

Explaining the Change in the Employee Behavior: How Did the Evolution of Learning Theories Lead to Employee Empowerment

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This paper emphasizes the influence of the learning theories on the continually changing trends in the employee behavior. Departing from the basic, yet crucial idea that people are the necessary resource and the driving factor in the production process, and as such should be managed successfully (Bell & Ramdass, 2010), the authors will elaborate the importance of the management's adoption and use of various learning theories that eventually resulted in major changes in the observed behavior of their employees. The years of the excessive reliance on the employment of the positive or negative reinforcement to model employees' behavior in a direction of an ideal example (Macek, 2011) have slowly faded away, and the emergence of the new attitude towards the labor force has dominated the corporate world in the recent times. It relies more heavily on the concepts of the cognitivist theory, taking into account an individual's personality traits and attributes during the learning process (DuBrin, 2006). The focus on the cognitive learning theories has necessarily generated more employee freedom in their work environment and during the task resolution, translating itself into increasing employee empowerment. Whether this empowerment represents a sustainable solution for both management and employees remains to be seen, but the underlying reason behind this trend is clear – the evolution of the learning theories.

Introduction

Discussion about the learning theories within management circles is often restricted to the challenges associated with the employee acquisition and the development of job related skills, but it is wise to acknowledge that these theories have traditionally found a wide range of application. Throughout much of the 20th century, managers applied principles of behavioral learning theory to direct or maintain desired employee behavior. Geiger (1981) explains one of these theories – operant conditioning – as a system of continuous supervision and observation of the employee behavior, with the goal of providing the feedback, either reward or punishment, in order to modify his or her behavior. Macek (2011) goes even a step further, claiming that the operant conditioning can be utilized to a point at which the excellence becomes an addiction.

Although the theory produced favorable outcomes for the organizations in the past, and it is still frequently employed as a very basic influence on the employee performance, it does come at the significant cost and faces some insurmountable barriers in the current work environment. Bell and Ramdass (2010) observe that reward and punishment systems must be continually updated and maintained, employees must be closely supervised and treated only and exclusively based on their performance and output, completely ignoring varying personality traits, importance of the organizational citizenship behavior, as well as the compatibility between organization's and the employee's goals.

DiSanza (1993) conducted an ethnographic study of a bank's attempt to increase employee motivation through reinforcement, offering monetary compensations to boost the sales of the bank services. The bank gave three dollars for every new customer, and ten dollars for successful referrals, yet the employees' reactions were mixed, resulting in either demotivation and disappointment or unhealthy, overly aggressive competitiveness among employees. As DiSanza (1993) argues, some employees believed that the rewards were either not valuable enough or simply unattainable, while others took things too seriously, producing a negative impact on the balance and cooperation in the workplace environment.

Some of the above mentioned deficiencies of the operant conditioning could severely impact its effectiveness. Macek (2011) agrees that in the long run, management has to focus on the shift away from the reinforcements, and instead build the environment in which the employees

find satisfaction in the goal accomplishment, rather than the rewards that would follow.

The awareness about the downfalls of the operant conditioning led to the development of yet another behavioral theory, social learning theory, which contrasts operant conditioning theory in terms of the role played by the management and the importance of an individual's attitude towards the organization's goals and policies. This theory suggests that individuals learn new behaviors unconsciously through observation and imitation of other persons' behavior (*The Penguin Dictionary of Psychology*, 2009). Furthermore, Bandura (1989) states that an individual's action, along with his personal factors and the surrounding environment all act as interacting variables, calling this system triadic reciprocal causation.

In the social learning theory, Albert Bandura, one of its initiators, emphasized the importance of observational learning in our environment (Kyle, 1978). Social learning theory represents an evolution compared to the previously dominant operant conditioning theory, because it departs from the employee reinforcement process, and highlights the concepts of leadership and self-efficacy. There has to be a clear distinction between the natural modeling process, which happens normally as a part of our life, and the manager's direct effort to model an employee's behavior, using his leadership ability and insuring employee's interest and focus (Sims Jr. & Manz, 2008).

Social learning theory also represents the start of the employee empowerment process, at least to a certain degree. Managers are required to assign responsibility to their employees, who will use self-management to schedule and maintain learning by imitating their leaders (Frayne & Latham, 1987). The results are, however, very rewarding and encouraging. Research by Frayne and Latham (1987) on twenty government employees demonstrated that when given the chance to utilize self-management, employees' self-efficacy surges upwards, resulting in the improved job attendance and performance. DuBrin (2006) defines self-efficacy as a concept of one's belief in his or her own competence to finish the pending job.

