
What Motivates Employees? Workers and Supervisors Give Different Answers

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Which do workers value more: interesting work or good wages? Supervisors think they know the answer, but forty years of survey results prove that they don't.

Why do workers work? Industrial psychologists and management experts have sought the answer to this question for many years. If a company knows why its employees come to work on time, stay with the company for their full working lives, and are productive, then it might be able to ensure that all of its employees behave in that way. Such a company would have a decided marketplace advantage over competitors suffering from absenteeism, costly re-training programs, and production slowdowns.

WHICH DO WORKERS WANT: INTERESTING WORK OR GOOD WAGES?

How can we discover why workers work? One obvious way is to ask employees what they prefer in their work environment. When we asked 1,000 industrial employees this question, we found that the item most frequently cited was "interesting work."

If this is the answer, then all that is necessary is to make all of the work in industry interesting. Then we will have happy, productive employees

who come to work on time and don't quit. Unfortunately, not all jobs can be made interesting. More importantly, what is interesting to one person may not be interesting to someone else.

If direct supervisors are able to recognize the differences between their employees, then perhaps they can make sure that everyone is in a job that he or she finds interesting. However, when supervisors were asked what they thought their employees wanted from their jobs, the supervisors claimed that their workers' highest preference was not for interesting work but for good wages. If the immediate supervisors are to be believed, all a company has to do is to make sure that it pays good wages to all its employees.

Good wages are probably easier to offer than interesting work, but the employees say that salary alone doesn't rank extremely high on their list of preferences. Thus, there are some differences in how managers view the reasons that workers work and how workers view the reasons they work.

This article:

- Compares results of three sur-

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veys concerning employee and supervisory rankings of ten motivational items;

- Discusses individual differences between groups of employees and supervisors; and
- Looks at the manipulation of reward systems.

FORTY YEARS OF SURVEYS

In 1946, industrial employees were asked to rank ten “job reward” factors in terms of personal preference. The results were as follows:

1. Full appreciation of work done;
2. Feeling of being in on things;
3. Sympathetic help with personal problems;
4. Job security;
5. Good wages;
6. Interesting work;
7. Promotion and growth in the organization;
8. Personal loyalty to employees;
9. Good working conditions; and
10. Tactful discipline.¹

A similar questionnaire was given to industrial employees in 1981 and again in 1986.

By 1981 what workers wanted had changed. “Interesting work” was in first position, and “sympathetic help with personal problems” had dropped to the ninth slot. By 1986, the list looked like this:

1. Interesting work;
2. Full appreciation of work done;

3. Feeling of being in on things;
4. Job security;
5. Good wages;
6. Promotion and growth in organization;
7. Good working conditions;
8. Personal loyalty to employees;
9. Tactful discipline; and
10. Sympathetic help with personal problems.

The workers surveyed in 1946 came from a different environment than today’s factory workers. America had come out of a depression and had just gone through a war. In 1986, after almost forty years of relative prosperity and a rise in the standard of living beyond the imagination of workers in 1946, it is not surprising that what workers want from their work had changed.

MOTIVATION, MASLOW, AND HERZBERG

The late psychologist A. H. Maslow organized human needs on five general levels.² In ascending order these are:

- Physiological needs (food, water, sex, shelter);
- Safety needs (protection);
- Social needs (belonging, acceptance);
- Ego needs (achievement, status, appreciation); and
- Self-actualization needs (need to realize one’s potential).

The first three needs can be considered basic or “deficit” needs. When

these basic needs are satisfied, then the ego and self-actualization needs are pursued.

Frederick Herzberg’s two-factor theory, also known as the motivation-hygiene theory, divides need satisfactions into extrinsic and intrinsic factors.³ The extrinsic factors—such as salary, working conditions, and job security—lead to job dissatisfaction if not met, but will not necessarily contribute to job satisfaction when they are met. The intrinsic factors—such as the work itself, achievement, and recognition—are the actual motivators; they fulfill an individual’s need for psychological growth. The extrinsic factors, on the other hand, merely prevent dissatisfaction.

