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THE IMPORTANCE OF UNDERSTANDING AND CHANGING EMPLOYEE OUTCOME EXPECTANCIES FOR GAINING COMMITMENT TO AN ORGANIZATIONAL GOAL

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Senior management and the union executive committee of a forest products company set an organizational goal to reduce theft from approximately a million dollars a year to zero. Salaried and hourly employees, selected at random, were interviewed regarding their outcome expectancies for honest and dishonest behavior. The responses were categorized within a 2 × 2 empathy box (honest/dishonest behavior vs. positive/negative outcome expectancies) to allow the organization's leadership to understand from the employee's perspective why there was so much theft. This information was subsequently used to alter employee outcome expectancies which, in turn, changed behavior. Theft dropped to near zero.

Central to the theory and application of goal setting is goal commitment (Locke & Latham, 1990). If there is no commitment, there by definition is no goal. Commitment to self- set, participatively set, and assigned goals for individuals and small groups has been relatively easy to bring about in both field and laboratory settings. This is because the goals usually fall within what Christian Barnard (1938) called the person's zone of indifference. Moreover, assigned and participatively set goals in the workplace are usually the result of discussions with a person who has legitimate, referent, or expert power (Locke, Latham, & Erez, 1988).

Three key constructs in social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986; 1997) include goal setting, self-efficacy, and outcome expectancies. Self-efficacy is task specific; it is the measure of the extent to which one believes that one has the knowledge to master the task or the ability to acquire it. Self-efficacy has been found to have a direct effect, as well as an indirect effect through goals, on performance (see Locke & Latham, 1990).

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Interventions that increase self-efficacy increase effort and persistence to attain difficult or challenging goals. Goal-setting studies that have included measures of self-efficacy typically obtain findings that are statistically significant.

Outcome expectancies are a measure of the extent to which one sees a causal relationship between one's behavior and the positive or negative outcome that one expects. goal-setting studies that have included measures of outcome expectancies have typically found nonsignificant results (e.g., Frayne & Latham, 1987). This is likely due to the fact that the goal was set by or for the individual or a small group. Thus, these nonsignificant findings are likely due to a restriction of range. The positive outcome expectancy or attractiveness of attaining a goal that is self-set, participatively set, or assigned is almost always uniformly high. This is not necessarily true, however, for an organizational goal. What is transparently a positive outcome for the organization as a whole (e.g., cost reduction) is not necessarily positive for an individual employee. Hence understanding the employee's outcome expectancies regarding the attainment of an organizational goal and, if necessary, altering those expectancies may be critical for getting the employee to pursue it.

The purpose of the present study was to understand and then change employee outcome expectancies in order to gain commitment to an organization's goal: namely, the reduction of theft from approximately a million dollars a year to near zero. An intervention designed to increase self-efficacy or collective efficacy to be honest was ruled out by the organization's leadership. Increasing employee confidence in learning or acquiring honest behavior was viewed as unnecessary. Employees already knew the differences between "right and wrong." Instead, an intervention–namely, an empathy box–was used to increase the organization leadership's understanding of why employees were engaging in theft.

Method

Participants

The population of employees was 1,200 individuals who worked for a forest products company in a mill located in the rural northwestern U.S. Of this number 1,000 were hourly and 200 were salaried employees. Their ages ranged from 22–64 years.

The regional vice president selected randomly 1 out of every 10 salaried members to be interviewed. Similarly, the union was asked to select one out of every 25 people to be interviewed. Of the people interviewed, 20 were salaried and 40 were union members. All of them had

worked in the plant for at least 3 years; the majority of employees had worked for the company all their adult lives. Their jobs included sawyer, saw filer, trimmer, edger, and millwright.

The interviews were conducted by the author. The leadership explained that the author was not only an outside consultant, but more importantly a psychologist and therefore "who said what would be confidential."

Goal

Employee theft was approximately 1 million dollars a year. The specific high goal of the organization was to reduce theft to less than a thousand dollars a year.

