An Analysis of Employee Motivation within the Public Sector

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LIS 650
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April 15, 2009
Understanding what motivates individuals is vital in attempting to obtain high level output from them in the workforce. Work motivation describes “a person’s desire to work hard and work well – to the arousal, direction, and persistence of effort in work settings” (Rainey, 1997, p. 201). For some, increased salary or incentives may be the highest motivator. Others may find that simply being part of an organization that promotes the social good is their greatest motivator. Motivation as it relates to employees working in the public sector is analyzed below. Further, the implications of this motivational research as it relates to the library setting will be considered.

In attempting to understand motivational factors influencing public sector employees, one must first review research regarding those who are currently working in the public arena. Overall, research findings suggest that public service employees are more greatly influenced by intrinsic rewards than extrinsic rewards such as salary. Wright (2007) explains, “… the importance employees place on contributing to the public sector mission of their organizations may provide intrinsic rewards that compensate for the low levels of extrinsic rewards commonly associated with public sector work” (p. 54). Further, Perry and Wise (1990) suggest that individuals working in public service have a “predisposition to respond to motives grounded primarily or uniquely in public institutions and organizations” (p. 367). In other words, individuals choosing public service may have an inherent nature which sets them up to favor the missions of public service entities.

In addition to possessing a strong public service ethic, individuals select public service work for a variety of other reasons. Buelens and Broeck (2007) conducted an analysis of the
differences in work motivation between public and private sector organizations. In this study, they surveyed 3,314 private sector and 409 public sector employees in Belgium. They found that public sector workers were more strongly motivated by the desire to work in a supporting working environment than their private sector counterparts. Further, they concluded that public sector employees make fundamental choices and prefer to lead a more balanced life. They suggest, “Perhaps they invest more in their private lives and simply do not want to join the “rat race” (of the private sector)” (Buelens and Broeck, 2007, p. 69).  

Mann (2006) further concludes, “Other characteristics commonly attributed to a service ethic include a deeper desire to make a difference, an ability to have an impact on public affairs, a sense of responsibility and integrity, and a reliance on intrinsic rewards as opposed to salary or job security” (p. 33).

Upon looking at the research findings discussed above, one might assume that the public workforce as a whole is one in which workers are highly motivated simply by their self selection into public service professions. However, despite good intentions, not all public service workers demonstrate the level of motivation desired by their supervisors. Administrators must help their employees continue to be motivated throughout their careers as public servants. Wright (2007) suggested that managers inspire their employees to work harder by clearly communicating how their work benefits society. By helping workers develop a strong public service ethic through emphasizing the societal benefits of their work, public administrators will continue to build a motivated workforce. This applies directly to libraries. If employees truly buy in to the mission of their libraries, whether it is to promote literacy, empower individuals, or enhance their communities, they will come to understand and believe in the value of their service to the organization and society at large. Several additional motivational strategies gleaned from public sector research are discussed below.
First, research suggests that public sector administrators should concentrate on promoting affective commitment of their employees to the organization. In other words, managers should focus on cultivating employees’ interests, attitudes, or emotional values as they relate to their work in the public sector. In a survey designed to assess the organizational commitment of 344 county government employees, Liou and Nyhan (1994) concluded, “Public managers can elicit affective commitment through extensive work on their agency culture, socialization process, and efforts to meet employee expectations” (p. 112). Further, these researchers suggest, “Public employee motives and commitment are primarily based on their identification with and involvement in their public organizations” (p. 111). If public sector administrators, including library managers and directors, carefully work to socialize their employees into the culture of their organizations, ensure they “buy in” to the mission, and work carefully to help meet employee expectations, then employees will begin to identify with their organizations and feel motivated.

Another key factor which must be considered when working to motivate public sector employee relates to feedback. “Feedback, or telling employees how well they are performing, is an essential element for effective organizational functioning. Feedback affects both employee motivation and performance” (Yeager, Rabin, and Vocino, 1985, p. 570). In a survey study conducted on federal, state, and local government employees working in white collar positions and the effects of feedback on their job attitudes, Yeager et al. (1985) found that adequate feedback has positive impacts on motivation in general, effort, goal setting, performance adjustment and improvement, and goal attainment. Further, these researchers found, “Those in high feedback situations make greater use of their profession as a reference group and develop a greater sense of calling or dedication to their profession than their peers working in moderate
feedback work settings” (Yeager et al., 1985, p. 573). In many work situations, feedback is given only when an individual makes a mistake or does not meet the expectations of his supervisor. When employees demonstrate positive job performance, it is not always readily recognized. If public sector administrators make better efforts to provide feedback, particularly emphasizing the positive, they may begin to notice a higher level of motivation among their staff members. Since feedback is an easy-to-use, nearly cost-free reward, it should not be overlooked. Library managers and directors must provide feedback to their employees not only through periodic reviews, but also utilize informal praise and comments and develop employee recognition programs for jobs well done.

