Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory

Why does a pay rise stop the complaints but not always make people work with more energy? The American psychologist Frederick Herzberg studied this question. In 1959, with Bernard Mausner and Barbara Snyderman, he published The Motivation to Work, based on interviews with about two hundred engineers and accountants. They described times when they felt very good and very bad about their jobs. The causes of good feelings were mostly different from the causes of bad feelings, so Herzberg described two separate groups of factors: hygiene factors and motivators.

1. Hygiene Factors

Hygiene factors are the conditions around the job. They include pay, job security, company policy, supervision, working conditions and relationships at work. When these factors are poor, people feel dissatisfied and complain. When they are good, the complaints stop, but people are not automatically motivated. Herzberg borrowed the word hygiene from health: clean water prevents illness, but it does not make us fit.

Example: A gym member is annoyed because the showers are always cold. The gym fixes this hygiene factor, and the complaints stop, but the member does not train any harder.

At work: Ola, a new team manager, hears complaints about a noisy office and late expense payments. She treats both as hygiene factors and fixes them quickly. The complaints stop, yet the team's energy stays the same.

2. Motivators

Motivators come from the work itself. They include achievement, recognition, interesting work, responsibility, advancement and personal growth. These factors give people real satisfaction and make them want to do more. When they are missing, people may not complain, but they simply do what is required. Motivators answer the question of why a job feels worth doing.

Example: A young musician receives a motivator: the responsibility of playing a solo at the school concert. He starts practising every day without anyone asking him.

At work: Ola adds motivators: she gives an analyst full responsibility for a client report and recognises the result in the team meeting. The analyst's energy rises, and he starts suggesting improvements of his own.

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3. Two Separate Scales

The key idea is that satisfaction and dissatisfaction are not two ends of one line. Herzberg said that the opposite of satisfaction is no satisfaction, and the opposite of dissatisfaction is no dissatisfaction. Hygiene factors move people between dissatisfied and not dissatisfied. Motivators move people between not satisfied and satisfied. This is why fixing complaints alone rarely creates enthusiasm.

Example: Looking at the two separate scales, a hotel sees that a good bed only prevents complaints. The warm personal welcome is what guests remember and talk about.

At work: Ola looks at the two separate scales to understand her team: there are no complaints now, but there is no extra energy either. No dissatisfaction is not the same as satisfaction, so she plans motivators as a separate step.

4. Using Both Factors

Herzberg advised managers to work on both groups of factors. First, they keep hygiene factors at a fair level, so that people are not unhappy. Second, they build motivators into the job itself, an approach he called job enrichment: more responsibility, more chances to achieve and room to grow. Later researchers questioned parts of the theory, such as its interview method, and people differ in what motivates them. Still, the two lists remain a useful checklist for any manager.

Example: A volunteer group uses both factors: it first fixes the timetable and buys enough tools. Then each volunteer leads one small project, and more people stay for the whole season.

At work: Ola uses both factors: after fixing the office problems, she enriches each job with clear goals, regular feedback and new challenges. Three months later, two team members ask to lead new projects.

Conclusion

In summary, Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory separates hygiene factors from motivators. Hygiene factors, such as pay and working conditions, prevent dissatisfaction when they are fair. Motivators, such as achievement, recognition and responsibility, create real satisfaction. Good managers first remove the reasons for complaints and then make the work itself meaningful. People do their best work when the job is both fair and worth doing.

Sources

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