If we relate the list of employee ratings to Maslow’s hierarchy of needs or to Herzberg’s hygiene theory, it becomes fairly obvious that organizations in the U.S. industrial sector have done a better job of satisfying the basic or “deficit” needs of their workers than they have in satisfying the ego or self-fulfillment needs.⁴

In the 1946, 1981, and 1986 studies, supervisors were asked to rank job rewards as they believed employees would rank them. Their rankings remained almost the same for each year:

1. Good wages;
2. Job security;
3. Promotion and growth in the organization;

3. Frederick Herzberg, Bernard Mausner, and Barbara Bloch Snyderman, *The Motivation to Work* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1959).

4. See Alan C. Filley and Robert J. House, “Some Empirical Evidence about Needs Theory,” *Managerial Motivation and Compensation* (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan: 1972) p. 239.

1. Kenneth A. Kovach, “Why Motivational Theories Don’t Work,” *Society for the Advancement of Management Advanced Management Journal*, Spring, 1980: 56.

2. Abraham H. Maslow, “A Theory of Human Motivation,” *Psychological Review*, July 1943: 370-96.

4. Good working conditions;
5. Interesting work;
6. Personal loyalty to employees;
7. Tactful discipline;
8. Full appreciation of work done;
9. Sympathetic help with personal problems; and
10. Feeling of being in on things.

The supervisors' rankings show that not only have they not changed over the last forty years their collective perception of factors that motivate employees, but also that they don't realize the importance of Maslow's hierarchy of needs or Herzberg's extrinsic and intrinsic factors in motivation. Most importantly, a comparison of the rankings shows that supervisors have a very inaccurate perception of what motivates employees.

MANAGERS AND MOTIVATION

Assuming that they are aware of almost four decades of research, why have managers chosen to ignore the theories of motivation? Specifically, why do managers continually place wages at the top of their hierarchy and the other motivators, which both Maslow and Herzberg consider essential for job satisfaction, at the bottom? Several explanations are possible for supervisors' apparent neglect of the conclusions drawn from the research of behavioral scientists.

One reason could be that supervisors believe employees find an interest in money and other basic needs socially undesirable and therefore pay lip service to more socially acceptable factors such as interesting work. On the other hand, it is possible that employees are better witnesses to their own feelings than are their supervisors.

Another reason for the disparity may be that managers choose rewards for which they are less responsible. For example, pay raises are usually determined by formalized organizational policies, not by the personal relationships between supervisors and employees. Thus, supervisors can "pass the buck" when it comes time to assign blame for poor levels of employee motivation.

These explanations are largely untested. Another theory that may explain this phenomenon can be called "self-reference." Managers offer rewards or behave toward workers in ways that would motivate *them*, but these are not necessarily the rewards and behaviors that will motivate *their employees*.

David McClelland found that supervisors are usually high achievers who are interested in concrete measures—namely, money—that reflect how well they have done.⁵ For managers, money is a quantifiable way of keeping score.

In 1946 there was a significant difference between the way supervisors ranked employee rewards and the rankings made by employees themselves; there was also a significant difference between the two in 1981 and

1986. Thus, managers appear to remain out of tune with the desires of their employees. Despite a tremendous volume of behavioral research into what motivates employees, supervisory self-reference is as much of a problem today as it was after the Second World War—a sad commentary on the implementation of research results in the workplace.

HOW WORKER VALUES DIFFER

The 1986 survey divided employees into various categories, something the earlier surveys did not do. Just as there are differences between what employees want over time, there may also be differences between categories of employees based on sex, age, income level, job type, and organization level. Table 1 shows the subgroups studied in the 1986 survey, and Table 2 analyzes subset data and makes it possible for the responses of each subset

5. David C. McClelland, "The Role of Money in Managing Motivation," *Managerial Motivation and Compensation* (note 4): 527.

