

Improving Organisational Performance Through Understanding Human Motivation*

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This article explores some thoughtful considerations for management related to understanding and improving the overall performance of individuals and teams in organisations. It reflects thoughts and learnings from several implementations of small and large projects in public sector. It also sheds light on various theories, tools and frameworks and how they can be used to improve overall organisational performance.

Keywords: competency development, motivation, performance, team building

Introduction

In today's dynamic and rapidly changing workplace and globalised economy, development of organisational performance is associated with the development of personal performance, skills, knowledge and experience (Covey, 1989; Covey, 2004; Jones, George, & Hill, 2000). However, the ability to achieve and maintain high performance and productivity in organisations is a key challenge facing management today.

Our experience shows that management need to give higher attention towards understanding individual differences, needs and behaviours, as well as their criticality to enable them to understand and manage organisational complexity. Such understanding is considered important in helping individuals develop effective learning styles that is aligned with organisational objectives and needs.

Our primary learning is touching the subject of perceptions, beliefs and values that motivate our behaviours and impact the overall learning process we may decide to follow. A variety of theories regarding human nature and motivation in particular are explored here, to explain the diversified behaviours, and particularly, what influences people to do what they do. We also reflect our learnings and make sense of the presented theories in relation to our experiences in practice.

Left-Brain and Right-Brain Management

If our life experiences and culture shape our mental models of the world then our own unique thinking styles and sensory preferences will shape the way we know the world... Our thinking is shaped by our very existence in our world, our

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thinking styles and sensory preferences, these styles and preferences are the ones we have always been comfortable with and familiarity is comforting (Potts, 2002).

A useful theory for management to always keep in mind is the right-brain and left-brain thinking. Most of us have one side of our brains dominant which influence the choice of thinking and learning styles. Figure 1 illustrates the differences between the two sides of the brain.

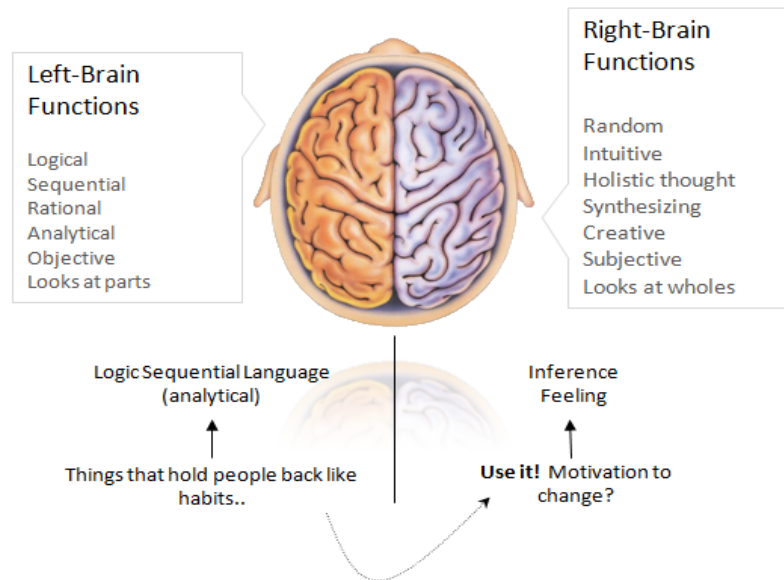


Figure 1. Left-brain and right-brain thinking model.

Numerous management styles can originate from the left or the right side of the brain (Heller, 2002). The left side has an exasperating devotion to numerical figures, details, analysis, time-bound logic, and sequential thinking, etc., concerning itself with cash flow and the dire consequences of mismanagement of finances. It processes information in an analytical and sequential way, looking first at the pieces, then putting them together to get the whole.

The right side is often based on intuitive, emotional decisions, synthesis, and holistic thinking, i.e., it processes information in an intuitive way, looking first at the whole picture then filling in details. While this approach can yield immediate success in the short run, it often comes at the risk of long-term sustainability and growth.

