It's (Probably) Not Them:
How Workplace Systems
Destroy Employee
Motivation and What You
Can Do About It

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I am the manager of Access Services at the University of Guelph in Guelph, Ontario. We're a medium-sized university serving approximately 24, 000 students. Prior to becoming a librarian, I was a manager for several retail businesses. When I became a manager again three years ago, I was struck by how my new department resembled my old retail stores: employee engagement was an issue, especially among our student staff members. I set out to understand employee motivation better in light of recent research and conversations in the management-sphere about healthy workplaces, happiness, and neuroscience.

WARNING:
* I don't have all the answers – no magic bullet here just the beginning of a conversation that I hope to keep going for myself and the profession
* Based on my own experiences as a manager in new department and the challenges and issues I observed and have been trying to resolve in my first two years. Some of what I say and what I've done and thought may not apply to your workplace but I hope that you get something out of today's session that starts a larger conversation
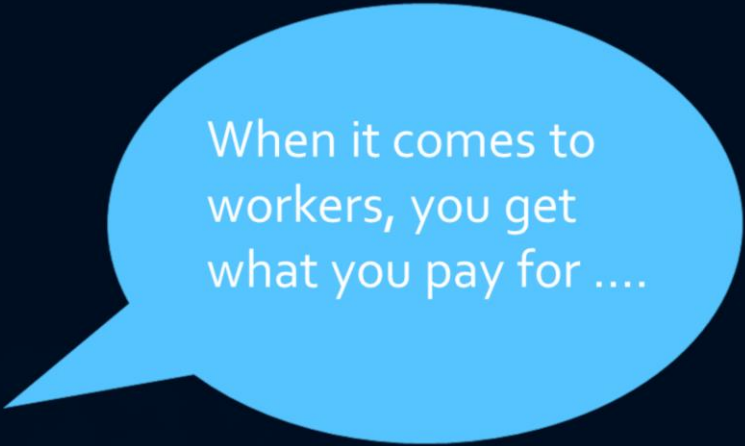* I'm a bit of an idealist!!

# What is a Workplace System?

Workplace systems are practically anything that's been created by you as the manager or the workplace such as policies, procedures, workflows, job descriptions, training and development. A workplace system can also be really big things such as unions.

## Where Do Systems Come From?

Systems come from ideas – from ideas and theories about the world and human nature or human behaviour.

Ask that you reflect on the following statements privately to yourself about whether you yourself have ever thought or said something like this or have overheard it at your library

It is in the inherent interest of every man to live as much at his ease as he can; and if his emoluments are to be precisely the same whether he does or does not perform some very laborious duty, to perform it in as careless and slovenly a manner as authority will permit

Adam Smith. (1776). *The Wealth of Nations*

In other words, all things being equal, the only way to get people to do good work is to incentivize the work. You have to make it worth their while!! People only do things for incentives, rewards, or money.

Before Smith we get thinkers like Thomas Hobbes who proposed in *Leviathan* that people are inherently selfish and aggressive.

Work consists mainly of simple, not particularly interesting, tasks. The only way to get people to do them is to incentivize them properly and monitor them carefully

Frederick Winslow Taylor. (1911). *The Principles of Scientific Management*

Taylor introduced the idea that there should be a division of labour – that mental work (such as planning) be divided out from manual work. Control of the work was to be transferred from workers to management and that it was management's job to provide detailed plans for how to do a job to workers who should not deviate from that plan or instruction.

While Taylor only intended his ideas to be applied to factory work – with the intention of making them more efficient and productive - his theories were highly influential in the early 20th Century and his work was applied to many more types of workplaces than he might have intended.
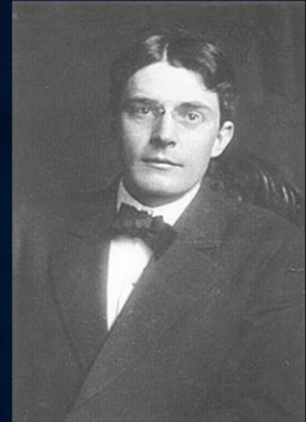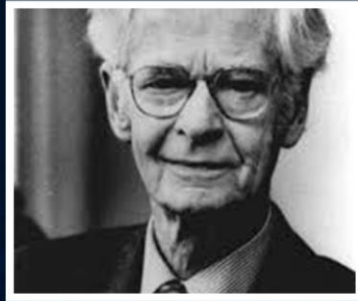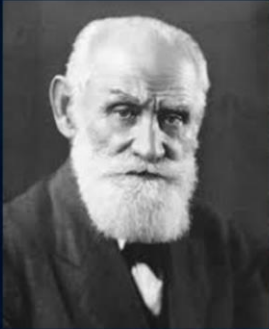
Ivan Pavlov, John B. Watson and B.F. Skinner all came along and offered related "behaviourist" theories of why people do what they do – and all of it was applied to broader ideas of human nature and to why we work and how work should be structured and incentivized.