Table 1
Statistics for the 1986 Survey

1,000 Employees (Industrial Sector)	100 Supervisors* (First and Second Level)
<i>Sex</i> M = 622 F = 378	<i>Sex</i> M = 76 F = 24
<i>Age</i> Under 30 = 202 31-40 = 348 41-50 = 325 Over 50 = 125	<i>Age</i> Under 30 = 16 31-40 = 29 41-50 = 40 Over 50 = 15
<i>Income Level</i> Under \$12,000 = 135 \$12,001-\$18,000 = 360 \$18,001-\$25,000 = 334 Over \$25,000 = 171	<i>Income Level</i> Under \$16,000 = 6 \$16,001-\$22,000 = 34 \$22,001-\$30,000 = 39 Over \$30,000 = 21
<i>Job Type</i> Blue-collar unskilled = 350 Blue-collar skilled = 291 White-collar unskilled = 206 White-collar skilled = 113	<i>Job Type Supervised</i> Blue-collar unskilled = 31 Blue-collar skilled = 27 White-collar unskilled = 23 White-collar skilled = 19
<i>Organization Level</i> Lower Nonsupervisory = 418 Middle Nonsupervisory = 359 Higher Nonsupervisory = 139	<i>Organizational Level Supervised</i> Lower Nonsupervisory = 34 Middle Nonsupervisory = 37 Higher Nonsupervisory = 29

*Supervisors surveyed are directly connected with employees surveyed.

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to be compared with those of the entire group of 1,000 employees. Note that supervisors are not included in the subgroups, only the 1,000 employees.

Male/Female

When the responses of men and women were analyzed, no significant statistical difference was found in the

preferences of the two groups. However, women put “full appreciation of work” in first place, while men put it second. Female employees may place greater importance on interpersonal relationships and communication than do male employees, a difference that should be noted by managers. Women in the workplace have different problems than do men; many are still trying to cope with their traditional

roles as housewives along with their roles as workers. This possible role conflict could cause women to seek more appreciation of work.

Age Group

Four age groups were analyzed: under 30, 31-40, 41-50, and over 50. The under 30 group showed the greatest disparity in its distribution from the

Table 2
What Workers Want, Ranked by Subgroups (1986 Survey)

	Sex		Age				Income Level				Job Type			Organization Level					
	Supervisors	Employees	Men	Women	Under 30	31-40	41-50	Over 50	Under \$12,000	\$12,001-\$18,000	\$18,001-\$25,000	Over \$25,000	Blue-Collar Unskilled	Blue-Collar Skilled	White-Collar Unskilled	White-Collar Skilled	Lower Non-supervisory	Middle Non-supervisory	Higher Non-supervisory
Interesting work	5	1	1	2	4	2	3	1	5	2	1	1	2	1	1	2	3	1	1
Full appreciation of work done	8	2	1	3	5	3	2	2	4	3	3	2	1	6	3	1	4	2	2
Feeling of being in on things	10	3	2	3	6	4	1	3	6	1	2	4	5	2	5	4	5	3	3
Job security	2	4	5	4	2	1	4	7	2	4	4	3	4	3	7	5	2	4	6
Good wages	1	5	4	5	1	5	5	8	1	5	6	8	3	4	6	6	1	6	8
Promotion and growth in org.	3	6	6	6	3	6	8	9	3	6	5	7	6	5	4	3	6	5	5
Good working conditions	4	7	7	7	7	7	7	4	8	7	7	6	9	7	2	7	7	7	4
Personal loyalty to employees	7	8	8	8	9	9	6	5	7	8	8	5	8	9	9	8	8	8	7
Tactful discipline	9	9	9	9	8	10	9	10	10	9	9	10	7	10	10	9	9	9	10
Sympathetic help with personal problems	6	10	10	10	10	8	10	6	9	10	10	9	10	8	8	10	10	10	9

total responses of all groups but the greatest similarity to the supervisors' estimate of how employees would respond. The difference between how the under 30 group responded when compared with each of the other age groups is statistically significant.

The under 30 group chose good wages, job security, and promotion and growth as their first three choices. This could indicate that these new workers have not yet fulfilled their basic needs according to Maslow. When the under 30 group is compared with the other groups, it is interesting to note that the 31-40 group still place job security high on their hierarchy of values but that this basic need becomes less important as one moves up through the age groups. Thus, industry seems to do well in taking care of the basic needs of employees, at least for those who stay past their fortieth birthday. If Maslow is to be believed, older workers should then place more emphasis on their social and ego needs, their lower order needs being fulfilled. This would explain why workers over 50 place "sympathetic help with personal problems," "good working conditions," and "personal loyalty to employees" moderately high on their lists of preferences—certainly higher than do younger employees.