Our experience in projects also shows that it is important that we follow a “balanced-thinking” (i.e., to engage both sides of the brain) to analyse and identify elements that contribute towards the achievement and maintenance of highest performance and productivity levels (see Leonard & Straus, 1997). It was found vital that we constantly promote this way of thinking to enhance the overall performance of projects. Organisations aiming to improve productivity, with rigorous planned strategies, staff with balanced and mixed thinking skills can produce more efficient and innovative organisational outcomes (Cohen, 2008). The left-brain and right-brain model goes beyond mere issues of management style, but it reflects organisational thinking and how it approaches problem solving, and can better addresses the situational uniqueness of projects and conquer the challenges of contemporary projects.

Beliefs and Perceptions

Perhaps, the most significant learning from the different projects was about how things like beliefs and perceptions can inhibit us from learning and development, or in other words, how our beliefs and perceptions may inhibit us from doing any right-brain thinking. Figure 2 demonstrates different motivation layers, showing how behaviour can determine our beliefs, habits, and needs. Motivation is a hidden power that stems from a deep rooted belief that activates and drives behavior and gives it direction; it is strongest when it comes from our inner values (Lock, 2001). Thus, understanding motivation should empower us to better understand ourselves and others. This should, in turn, enable us to change and/or further improve our behaviours and performance.

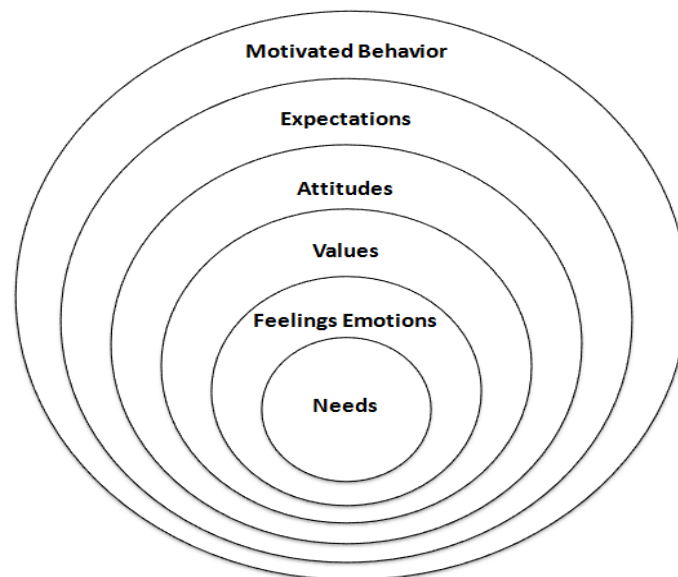


Figure 2. Motivation factors.

It is also important for management to understand the association between our unconscious mind and how it may determine particular motivated behaviours, i.e., how beliefs may be part of our unconscious mind and play the role of regulating many of our behaviours and actions we take in life. We correlate this to Freud's topographical model that represents the configuration of the mind (Person, Figueira, & Fonagy, 1995). The model makes three classifications of the human mind:

Conscious: Awareness of one's environment and one's own existence, sensations, and thoughts, i.e., part of the mind that holds what we are aware of. We can verbalize about our conscious experience and think about it in a logical fashion.

Preconscious: Memories or feelings that are not part of one's immediate awareness but that can be recalled through conscious effort.

Unconscious: Part of mind containing elements of psychic makeup, such as memories or repressed desires, that are not subject to conscious perception or control but that often affect conscious thoughts and behavior.

Figure 3 uses an iceberg metaphor to facilitate the understanding of Freud's topographical theory. It shows that more than 90% of an iceberg is beneath the water (preconscious and unconscious) whereas only 10% of it is visible (conscious).

Using Freud's topographical model of the mind, we can see that a substance may pass back and forth between the conscious and preconscious mind. Subsequently, substances from these two levels can easily slip into the unconscious mind. Rationally, the unconscious substances (e.g., unconscious fears and previous experiences) can very much direct our behaviours and instinctively make several decisions for us. It is our unconscious mind that effects what we can or cannot accomplish. By challenging and changing some of our beliefs and perceptions, we can utilise our abilities and potentials towards escalating our talents, achieving our goals and attaining significant success in almost every dimension of our progressive life. The following section explores various theories that represent the most common held views as to what motivates behaviour, and we reflect on each based on our experience.

