.

Working Toward a Solution

The zero to modest correlations found between measures of job satisfaction and various typical measures of work-related behavior may lead to a conclusion that these variables are largely orthogonal, and the wisdom of expecting much of a relationship is dubious at best. Or, small relationships may exist but are obscured by an individual-level analysis; rather, they are emergent when organizational-level dependent variables are used (Ostroff, 1992). Alternatively, as Mawhinney (2011) argues, any such relationships may be constrained by Hobson's choice on the part of individual employees and restriction of range in the data. There is a further point here to pursue: The vast majority of job satisfaction/work-related behavior studies are correlational. Independent variables are not manipulated in correlational studies. Thus, the full range of the independent variable and its effects on the dependent variable are not known. What is known is that a miasma of aversive control is associated with both low affective reaction to the environment in which aversive control occurs (job satisfaction) and a tendency to behave in a manner that meets the bare minimum required to avoid the aversive control (work-related behavior). It may be that both job satisfaction and work-related behaviors (and also organizational performance) can be increased not by actions targeting each directly but by taking action to change a third variable. The dual goal of high-performing organizations and high job satisfaction may be achieved by eroding the paradigm of aversive control. There is some evidence to support this idea.

Taken a step further, the principles and practices of OBM may be the most positive and humanizing ways to achieve this solution (Crowell, 2004), OBM interventions can work synergistically with more traditional organizational interventions (Crowell, Hantula, & McArthur, 2011). Ethical leadership increases job satisfaction (Kim & Brymer, 2011; Pettijohn, Pettijohn, & Taylor,

2008), as does supportive leadership (Schyns, van Veldhoven, & Wood, 2009). Stock in trade OBM interventions such as feedback not only can increase job performance but can also increase job satisfaction (Anseel & Lievens, 2007; Palmer & Johnson, 2013; Sommer & Kulkarni, 2012), as can a goal-setting and feedback package intervention (Wilk & Redmon, 1998). Indeed, more systemic interventions such as the balanced scorecard (Abernathy, 1997) have been shown to increase job satisfaction (Molina, Gonzalez, Florencio, & Gonzalez, 2014). Unfortunately, most OBM interventions do not include measures of job satisfaction, or if such measures are included they are neither standardized nor validated (Mawhinney, 2011). Development and inclusion of theoretically (i.e., behavior analytic) based measures is an important future direction for OBM research.

Properly administered positive reinforcement-based interventions can make for more productive, humanized, and satisfying organizations. Perhaps the most compelling evidence for the sheer power of a highly reinforcing work environment is the audacious question of whether a job can be made so reinforcing that drug addicts will refrain from using in order to gain access to the workplace—that is, the work environment is more reinforcing than cocaine or heroin. The therapeutic workplace, which serves substance abusers and requires employees to provide a daily clean urine sample to gain access to a highly reinforcing work environment. Evidence shows that in fact a workplace can be made to be more reinforcing than drugs over a period of years (Aklin et al., 2014; Holtyn et al., 2014; Koffarnus et al., 2011; Silverman et al., 2002, 2005). And furthermore, such an arrangement can be extended to low-income adults, in that it has been found that positive reinforcement in the form of performance-based pay increases both job performance and job satisfaction (Koffarnus, DeFulio, Sigurdsson, & Silverman, 2013).

Indeed, highly reinforcing management and leadership practices can accomplish the following: make workplaces more productive and safe, make employees more emotionally healthy, reduce psychopathology, prevent cancer and heart disease, reduce (maybe cure) substance abuse, make families happier, reduce domestic violence, and make communities better. Consequences are the key. Behavior analysis provides the theoretical basis for such a solution, and OBM supplies the technology for accomplishing it. It is within our grasp.

Conclusion

Demonstrated control of the work environment implies responsibility for the same. Organizational psychologists as a whole, and OBM practitioners in particular, have the knowledge, skills, and abilities to construct reinforcing workplace interventions. Organizational scientists and practitioners hold much influence over the manner in which organizations treat their employees. People deserve to be treated well. Doing no harm is not good enough;

this goes far beyond social validity and is a call to lead by action, to show that it can in fact be done, repeatedly. Those who have the power to do good have the obligation to act; improving affective reaction to work is within our realm and becomes our duty. Work need no longer be a four-letter word. Depending on where one's sentiments may lie, the ethical imperative may be summed up either by Spiderman's dictum "With great power comes great responsibility" or by St. Luke's aphorism "To whom much is given, much is expected." It is now time to lead.

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