Income

The low-income group (under \$12,000) showed a response pattern that was quite different from the total employee responses but similar to supervisory expectations. The responses were also statistically different from the other income groups.

Like younger employees, the low-income group placed "good wages," "job security," and "promotion and growth in the organization" in the primary positions.

The next two income levels (through \$25,000) resembled one another strongly. They differed from the low-income group in that they placed "good wages," "job security," and "promotion and growth in the organization" in the middle position in their list of preferences.

Interestingly, the over \$25,000 group put "job security" third in im-

portance. Perhaps increased affluence increases also the desire to retain it.

Job Types

A comparison of the blue-collar unskilled responses and white-collar unskilled responses showed significant differences. The unskilled blue-collar group gave top ranking to "full appreciation of work done," "interesting work," and "good wages," whereas the unskilled white-collar worker showed a greater interest in "interesting work," "good working conditions," and "appreciation of work done." The unskilled blue-collar worker was slightly more interested in "job security" than the unskilled white-collar worker, whereas the unskilled white collar worker placed more value on "promotion and growth in the organization."

Fewer differences emerge when comparing the skilled blue-collar with the skilled white-collar worker. The most significant difference is that skilled blue-collar workers do not seem to place as much value on "full appreciation of work done." It may be that skilled blue-collar workers are intrinsically content with their work because, in the majority of cases, their tasks are well defined and self-contained. The tasks of white collar workers, on the other hand, tend to be more open-ended, and the worker is more dependent on supervisory feedback for the definition and assessment of the job.

"Job security" was of significant importance for the blue-collar skilled worker, who ranked it third, whereas "promotion and growth in the organization" was ranked third by the white-collar skilled.

The most significant difference between blue-collar unskilled and blue-collar skilled is the value they place on "full appreciation of work done." The skilled worker rated this factor sixth out of ten, whereas the unskilled worker placed it first in importance.

White-collar unskilled and white-collar skilled workers rated "good working conditions" significantly differently. The unskilled worker placed

working conditions second in importance, whereas the skilled worker placed it seventh. Here again, Maslow may come into play: The unskilled worker is more likely than his skilled counterpart to find himself in an unsatisfactory physical environment (unfulfilled need).

Organizational Level

The organization levels were divided into lower, middle, and higher non-supervisory categories. The comparison of the lower with both the middle and the higher levels produced statistically significant differences.

The greatest difference was that the lower organization level employees rated "good wages" first and "job security" second, whereas both the middle and higher levels rated "interesting work" first and "full appreciation of work done" second. Here is more evidence that basic needs must be satisfied before the higher needs are expressed.

MANIPULATING THE REWARD SYSTEM

According to all three surveys, supervisors feel that money is the major motivator of their employees. But only three of the employee subgroups rated money as the most important reward. These subgroups were:

- The under 30 group, representing 20 percent of the total survey;
- The under \$12,000 income level, representing 13.5 percent of the total; and
- The lower organization level employee, representing 42 percent of the total survey.

Why do managers choose to ignore the reward responses made by most of the workers under their supervision? Managers seem to operate under a self-reference system; they rank rewards as they would want them for themselves and assume that their employees would subscribe to the same rewards.

If this is true—and the survey results confirm that it is true—then how can management be encouraged to

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base employee policies on more objective interpretations of employee motivations?

One way to encourage more objectivity in structuring reward systems is to do attitude surveys such as this one. This survey revealed that supervisors do not know what their employees want. It also revealed differences among employee subgroups that management should take into consideration when structuring reward systems.

Managers need to be aware that reward practices should be designed to fit the needs of particular persons working under particular conditions. Using the present survey as an example, how can reward systems be manipulated for the various groupings?

Male/Female

According to this survey, men are more inclined to prefer interesting work, whereas women need more appreciation of work well done. Efforts should be made to design interesting jobs—both groups marked “interesting work” as one of the three primary rewards. But managers who take into account the fact that women workers have more need of appreciation will engage in verbal communication intended to foster such a feeling.

Age Group

Flexible pay incentives might be used effectively with the under 30 workers

who are concerned about their basic needs. Older groups can be expected to respond more positively to job enrichment and job enlargement programs.