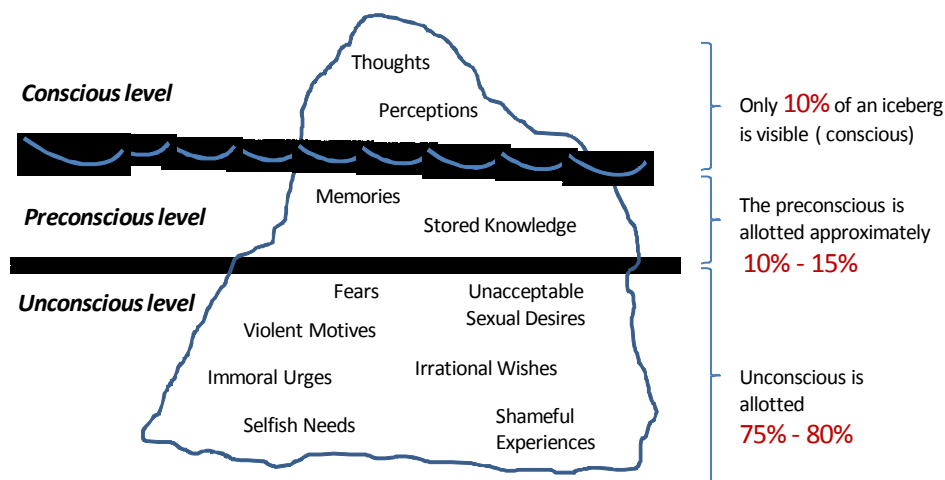


Figure 3. Mental iceberg of Freud's view of the human mind.

Theories and Practice

We all have preferred unconscious and conscious habits of thought that influence how we make decisions, communicate, learn and interact with others.... Our mental models and maps are "configured" by the very nature of our experiences; they are "configured" by our cultures. The western concept of time is very linear, whereas the Australian Aboriginal notion of time is very holistic! Neither are right or wrong they are just different (Herrmann, 1996).

A survey of global employers in 2005 (eDison, 2005) revealed that:

- More than 50% of employees lack the motivation to keep learning and improving;
- 4 in 10 people cannot work cooperatively;
- Only 19% of entry level-applicants have enough adequate self-discipline for their jobs;
- 70% of all change initiatives fail due to people issues-inability to lead, lack of teamwork, unwillingness to take initiative, inability to deal with change, etc.;
- Primary derailleur of top executives: a lack of impulse control.

In today's competitive knowledge-driven organisations, leadership is more important than ever, and requires more than just possessing the right technical skills. Today's leaders need to recognise their own feelings and those of others to motivate themselves and effectively manage relationships, increase morale and motivation, improve productivity, promote greater cooperation and team work and increase retention of top talent.

Theory X and Theory Y

We have always believed that the main success factor for us in both our own personal life and at work is the ability to develop a positive environment. The different learning lessons from our projects indicate that in order to build such an environment, we need first to treat people as individuals and appreciate their personal differences. All of us are individuals; we have different personalities; we think differently; we have different needs, wants, values, expectations, and goals; we each change over time as well. Therefore, we need to recognise people as individuals and to work with their individual differences.

Our personal philosophies often influence the motivational approaches we normally select to deal with such differences. Such philosophies or attitudes towards others can be mapped to theory X and theory Y (McGregor, 1960) (see Figure 4). People in theory X have negative perceptions of other people's potential and attitudes, whereas those in theory Y have an opposite view, and assume that other people can be self-directing and seek responsibility. Table 1 provides further examples of the perceptions of the two theories.