Moving Beyond Behavioral Learning Theories: The Power of Intrinsic Motivation

Eventually, as the level of the competitiveness on the labor market surged upwards, firms slowly became aware of the downfalls of the learning theories in place. Their lack of reliance

on the individual's traits and attributes could not be sustained, and the firms responded by immediately shifting their focus on these two factors affecting employee behavior. This trend has brought about the new set of requirements for both employers and especially employees. Employers are asked to act as mediators, mentors and even advisers, as opposed to being intrusive supervisors. On the other side, employees are encouraged to use cognitive learning, allowing them to use their own methods and insights to solve problems or learn new concepts (DuBrin, 2006).

Organizations have, accordingly, been able to start dealing with the raising issue of poor employee behavior from another perspective. Behavioral learning theories focus on the underlying power of the reinforcements to make sure that employees comply with the requirements, but they do not recognize the need for an individualized approach based on one's personal characteristics. On the other hand, cognitive learning theory is addressing broader environmental factors to find out the actual reasons of the counterproductive work behavior (MacLane & Walmsley, 2010).

Gupta and Jenkins Jr. (1991) emphasize that this lack of ability to address dysfunctional employee behavior has led to the emergence of the cognitive theories at the expense of the behavioral theories. Cognitive learning claims that learners should be allowed to develop hunches, insights and creative ideas (DuBrin, 2006), pointing out the importance of their analytical and reasoning skills. Managers relying on this theory have the intention to put their employees in the position in which they are most likely to succeed, based on the evaluation of their personality traits, level of intrinsic motivation, skills and the compliance with the organization's broader goals.

Consequently, the organizations have finally understood the strong correlation between the employees' performance and their commitment towards the organization's goals (Shore & Wayne, 1993). Ludwig and Frazier (2012) have also observed a strong impact of employee engagement on positive outcomes, including lower costs and lower absenteeism.

Having all of this in mind, it is obvious why many organizations have switched from using modeling and reinforcements to cognitive learning when influencing the employee behavior – not only because it increases the employee satisfaction, intrinsic motivation and performance, but it also helps managers to harmonize an individual's goals with the firm's goals and provides optimal assistance when trying to solve the issue of counterproductive

employee behavior. Finally, there is one underlying factor that connects all of the previously listed benefits together – they all participate in the increase of the firm's competitiveness in the market.

Using Modern Learning Theories to Create Competitive Advantages

The evolution of the workplace environment has changed the way organizations approach problems and decision-making processes, allowing employees to step in and provide valuable inputs on their own terms, yet oblige them to understand the accountability they have towards the resulting outcomes. Cognitive theories, such as the attribution theory, have influenced employees' behavior drastically, challenging them to engage in a three-step process involving analysis of the possible outcomes, evaluation of one's own abilities and traits, and decision whether certain behavior would generate positive results (*The Penguin Dictionary of Psychology*, 2009).

This trend has led to the emergence of the new class of employees – those that willingly initiate problem-solving activities, taking responsibility for success or failure. This also represents a departure from the attitude that workers are not different from the machines in the factory, claiming that they always react positively to rewards (with the emphasis on the monetary compensation), regardless of their environment.

Increasing the competitiveness.

Organizations have become very aggressive in the investments in employee learning programs, facing the pressure of an increasing competitiveness. Franz (2010) reports that the costs of such training have risen to 2.15% of payroll. Attracting new talented employees is impossible, unless the company offers them a significant degree of freedom in their behavior, creating a competitive, yet supportive work environment through cognitive learning.

Research suggests that employees are showing a high concern for issues such as job satisfaction, challenging tasks and continuous learning, and the most successful companies are fast to reply by placing more emphasis on these factors, compared to the old reinforcements. Apparently, Google pays its employees salaries that are below industry average, but compensates with benefits that they value more highly (Kuntze & Matulich, 2010).

Choosing creativity over tight control. In the production process, organizations have observed that they can achieve growth in their efficiency, while employing behavioral learning techniques. However, most of these organizations have struggled significantly in the recent times, trying to compete with companies utilizing even cheaper labor from China and India. They eventually realized that they should not rely on employees acting as 'mercenaries', responding only to rewards and punishments, but instead focus on attracting creative workers with the intrinsic motivation and the strong sense of urgency.

Observations have confirmed that creativity fuels job performance (Gong, Huang & Farh, 2009), bringing more success to those organizations that do not intrusively supervise their employees, but highlight their analytical and cognitive skills as a driving factor for the employee behavior, resulting in above average outcomes.

Employee empowerment. Overall, the shift towards cognitive learning theories has clearly been correlated with an increasing level of the employee empowerment. In order to maximize the positive effects of the creative environment and enriched job positions, organizations have to give even more power to their employees, accentuating the concepts of potency, meaningfulness and autonomy (DuBrin, 2006).

Botero and Van Dyne (2009) explained that competitive advantage could be easily generated through innovative ideas that employees suggest to their supervisors, focusing either on the enhancement of the quality of the product or service offered or an improvement in the production process.