The 41-50 group gave first place to “the feeling of being in on things.” Systems of top down vertical communication within the organization would appear to be particularly effective with this group. Supervisors dealing with the 41-50 age group might well make an effort to include this group in discussions of policy, even if their ideas are not always implemented.

The over 50 group places moderate importance on “good working conditions,” “personal loyalty to employees,” and “sympathetic help with personal problems.” A manager who is aware of these needs can help these employees be more productive.

Income

Lower-income employees, who are primarily concerned with “good wages,” would respond well to pay incentive programs. They are moderately concerned with “full appreciation of work done,” “interesting work,” and “the feeling of being in on things.” All of the other income groups are primarily concerned with “interesting work” and “full appreciation of work done.”

A job enrichment/job enlargement program would probably work for all income groups except the lowest one, while an incentive pay program (for

example, piece-rate or the Scanlon plan) might motivate lower-income employees.

Job Types

The most striking difference between the unskilled blue-collar worker and the unskilled white-collar worker is the emphasis placed on “good working conditions.” The unskilled white-collar workers, who put this second on their list of preferences, were the only group to give this factor so high a rating. Supervisors of this group should be able to address the physical working conditions by a simple environmental analysis and reap some motivational return.

The difference between blue-collar skilled and white-collar skilled workers is significant in the positioning of “full appreciation of work done.” Skilled blue-collar workers evidently have a high self-awareness of how well they do their jobs, whereas white-collar workers need outside confirmation of job worth.

Because of their need to be in on things, blue-collar skilled workers should be included in more decision-making activities. Skilled white-collar workers respond well to the same stimuli as their blue-collar counterparts but for a different reason. Greater participation in decision-making activities provides these white-collar workers with the feedback they need to define their jobs and better opportunities to receive the exposure needed for advancement.

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Organization Level

Employees at the lower organizational level would respond to pay incentives and greater job security. In the middle and higher levels employees respond to job enrichment and job enlargement programs.

In the middle organization level, respondents assigned job security the number four position, the same position as the total respondent ranking. Management should consider seriously the insecurity experienced by workers in the industrial sector.

Evidently job security matters to people who don't have it, as evidenced by the under 30 group giving it second position, the 31-40 group (a group that may find it more difficult to change jobs) ranking it first, and the over 50 group (the group with the most security) ranking it seventh. The higher organization level group, probably those with the most security, placed job security in the number six position. Again, the evidence supports Maslow's contention that fulfilled needs no longer motivate.

THE IMPORTANCE OF ATTITUDE SURVEYS

With the exception of two groups—the group under 30 and the group making less than \$12,000 a year—all of the respondents ranked “interesting work” in one of the three top positions.

For thirty years a large utility company asked job applicants to rank-order 10 job characteristics in terms of

their importance to the applicants. A study that drew on this experience came up with results similar to those shown in Table 2.⁶ Over this thirty-year period, job security declined in importance and “type of work” increased in importance. Furthermore, when the respondents were grouped according to educational attainment, people with higher education attached more importance to type of work, while those with only high school diplomas attached more importance to job security.

Because each year the American labor force contains a higher percentage of persons with postsecondary education, the importance of interesting work will increase.

Making work interesting is not an easy task, however. It is much easier to pay more, to make work cleaner and safer, even to ensure reasonable job security than it is to make some kinds of work interesting. Perhaps in the future job enlargement and enrichment need to be tried on a far larger scale than has been done in the past. Surely the work of Frederick Herzberg would support such a notion. Organizations with considerable numbers of younger, lower-paid workers may well take a long look at these behavioral concepts.

Many studies in the field of job satisfaction are in general agreement that most workers are satisfied with their jobs. Workers between 20-29, however, are the least satisfied. A study

of this particular group found that 24 percent—almost one in four—held negative attitudes toward their work.⁷

Job satisfaction is a difficult thing to measure. It is tied to the expectations of the workers who answer the question, and it is difficult to evaluate against a fixed scale of intensity. At what point, for example, do an individual's cumulative negative feelings add up to an overall assessment that he or she is dissatisfied with a given job? Only the individual can make such a judgment.

However, this does not mean that we cannot generalize from these surveys. For example, it appears that, in most cases, the basic needs of the worker are met by industrial organizations. That is, wages are not a burning issue except with those under age 30 earning less than \$12,000 a year, and at the lowest organizational level.