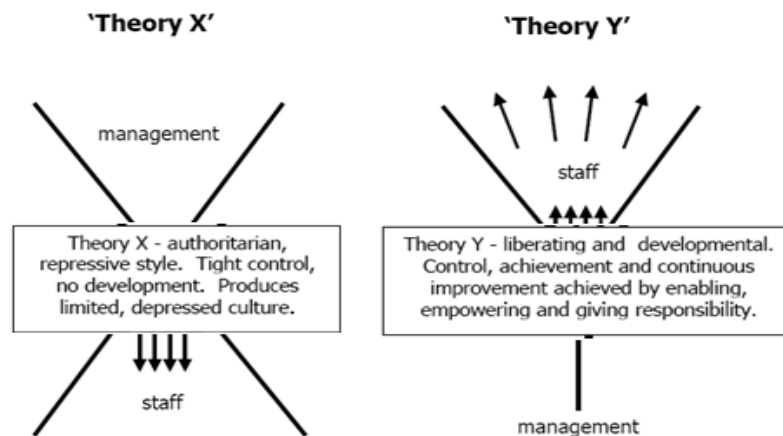


Figure 4. Theory X & Theory Y.

Table 1

Theory X and Theory Y Perceptions (Jones et al., 2000)

Theory X	Theory Y
The average employee is lazy, dislikes work, and will try to do as little as possible.	Employees are not inherently lazy. Given the chance, employees will do what is good for the organisation.
To ensure that employees work hard, managers should closely supervise employees.	To allow employees to work in the organisation's interest, managers must create a work setting that provides opportunities for workers to exercise initiatives and self direction.
Managers should create strict work rules and implement a well defined system of rewards and punishments to control employees.	Managers should decentralise authority to employees and make sure employees have the resources necessary to achieve organisational goals.

Figure 5 also presents a continuum containing positive and negative motivations. Positive leadership styles encourage development of employees and higher levels of job satisfaction. Negative leadership styles are based on the manager's ability to withhold items of value from employees. The result of negative leadership may be an environment of fear, where managers are viewed with distrust and seen as dictators rather than as leaders or team players.

As we have stated this earlier, our perceptions, attitudes and behaviours are normally driven and motivated by

our needs, beliefs and values. The same applies to others around us. If we want to understand ourselves and/or others, we need to look at such motivators which would probably help us modify our perceptions and thereafter our behaviours. Many methods have been developed to explain why people choose to follow particular behaviours.

Two categories of motivation theories are covered next, content and process theories. Content theories are concerned with what motivates behaviour. Process theories are concerned with how the content of motivation influences behaviour. The next section starts the discussion with a content theory—Maslow's theory.



Figure 5. Positive vs. negative motivation. Source: Maslow, 1943.

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Theory (Content Theory)

Maslow's theory is one of the very common tools used to understand human needs. It mainly identifies five basic levels of needs as illustrated in Figure 6, namely, physical, safety, social, esteem and self-actualisation needs. The principle argument of the theory is based around the following four premises:

- (1) Individual's needs are arranged in a hierarchical order that starts from the most basic needs (water, food, shelter) to the most complex (esteem and self-actualisation);
- (2) Only an unsatisfied need can influence behaviour, where a satisfied need is not considered to be a motivator;
- (3) A person will at least minimally satisfy each level of need before feeling the need at the next level;
- (4) The level of satisfaction of needs always fluctuates, i.e., if satisfaction is not maintained for a need, it will become a priority need again. Once a need is satisfied, it will cease to influence behaviour.