Research also supports the claim that employees are more highly motivated when they have a clear understanding of their work goals and feel they are attainable. Wright (2007) conducted a study designed to analyze employee work motivation and performance in the public sector. In this study, 807 public employees who self-identified as managers and professionals with pay grades typically associated with that type of work were surveyed. He found that public employees are more motivated to perform their work when they have clearly understood and challenging tasks that they feel are important and achievable. Wright (2007) further concluded, “…individuals are more committed to their performance objectives when they believe those objectives are achievable and will result in important outcomes for themselves or, to the extent they are committed to organizational goals, the organization in which they work” (p. 55). In reviewing these findings, public sector administrators, including library managers, must act carefully to ensure their employees feel they have tasks which are clearly understood, challenging, and provide important outcomes for themselves and/or their organizations.
In these volatile economic times, organizations are continuously finding themselves reorganizing their workforces in order to do more work with fewer resources. Public sector administrators may feel at a loss as to how to keep their employees motivated. Research suggests that if workers are allowed to participate in proposing changes in their work and their environment, this may serve as a source of motivation. In a field study of 82 military guards, Rosenbach and Zawacki (1989) looked at the effect of employee participation in the redesign of their jobs. They found that employees will be more committed to change if they are involved in the evaluation and implementation of the change effort. Further, during this study these researchers discovered, “During the intervention a great deal of interaction was obviously required – particularly between employees and supervisors – and this was an important source of motivation for the project” (p. 119). These findings suggest that both employees and their organizations benefit when workers are able to have “a say” in the design of their duties and environment. Further, employees may demonstrate a higher level of motivation when interaction between employees and supervisors is promoted in a team approach, rather than an “us versus them” mentality. These findings can be applied directly to the library setting. With a team approach, staff and management can work together to find the best solutions to improve the design of work and the library environment which will benefit everyone, including patrons.

In trying to solve the motivational puzzle, public sector administrators should not overlook the importance of extrinsic rewards such as a pay for performance incentive plan. Wright (2007) cautions, “Public mangers should neither ignore the importance of (extrinsic rewards) nor look to them as a primary solution to the motivational puzzle. They should, however, take care to assign performance expectations in ways that not only clearly explain what employees should do and how they should do it but also why they should do it” (p. 60).
Additional research questions the effect of monetary incentive systems as the primary way to motivate public employees. In a study of 3,314 private sector and 409 public sector employees in Belgium, Buelens and Broeck (2007) found that civil servants were significantly less motivated by salary than were their private sector counterparts. Further, in a survey study of more than 2000 public employees in the United Kingdom who were participating in a performance pay situation, Marsden and Richardson (1994) found, “…performance pay… is very unlikely to have significantly raised employee motivation – indeed may, on balance, been demotivating” (p. 244). These researchers further concluded that few staff members felt that performance pay provided them with an incentive, or motivation, to change their behavior significantly. Of those who were most strongly influenced in a positive direction by pay for performance plans, Marsden and Richardson (1994) found they were the most junior grade employees and those with the shortest service. Liou and Nyhan (1994) encourage public sector administrators to concentrate more on promoting affective commitment as a way to motivate public employees rather than through the use of extrinsic rewards. Further, the use of merit pay also presents many other challenges. Mann (2006) states, “…merit pay faces numerous challenges (unrelated to motivation) in the public sector such as irregular and inefficient funding, difficulties assessing performance, and bureaucratic and structural hurdles” (p. 38). In light of this research, rather than focusing on merit pay as a motivator, public sector administrators should concentrate their motivational efforts on other strategies as discussed above. The findings concerning the ineffectiveness of merit pay in motivating public servants is good news for libraries, considering that in today’s tough economic times library budgets are quickly being cut and additional funds are often not available.
In times of recession, many public agencies are forced to downsize or outsource their services. As one might expect, research indicates this can have a damaging effect on employee motivation. Bolman and Deal (2008) state, “Downsizing and outsourcing also have a corrosive effect on employee motivation and commitment” (135). Further, one must recall that public servants are often motivated to choose careers in the public sector because of their inherent public service ethic or the drive to serve others and work for the greater good of the community. Feldheim (2007) states, “Downsizing strategies downsize the public-service ethic and potentially downsize the values of fairness and compassion from the public sector. Downsizing impacts public employees trust commitment, morale, and belief in the ethic of public service creating moral implications for public administration” (p. 265). Feldheim (2007) argues that public administrators must recognize the damage downsizing has caused to the public service ethic and to the public interest, and actively work to rebuild the infrastructure of the profession through strategies that support the public service ethic of serving the public interest. In summary, public administrators must proceed with caution if choosing to downsize their workforce. Downsizing can adversely affect employee motivation as well as damage the public service ethic of the employees. “If forced to downsize, public administrators should work carefully with their employees to foster a renewed commitment to the public service values of social justice, civic duty, and compassion…” (Feldheim, 2007, p. 265). Rather than using downsizing as a first measure to save money, library directors need to form close partnerships with their boards of trustees, mayors, or other political entities to ensure the value libraries bring to communities outweighs the desire to make cuts. Further, rather than downsize staff, libraries may choose to make budget limitations in other ways such as making staff-wide trims (i.e. everyone work two less hours per week or receive one less day of vacation), reduce programming budgets, etc.
While none of these choices are highly favorable, they may reduce the possibility of downsizing within libraries and preserve the morale, motivation, and public service ethic of library staff.