Procedure

To gain the union executive committee's support for this study, management explained that the purpose was not to identify and prosecute employees who were stealing, but rather to find a way "to walk in the shoes" of the people who stole from the mill. Two phrases were used by the author to explain to the union the assumption underlying the proposed interview questions: namely, (a) understand the anticipated consequences or outcome expectancies, and you will understand the person's behavior; (b) change the outcome expectancies or the consequences that are anticipated, and you will change the person's behavior. To further gain their support, the author showed the union leadership the APA ethics code regarding client confidentiality. Because of this emphasis on process and procedure rather than on an employee, and because employees were stealing from fellow employees as well as from the company, the union executive committee agreed to jointly support the study with management. This methodology provided the executive committee a way to respond to the union members who were complaining about the thefts.

The rationale for the study, explained by the organization's leaders to the employees, was twofold. The dollar amount of the theft was significantly limiting the organization's bottom line, and the employees were complaining to their union leaders that they themselves were frequently the victim of the thieves.

A 2 × 2 empathy box, developed by the author, is shown in Figure 1. Four questions were asked. First, what positive outcomes do you personally expect for honest behavior? Alternatively worded questions included: Where is the "win" for you to be honest? What are the up-

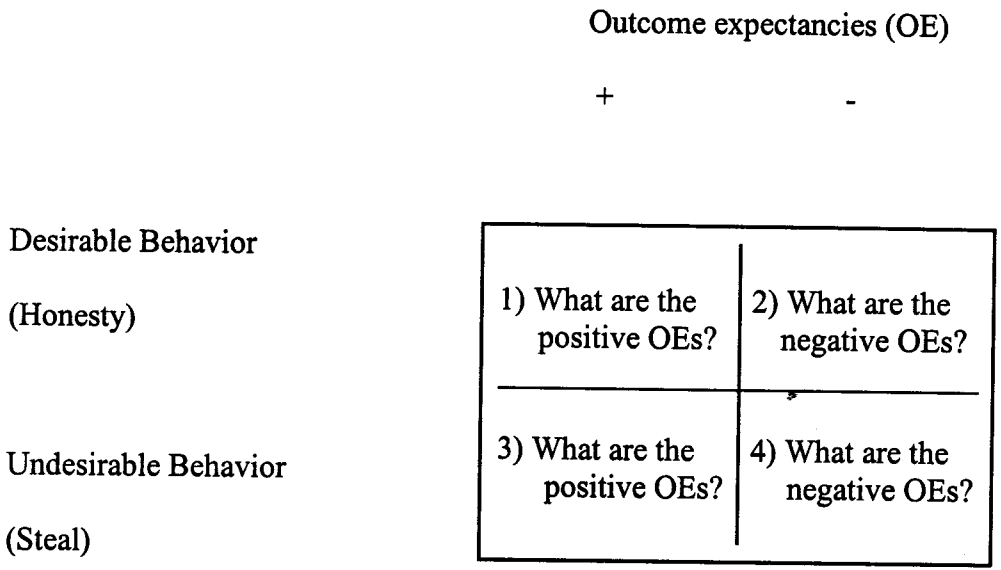

Figure 1: **Empathy Box**

sides? How will you come out ahead? What are the benefits that you can expect?

Second, what are the negative outcomes that you expect for you personally for being honest? Alternatively worded questions included: How will you get hurt for being honest? What are the downsides for you to be honest? How might you lose for being honest?

Third, what are the positive outcomes for you personally to steal? What are the upsides for you personally? How will you come out ahead? What are the "wins" for you to steal?

Fourth, what are the negative outcomes you can expect for engaging in theft? What downsides do you anticipate? How might you get hurt? How would you lose?

The fifth question, not indicated by Figure 1, was asked of the senior management team and the members of the union executive. "Based on the answers shown in Figure 1, what outcome expectancies need to be changed to foster honest behavior?" This fifth question was based on theory, supported by data, that when self-efficacy regarding a specific behavior is high, increasing positive outcome expectancies regarding the emission of that behavior is sufficient for increasing its frequency (Bandura, 1986, 1997).

Note that no attempt was made through these questions to identify who stole or who was a victim of theft. Again, in order to gain union support for these questions, as well as employee willingness to respond to them, the sole emphasis of the study was on understanding why theft occurred, not on identification of "who did what," or "what was done to whom."

Results

The random selection of employees to be interviewed was effective in that it enabled the interviewing of people who were involved in theft. That they were guaranteed anonymity and that they were members of a strong international union whose leadership supported this study may explain why they showed no reluctance in voluntarily identifying themselves as the thieves and answering the four questions candidly. Their responses are summarized below:

1. The answer from the people who stole, to the question of positive outcomes one can expect for being honest, was "nothing." The responses of the employees who did not steal were uniformly moralistic. One person, the union president, said, "You can look yourself in the mirror when you get out of bed in the morning." Similar responses included "It is the right thing to do," "I am setting an example for my kids," and "I can live with myself."