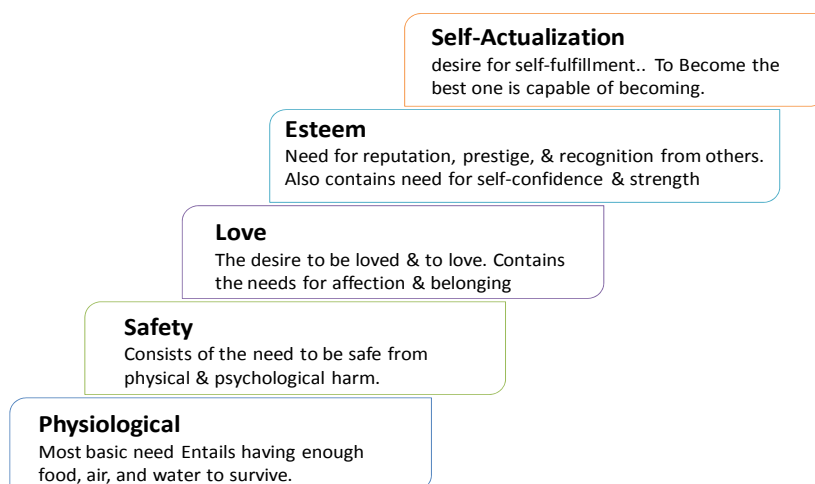


Figure 6. Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Source: Herzberg, 1987.

To us, the theory represented a workable motivation framework that we utilised in analysing specific attitudes and behaviours to identify a particular need level an individual may attempt to satisfy, which gave us the opportunity in turn to assist and or/guide the individual to satisfy those needs.

Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory (Content Theory)

Another relevant needs theory is called the two-factor theory. It principally uncovers two sets of factors:

- (1) Motivators: factors that produce satisfaction and motivation;
- (2) Maintenance, or hygiene factors: factors that lead to dissatisfaction.

As illustrated in Figure 7, the hygiene factors range from causing no dissatisfaction, if they are present in any given environment, to causing high dissatisfaction, if they are not present in sufficient quality (Herzberg, Mausner, & Snyderman, 1959; Herzberg, 1987). Motivators, if present in, can provide low to high satisfaction, where if they are not present, no satisfaction can result (ibid.). Figure 8 shows overlapping features shared by both Maslow's and Herzber's theories where:

- (1) Hygiene factors are predominantly related to lower level needs;
- (2) Herzberg's motivators target higher level needs.

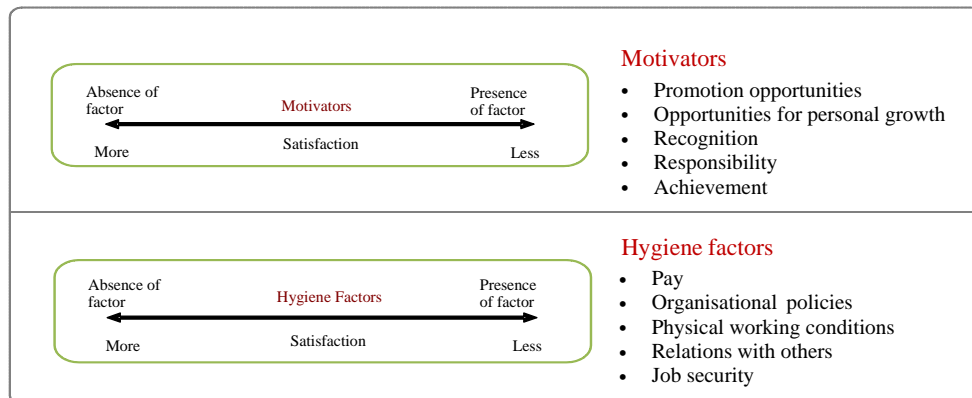


Figure 7. Herzberg's two-factor theory.

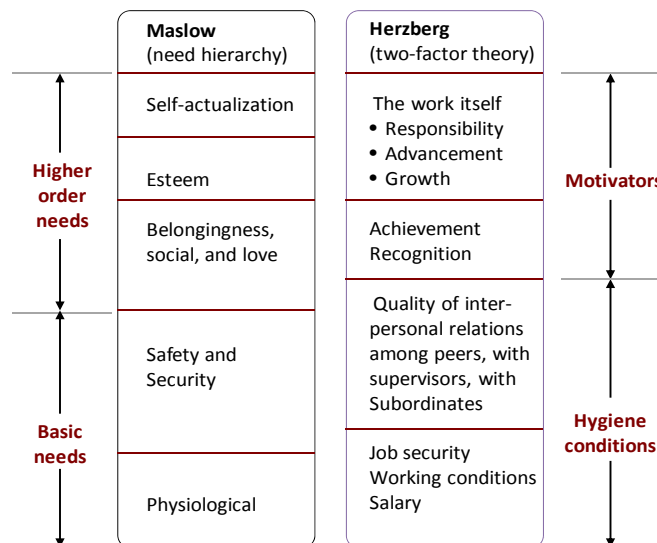


Figure 8. Maslow vs. Herzberg.