What most employees consider important is “interesting work,” “appreciation of work,” and the “feeling of being in on things.” Supervisors should be aware of the importance of these particular values and encourage upper level management to restructure jobs and construct better communications within the organization. They should be aware that the employees want to be appreciated and should make an effort to give credit where credit is due. Whenever possible, they should include all levels of employees in some forms of decision

6. C. E. Jurgensen, “Job Preferences: What Makes a Job Good or Bad?” *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 63 June 1978: 267-76.

7. H. L. Sheppard and N. Q. Herrick, *Where Have All the Robots Gone?* (New York: Free Press: 1972).

making so that employees have a feeling of belonging and participating.

Surveys of attitudes enable supervisors to spot potential dissatisfaction factors that could arise because of changes in the makeup of the work force and in the background of the employees. And frequent surveys help to impress on managers their responsibility to take into account the needs of employees.

In order to know what are the specific needs of employees, attitude surveys are necessary. Because of today's rapidly changing society, these surveys need to be taken often. Self-reference, a major problem in employee motivation for at least forty years, will not and cannot be eliminated or even minimized any other way.

The High-Wage Myth

The results of attitude surveys should be disseminated to the supervisors directly in charge of the employees, not held in the hands of upper-level management. These results may help to dispel the notion held by supervisors that their employees are motivated by high wages above everything else, even though this false notion has been disproven by practically every study over 40 years. In 1963, Saul W. Gellerman stated:

Myths die hard. It is quite clear that money's reputation as the ultimate motivation is going to be a long time a-dying.⁸

As the present survey shows, this myth is still alive and flourishing. Most supervisors in the industrial sector still believe it.

Maslow contended that under current business conditions most Amer-

ican employees have lower-level or deficit needs substantially satisfied. Therefore, such management strategies as increasing employee incomes or strengthening job security will not accomplish as much as often expected.

The results of these surveys bear out Maslow's contention, but they point out that there exists a class of employees whose basic needs still are not satisfied. The surveys show the degree to which various respondents' job circumstances provide sufficient rewards in each job area. If today's industrial organizations were to administer a similar survey, it would be a giant first step toward improving employee motivation in the United States.

MOTIVATION AND PRODUCTIVITY

In his book *Reality-Centered People Management*, Erwin S. Stanton states, "The most worrisome problem facing American business today is that of low employee work productivity."⁹

Historically, America's industrial gains have been the highest in the world, but lately our productivity growth has declined, particularly when compared with some of our industrial competitors. In 1986 the U.S., along with Great Britain, had the lowest rate of productivity gains in the past 10 years, a cumulative 27 percent. In the same period, Japan gained 107 percent and West Germany 70 percent.¹⁰ The decline in employee motivation and in commitment to high-quality work performance may

well be one of the major causes of this productivity slowdown.

What is needed is a management style that is flexible, that takes into account the types of employees being supervised, recognizing their differing abilities and diverse motivational needs. What is being advocated is a Theory Y style of management that takes everyone's needs into account as much as is consistent with the requirements of the production schedule.

A decline in productivity is a cost that many companies cannot afford and that the U.S., with its high standard of living, cannot tolerate. Increasing foreign competition already has caused many of our corporations serious problems and failures.

Proper motivation of employees is directly associated with productivity (a direct cost) and with maintenance factors (an indirect cost). Workers who are content with their jobs, who feel challenged, who have the opportunity to fulfill their goals will exhibit less destructive behavior on the job. They will be absent less frequently, they will be less inclined to change jobs, and, most importantly, they will produce at a higher level.

Management must understand what motivates employees within the context of the roles they perform. Such an understanding is absolutely crucial to improved productivity and, ultimately, to the health of our industry and our nation as a whole. Surveys are not a cure-all. But if companies periodically administer them and take to heart their results, incorporating them whenever possible in manipulating the reward system, employees, supervisors, the company, and the country stand to gain a great deal. □

9. (New York: AMACOM, 1982) p. v.

10. See Raj Aggarwal, "The Strategic Challenge of the Evolving Global Economy," *Business Horizons* 30 (July-August 1987): 38-44.

8. S. W. Gellerman, *Motivation and Productivity* (New York: AMA, 1963): p. 64.