Vroom's Expectancy Theory

Why do some people work hard for a goal while others hardly try, even when the reward on offer is the same? In 1964, the psychologist Victor Vroom explained this in his book Work and Motivation. His expectancy theory says that people choose how much effort to give based on what they expect to happen. Motivation depends on three beliefs: expectancy, instrumentality and valence. Managers use the theory to understand why a target or a reward does not always motivate.

1. Expectancy

Expectancy is the belief that effort will lead to good performance. The question in the person's mind is: if I try, can I really do it? Expectancy falls when a goal feels impossible, or when people lack skills, time or tools. Managers raise it with training, support and goals that are hard but reachable.

Example: A woman wants to run ten kilometres for charity, but her expectancy is low: she has never run more than two. An eight-week training plan shows her that she can do it, and she signs up.

At work: Areej, a sales manager, gives her team a new quarterly target, but they say that it is impossible. To raise expectancy, she breaks it into weekly goals and adds product training. The team starts to believe that the target is reachable.

2. Instrumentality

Instrumentality is the belief that good performance will lead to a reward. The question now is: if I succeed, will I really get what was promised? It falls when rewards are unclear, unfair or forgotten. When people have seen promises broken before, it is hard to rebuild. Clear rules and kept promises build it.

Example: The runner checks instrumentality: if she finishes, will her sponsors' money really reach the charity? The organisers publish how last year's money was used, and she trusts the event.

At work: Last year, a promised bonus arrived months late, so the team's instrumentality is low. Areej writes the bonus rule clearly, gets it approved by finance and shares it with everyone.

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3. Valence

Valence is the value that a person places on the reward. The question is: do I actually want this? The same reward can be exciting for one person and worthless for another. Valence can even be negative, for example a promotion that means moving far away from family. That is why it helps to ask people what matters to them.

Example: The run supports a children's hospital, and this cause matters deeply to the runner, so valence is high. Her friend cares more about the medal, and that motivates him too.

At work: Areej finds that the bonus is a shopping voucher that few people value, so its valence is low. She asks the team, and most prefer extra days off or a training course, so she offers a choice.

4. All Three Together

Vroom combined the three beliefs: motivation is expectancy multiplied by instrumentality multiplied by valence. Because they multiply, a very low score on any one of them can bring motivation close to zero. A great reward does not help if people think that the goal is impossible. In practice, people do not calculate numbers; they simply feel whether the effort is worth it. Managers therefore need to check all three, not only the reward.

Example: Another friend loves the cause and trusts the organisers, but he cannot run, so his expectancy is zero and he stays home. When the event adds a walking route, all three beliefs are high, and he joins.

At work: With reachable weekly goals, a clear bonus rule and rewards that people value, all three beliefs are now strong. By the end of the quarter, Areej's team reaches its target for the first time.

Conclusion

In summary, Vroom's expectancy theory explains motivation through three beliefs: expectancy, instrumentality and valence. People ask: can I do it, will it be rewarded, and do I want the reward? If the answer to any one question is no, effort drops. Good managers make goals reachable, keep their promises and offer rewards that people really value.

Sources

- Vroom, V. H. (1964). Work and Motivation. New York: Wiley.
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