2. Answers to the question of negative outcomes one can expect for being honest were twofold. First, rationalization that no significant economic harm would be done to the company. The colloquialism the thieves expressed frequently was that "the company spills more milk at breakfast than you and I could steal in a year." Second, harassment. Hourly employees who did not steal reported that they were explicitly intimidated: "If you want to get along here, you better play the game." They were not required to steal, but they were required to not inform anyone of whom they observed engaging in theft. As the company was in a rural community, it was the primary source and among the highest paying sources of employment. This was an incentive for people to get along with one another.

   Salaried supervisors responded to this question with the colloquialism, "see no evil, hear no evil." When asked to elaborate, they explained that a supervisor had noticed people leaving the work site with what appeared to be heavy lunch boxes. When a supervisor stopped them, grievances were subsequently filed. The human resources manager summoned the supervisor to inform him that more grievances had been filed because of him than any other person in a salaried position. The conversation ended with the HR manager asking: "How much longer can we allow grievances to continue?"

   The conversation reportedly took place at 11:15 a.m. At lunch the supervisor was asked by peers as to the reason for and the nature of the conversation with the HR manager. The uniform outcome was the adoption by the supervisors of the slogan, "hear no evil, see no evil."
3. In response to the third question as to the positive outcome expected of theft, none of the thieves mentioned acts of revenge against the company to explain their behavior. No one reported that they sold what was stolen for profit. All of them said that they did not even use what was stolen. Instead, the responses of the thieves to the third question were twofold. First, they expressed pride in performance: "We are so good we could steal a head-rig from a sawmill." A head-rig weighs more than a ton. They even attempted to involve the author: "Doc, tell us what you want, and we will get it out within 45 days." Second, they used the word "thrill" to describe the excitement that they experienced in task accomplishment. They explained the planning and teamwork required in executing a theft successfully.

   The people who did not steal reported that there were no positive outcomes that they could think of that would justify stealing.
4. The response of the thieves to the final question regarding the negative outcomes that they expected for theft did not include termination of employment. As members of a strong union they had high

self- and collective efficacy that their jobs would be protected even if they were caught stealing from the company. They acknowledged that if caught, they would likely receive a suspension. But, if one or more of them were suspended, they were confident that a monetary collection would be made on their behalf in the union hall.

Because the thieves did not sell what was taken, the negative outcome that they expected was strong arguments among themselves as to whose turn it was to store what was stolen. That which had been taken was reportedly clogging up their garages, basements, and attics. This in turn was incurring the wrath of their spouses.

The people who did not steal cited loss of self-respect and the respect of family members as likely outcomes of engaging in theft.

The results of these interviews were explained in detail to the organization's salaried and union leadership together. The fifth and final question was then asked of them as to ways to change the thieves outcome expectancies so as to bring about honest behavior. The company's senior management team, to the objection of the union executive committee, immediately advocated the installation of hidden cameras and the hiring of private detectives to masquerade as employees so as to enable the identification and prosecution of the thieves.

This proposed solution was abandoned when the author made it known that he had been asked by the thieves themselves to make such a recommendation so as to increase their thrill from theft. They intended to steal the cameras. In addition, jokes had been made by them regarding the kidnaping of a Pinkerton if a significant other could be found who would allow the person to be stored in the garage, basement, or attic.

Hours of debate ensued among the organization's leaders on the value of a socio-technical intervention to put the "thrill" in job performance. The intervention was rejected because management did not want to invest money for sundry reasons in a mill that existed primarily as a thorn in a competitor's marketplace. Additional hours of debate were spent on the subject of profit sharing as well as possible ways to reward people monetarily for honest behavior. This idea, too, was abandoned because senior management did not want to create a precedent for other unionized settings.

The solutions acceptable to management and the union executive were found when they re-read the responses to the questions in cells 2 and 3 of Figure 1. First, communicate to supervisors in word and deed that they will be acknowledged and supported by upper management for insisting upon and monitoring honest behavior (cell 2). Second, remove the outcome expected from stealing: namely, the thrill (cell 3).