The basic premise: Motivation comes from outside – and mostly in the form of either food/security incentives or from monetary incentives.

The problem with these theories is that the early ones, for example the theories from Smith and Taylor, didn't actually ask the employees what they thought or why they worked! With later ones such as our threesome here, they were usually formed by conducting experiments with animals or, in Skinner's case, also young children.

# What (Really) Motivates Us?

Research now is mostly conducted with adults in the field and asks them for their thoughts about their own experiences to come up with theories.

Psychologists like Peter Heslin, Barry Schwartz, Carol Dweck and Amy Wrzesniewski are looking at different aspects of human behaviour and thoughts about motivation. Their work focuses on how we "design" our systems and workplaces to confirm our already established ideologies and ideas about human nature. In other words, we create our workplaces to conform to what we already believe about our workers – both generally overall and about specific people.

The articles and books listed at the end of this presentation are just a taste of this recent research. All of them offer revealing and provoking reads that can help each of us re-think and examine our management systems and practices for the better.

What motivates us?

- Exercise a measure of **autonomy**
- Exercise our **discretion**
- Connect to a purpose or higher **meaning** for the work
- Achieve a level of **mastery** or expertise

In general, recent research seems to agree on the following motivations. These are the motivating factors that are most common among all workers as revealed in the research. Individuals may have these and/or other motivating factors as well. An excellent resource for understanding the underlying motivation behind human social behaviour is David Rock's 2008 article *SCARF: A brain-based model for collaborating with and influencing others*. NeuroLeadership Journal, Vol. 1.

# What Can We Do?

We must engage in an examination of our systems for their underlying ideologies. What workplace do we want to create? Which ideas about human nature do we want to reinforce and create?

## What can we do?

- Look closely at job descriptions and job ads – not only how they are written but also how they are used and in what context are they placed for workers

- Connect tasks, jobs, positions, etc. to the higher purpose of the organization or to the real impact we have on our users
  - Part-time Student Assistant Position
    - Re-wrote the job ad to include the department and library context and behaviour expectations (e.g. library as living room/users as guests in our home)
  - Full-time Library Assistant Position – Access Services
    - Greater emphasis and description of the independent nature of the work

One of the first "systems" that I examined and changed at Guelph was to look more closely at our job descriptions and job ads.

Job descriptions are the stories we tell about the work and what each worker does in the organization. How do we tell those stories? How do we contextualize those stories? Are they just lists of duties – a checklist of things to get done each day - or are they placed within a context of meaning and purpose within the organization and the users we serve? How can we create or reorganize jobs to include variety, complexity, autonomy, development and growth?

## What can we do?

- Engage in training, coaching, mentoring, performance appraisal processes, and support for staff that helps them to achieve mastery and expertise, and recognizes them for that mastery
- Provide more frequent and concrete feedback
  - Performance rubric – what does outstanding performance look like?
- Invite feedback from workers on your own performance

We found that our student staff not only didn't understand the context and importance of their work within the whole Library, they also did not know what specific behaviours were expected of them in the performance of their jobs. We set about to create a performance rubric that would make it very clear what outstanding performance actually looks like. Student staff are invited to assess their own performance and to discuss their self-assessment with their supervisor each semester in order to encourage reflection and metacognitive skills.

Our training checklist lists "mastery" as the ultimate goal of training and gaining experience in all our roles in the department.

## What can we do?

- Examine and change workflows, policies, and procedures that forbid or discourage employees to exercise their discretion

- Have and show confidence in your employees to do the "right" thing – to do their jobs with integrity and competence

- Keep learning and talking to each other!!

What kinds of things do we forbid? How can we move more control (or autonomy and discretion) from the manager to the managed?

My next steps in my own department are to look more closely at policies and procedures that forbid staff to make independent decisions or to exercise discretion. I believe that exercising discretion is one of the most powerful motivators as it is at once a reflection of employee mastery and an acknowledgement of an employee's experience and trustworthiness. For example, at present, a long-standing rule in my department is that all fine forgiveness must be approved by the manager or coordinator – for any amount!! It, along with a few more procedures that enforced managerial control over the most minute operations, is on the chopping block this summer!

My final thoughts, which reveal my idealism I'm sure, are to think the best thoughts about the people you work with and those that report to you and then create the systems that will make those thoughts come true …

# Questions???

# The (Social) Science - References

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# Further Reading & Inspiration

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