The theory in our view can be used to focus on ensuring presence and quality of maintenance factors as a foundation on which to build motivation. For instance, managers have the power to make subordinates jobs more rewarding by granting them more responsibility, praising their accomplishments, making them feel that they are succeeding, and so on.

Vroom's Expectancy Theory (Process Theory)

Vroom's theory also referred to as valence instrumentality expectancy theory, explains why people choose a particular behaviour to satisfy their needs (see Figure 9). It states that before choosing a behaviour, an individual will evaluate various possibilities on the basis of how much work is involved and what the reward is. Motivation is a function of how badly individuals want something and how likely they think they are to get it. It occurs in direct proportion to perceived or expected rewards.



Figure 9. Expectancy theory. Source: Vroom, 1964.

The strength of a tendency to act in a certain way depends on the strength of an expectation that the act will be followed by a given outcome and on the attractiveness of that outcome to the individual (Blumberg & Pringle, 1982). This is to say that behaviour is heavily influenced by perceptions of possible outcomes (see Figure 10). If an individual expects a certain outcome, possesses the competence to achieve it, and wants it badly enough, he or she will exhibit the required behaviour. If a person expects that a specific behaviour will produce an outcome that he or she perceives as undesirable, he or she will be less inclined to exhibit that behaviour. In this light, a person who knows the other person's expectation and desires can tailor outcomes associated with specific behaviours to produce motivation.

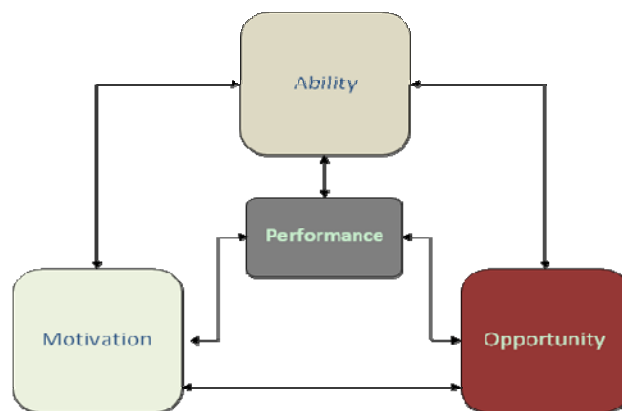


Figure 10. Performance dimensions.

Some Further Reflection

There has been so much debate about the applicability of the presented theories in today's world specially that some of them have been developed as early as 1920's (Jones et al., 2000; Keuning, 1998; Mullins, 1996). From our own personal perspectives, we see those theories still valid today as tools and frameworks for understanding human motivation.

For example, we agree with Maslow that only an unsatisfied need can motivate a person's behaviour. We are never satisfied with what we have as we always want more; thinking that what we do not have will seemingly make us happier. This is our nature.

Some of the presented theories also do not believe that human beings are pushed and pulled by mechanical forces, either of stimuli and reinforcements (behaviorism) or of unconscious instinctual impulses (psychoanalysis) (Simons et al., 1987). It rather promotes the idea of focusing on human potentials, with the belief that they continuously and characteristically strive for an upper level of our capabilities (ibid.).

In our opinion, the theories explored here provide sound theoretical frameworks to better analyse and understand the basis of individuals' perceptions, behaviours, and attitudes. Table 2 shows some examples of our interpretations and understanding of the presented theories. Such understanding should enable us to enhance and improve our own thinking styles, motivation, and overall performance.