Since research studies suggest that public service employees often possess an inherent public service ethic, are attracted to public service work, and are motivated by intrinsic rewards, human resource managers should utilize this information to seek ideal candidates to work in the public service professions. This, however, may be a challenging task as Mann (2006) states, “…it remains unclear how human resource managers can take advantage of this motivation in recruiting and selecting better employees” (p. 43). Employee screening and interviewing processes must be utilized that carefully consider candidates’ reasons for wanting to pursue particular positions in the public sector. Not only do employers need to hire individuals who are able to meet the demands of particular positions, but these individuals must be highly motivated to serve. Perhaps higher education professionals in public administration, psychology, business, and human resource management can work on interdisciplinary teams to develop tools which will help human resource managers recruit and select ideal candidates into public service.

In summary, many individuals are predisposed to favor public service work and possess a public service ethic which motivates them to work for the betterment of society. Public servants are more highly motivated by intrinsic rewards such as the simple pleasure received from performing a job or the sense of satisfaction in benefitting the greater good rather than receiving extrinsic rewards such as salary. Further, research shows that public servants prefer the supporting work environment often found in public service settings as well as stable duties and hours which allow them to achieve a satisfactory work-family balance for themselves.

In order to maintain a high level of motivation among employees, public sector administrators must utilize a variety of techniques. First, they must clearly and continuously
communicate to their staff members the valuable benefits their work provides to society. They must get individuals to “buy in” to the mission of the organization through careful organizational socialization processes. Secondly, public sector administrators must make it a priority to provide a high level of feedback to their employees, emphasizing the positive without overlooking corrective feedback. Third, administrators need to ensure employees have a clear understanding of their work and feel their goals are attainable in order for them to feel motivated. Fourth, when possible, public sector administrators should allow their employees to participate in the redesign of their work and environment. Through a cooperative effort in redesign, employees may feel motivated simply by the fact that they actually have “a say” in how things are done within their organizations. Finally, one should recall from the research discussed above that the use of extrinsic rewards in the public sector (such as merit pay) should be used with caution. While one can easily suppose that everyone enjoys receiving extra money for a job well done, researchers have concluded that merit pay is not enough of an incentive or motivation for employees to change their behavior significantly. Each of these strategies can be readily applied to libraries. If library directors and managers make a concerted effort to utilize these suggestions, they will have a better chance of maintaining a highly motivated workforce within their libraries.

In an ideal setting, if public sector administrators work carefully to recruit and select employees who favor public service work, continuously employ the motivational strategies discussed above, and use downsizing as a last resort to manage budgetary setbacks, public servants, including library staff, should remain a highly motivated workforce, ready to meet the needs of society. However, Marsden and Richardson (1994) caution, “Better motivation does not automatically translate into better performance. … staff might be highly motivated but still perform badly because of a range of impediments, e.g. poor management, inadequate training or
obsolete equipment. Motivation, then, is something that can lead to better performance, but only when other conditions are met” (p. 247). Library directors and managers must make every effort to prevent or remove barriers to high performance so that their staff members are highly motivated to serve their patrons with the best level of service available.
References