To accomplish the latter, the company adopted the library system. Employees are now allowed to borrow all that was previously stolen. The

company's legal department prepared forms for employee signatures that acknowledge that the company is not liable for any injury as a result of employee use of that which is borrowed. Because responses to cell 3 indicated that which was stolen was rarely if ever taken to be used or to be sold, the outcome that the organization's leaders correctly expected was that little if anything would be borrowed upon implementation of this policy.

A problem that confronts libraries is the return of the book by the person who borrows it. Monetary fines often result in a decision by the borrower to keep the book. Libraries want the book returned. To attain this goal, they periodically have an amnesty day whereby the book can be returned with no monetary penalty.

Knowing this policy, the organization's leadership agreed to model it. They announced that a given date in May was amnesty day. Not only could that which was taken be returned "with no questions asked," it would be returned with the assumption that the person who returned it was not the individual who had removed it from the company premises. The person was returning the material at the request of a friend.

The material was returned by the truckload. Amnesty was extended to a second day. The material was returned by the truckload. Amnesty was extended to a third day when the garages, basements, and attics were finally uncluttered by company property that had been taken illegally. Theft dropped to near zero immediately and has remained inconsequential by company accounting methods for 3 years subsequent to the intervention. Tools such as hammers and wrenches occasionally are reported missing. No evidence of symptom substitution has been found as a result of the library policy. That is, no increase in graffiti, vandalism, or absences has occurred as a result of the company's borrowing policy.

No specific actions were taken to address theft from fellow employees. The union committee believed that for political reasons it was better for them to be seen by their members as addressing theft as an issue of overall importance to the organization rather than breaking it down into subcomponents. They did not want to be perceived as looking for ways to discipline a fellow union member. Moreover, they had a hunch as to who was doing the stealing, and they suspected that stealing from fellow employees might be a way of casting suspicion onto supervisors. There are no data to support or refute their assumptions. However, when theft from the company stopped, complaints of theft from fellow employees also stopped.

Discussion

The practical significance of this study has little or nothing to do with ways to minimize theft. People steal for sundry reasons. The generaliz-

ability of these findings to other organizational settings is likely limited at best to settings where the theft is occurring as a way for people to experience excitement in the workplace.

The practical significance of this study is fourfold. First, it illustrates a systematic way to understand why people do what they do. It shows the value of systematically collecting data on the outcome expectancies of employees for engaging in or failing to engage in a specific behavior. It demonstrates the value of theory for providing a framework for practice.

Figure 1 is labeled an empathy box because it allows the interviewer "to walk in the other person's shoes," to identify the outcomes that other people anticipate or expect. The generality of the box for collecting these data is limitless. Cells 1 and 2 refer to desired behavior. Cells 3 and 4 refer to undesired behavior. Examples of desired behavior range from employee commitment to a goal in the workplace to teenagers keeping their bedroom tidy in the home. Examples of undesired behavior range from goal rejection in the workplace to untidy behavior of teenagers in the home. The empathy box can be used to solicit data regarding the outcome expectancies of others regarding these behaviors.

Of further practical significance is that this study has shown the value of examining the data on outcome expectancies for generating hypotheses on ways that they can be altered. Given high self-efficacy regarding a specific behavior (e.g., honesty), changes in outcome expectancies can lead to changes in behavior. This finding was noted elsewhere by Napier and Latham (1986). In that study, managers with high self-efficacy regarding ability to make accurate performance appraisals refrained from doing them because their outcome expectancies were that they would be punished for doing so.

Third, the present study has demonstrated the value of explicitly measuring outcome expectancies regarding commitment to a goal that is set at the organizational rather than at the individual level where the positive expected outcomes of committing to its attainment are not necessarily transparent for the individual employee.

With regard to the above three points, the author has used the empathy box to help an organization understand why a customer chooses a competitor (undesired behavior) rather than them (desired behavior) and the outcome expectancies of the customer that need to be changed in order to get that customer's business. Similarly, the empathy box has been used to understand ways to overcome (desired) resistance to change (undesirable behavior) on the part of employees.

Fourth, this study suggests the value of gaining the union leadership's support for a project in order to get employee involvement in it. Nearly all the employees stated that they would not have consented to being interviewed, let alone responding candidly, had the union leadership

not assured them that the interviewer was a psychologist who would guarantee their anonymity.

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