McDermott, Laschinger and Shamian (1996) observed that the lack of employee empowerment necessarily leads to the feeling of being 'stuck in the job', usually correlated with the lack of accountability, resistance to corporate changes and poor self-efficacy. The only solution seems to be generation of innovative and creative environment for the employees. Kanter provides an example of one occupation, nursing, which requires immediate empowerment and socialization to avoid underperformance (McDermott, Laschinger, & Shamian, 1996).

Informal Learning: An Illusion or a Reality

The decline in the amount of employee restrictions and the diminishing reliance on the

organizational chart in the communication process within and outside the organization has brought an emphasis on another learning technique – informal learning. DuBrin (2006) states that informal learning can be achieved anytime and anywhere as long as the workplace environment supports employee communication and allows enough time and space for informal interactions. The concept of informal learning goes beyond the idea of employee empowerment, suggesting that management only needs to secure common places within their corporate offices and stimulate the employee interaction and the learning process should start flowing undisturbed.

This idea is further supported by the research conducted by Jeon and Kim (2012), suggesting that the declining amount of routine and repeated tasks within the organizations leads to the rapid development of informal learning.

Although still relatively under-researched (Eraut, 2004), informal learning has motivated many companies to move in the direction of creating an environment where the ideas flow freely and employees are encouraged to exchange thoughts both in formal and informal situations. Kuntze and Matulich (2010) have suggested that this might be the winning formula for Google, one of the companies believing that informal learning can strongly influence employee behavior as witnessed by lower absenteeism, increased performance, and improved communication and cooperation.

An issue associated with informal learning is that it is largely invisible and immeasurable (Eraut, 2004), leading some people to believe that it is only an illusion that it affects employee behavior significantly. Garrick (1998) points that informal learning occurs outside of the formal programs, and thus questions its usefulness due to limited controllability by the organization's management that might result in learning incorrectly or relying on the mentor's opinion too heavily. Practical examples within highly successful organizations have, however, shown that it can be utilized very efficiently and at the very low cost, as a complement to the cognitive learning theory to modify employee behavior.

More importantly, informal learning shows a high degree of correlation with the establishment of the organizational citizenship behavior, which motivates employees to engage in activities even though there might not be direct compensation for them (DuBrin, 2006). One of these activities might be the interaction with the younger workers in the

informal environment, helping them learn some insights related to the industry or making suggestions on how to perform more efficiently.

The Present and the Future: What Does the E-learning Bring?

Technological advancements have caused changes on all levels of the corporate environment, including the introduction of yet another learning technique, e-learning. Brown and Charlier (2013) stated that e-learning is based on the idea that practice outpaces the development of the theory, whereas DuBrin (2006) claims that its success rate is highly dependent on the structure of the lessons.

Whether e-learning brings an improvement in employee behavior by enhancing performance cannot be clearly concluded, but we can definitely observe that it takes a completely different route to influence behavior compared to cognitive and informal theories. E-learning takes away the importance of an individualized approach, employee interaction and empowerment, yet still relies on the self control of each employee.

Even though the time flexibility of the e-learning should be praised, its success is doubtful. Characterized by a very high dropout rates

(DuBrin, 2006), it relies heavily on the attitude and the approach of an individual to whom the learning services are provided. As Brown and Charlier (2013) suggest, the fact that an employee controls the learning process is not necessarily translated into successful immediate success, especially if his intrinsic motivation and self-efficacy are not particularly high.

Githens (2006) further cautions users of e-learning of its downfalls, emphasizing the continuous need for technology maintenance and implementation of the new advancements, which might cause an unplanned increase in costs. He continues by addressing the issue of technological instability and the lack of mutual interests among employees that might affect the effectiveness of e-learning. Clearly, the process of maximizing benefits and effects of the technology is both time- and resource-consuming, yet it provides little influence on the organizational culture (Olafsen & Cetindamar, 2005).

At this point in time, we can confidently say that the utilization of the e-learning cannot generate such a strong impact on the employee behavior as the employment of the cognitive learning theory. E-learning might enhance the performance of those employees participating in the program voluntarily (Brown & Charlier, 2013), as well as alienate others from their peers due to greater reliance on the computer-based software, thus significantly hampering

the efficiency of the informal learning in the workplace environment and outside of it.

Conclusion

The increasing competitiveness in the global markets has fueled numerous changes in the management of the organizations, one of which is definitely the evolution in the utilization of the various learning theories to modify employee behavior. The growing pressure to continue enhancing productivity and efficiency has led to the urgent shift from the behavioral to the cognitive learning theories, promoting concepts of creativity, job enrichment and employee empowerment. Employees have responded to the greater emphasis on the cognitive and analytical skills by changing their behavior, from being the 'followers' to becoming self-managed 'initiators', willingly taking additional accountability for the challenging and exciting tasks. Consequently, some organizations already are, and the others plan to take an individualized approach towards employees, focusing on their attributes and personality traits in the problem-solving activities, while maintaining interactive workplace environment to allow the generation of the informal learning.

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