Table 2

Theories and Further Reflection

Theory	Examples
Theory X and Theory Y	Perceptions of how people view human behaviour mainly at work and organisational life.
Maslow's need theory	Confirms that human needs are an important part of human nature; Identity trial model vs. self-actualisation.
Herzberg's theory	Provide the foundation to build motivation and influence behaviour.
Vroom's expectancy theory	A framework to understand why people choose particular need (behaviour influence by perception of outcome).

We argue that performance improvement is more of a function of ability and motivation. Ability depends on education, experience, and training. Motivation is more related to our thoughts, i.e., we are the product of our own thoughts. The aim of motivation is to improve the quality of our thoughts. Thus motivation, for organisations need to be considered essential to learn best and maximise effectiveness.

For management, effective performance improvement needs to deal with the performance of the organisational system as a whole. It requires an analysis of the deeper, underlying systemic blockages for performance in organisations and/or broader systems by the actors (Hagmann, Peter, Chuma, Ngwenya, Kibwika, & Krebs, 2009). Such interventions should involve well managed learning processes which should in turn lead towards continuous performance-driven competence development.

Leading in successively larger contexts (from individuals to groups to organisation-wide efforts) requires successively larger sets of competencies in terms of knowledge, skills and abilities. To create the conditions and space necessary for such an objective, it is important for management to foster change processes within the organisation to allow competency development.

Table 3 shows a competency framework that we used to develop core personal competencies. The

framework looks at two prime competencies—personal and social. Personal competencies are those that determine how we manage ourselves, where social competencies are those that determine how we handle relationships. It sets out the skills, abilities, and personal qualities that leaders need to develop. We used this framework to develop leadership competencies and further identify training and development needs.

Table 3

Competency Framework

	Personal competence	Social competence
Awareness	Self-awareness: Knowing one's internal states, preferences, resources, and intuitions. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emotional awareness: Recognizing one's emotions and their effects. • Accurate self-assessment: Knowing one's strengths and limits. • Self-confidence: A strong sense of one's self-worth and capabilities. 	Social awareness: Awareness of others feelings, needs, and concerns. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Empathy: Sensing others' feelings and perspectives, and taking an active interest in their concerns. • Organisational awareness: Reading a group's emotional currents and power relationships. • Service orientation: Anticipating, recognizing, and meeting customers' needs.
Actions	Self-management: Managing ones' internal states, impulses, and resources. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self-control: Keeping disruptive emotions and impulses in check. • Trustworthiness: Maintaining standards of honesty and integrity. • Conscientiousness: Taking responsibility for personal performance. • Adaptability: Flexibility in handling change. • Achievement orientation: Striving to improve or meeting a standard of excellence. • Initiative: Readiness to act on opportunities. 	Social skills: Adeptness at inducing desirable responses in others. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Developing others: Sensing others' development needs and bolstering their abilities. • Leadership: Inspiring and guiding individuals and groups. • Influence: Wielding effective tactics for persuasion. • Communication: Listening openly and sending convincing messages. • Change catalyst: Initiating or managing change. • Conflict management: Negotiating and resolving disagreements. • Building bonds: Nurturing instrumental relationships. • Teamwork & collaboration: Working with others toward shared goals. Creating group synergy in pursuing collective goals.

Note. Source: Herrmann, 1996.

Conclusion

Human nature can be very simple, yet very complex. An understanding and appreciation of this fact is essential to effective employee motivation, and therefore effective management and leadership of result oriented organisations. The content of this article was prepared to raise management awareness and provide them with some fundamental pieces of knowledge about behaviours in organisations and how much they are determined by perceptions and personalities. The different learning lessons from the projects and the work we carried out to complete this paper, played a major role in clearing out what is to be “set of foundations and pivotal ingredients” for self motivation, assertive communication (Wertheim, 1998), personal empowerment, enhancing personal behaviours (Kagan, 2004), and interpersonal relationships. The presented theories are considered important tools and frameworks for management to understanding human motivation. The presented lessons, overall, should assist in formulating an effective learning contract for management to understanding the rudiments for building complementary teams, concerned with methods, systems, and procedures and at the same time with direction and results.

To acquire a functional balance, management need to exercise the weaker side of the organisational brain. For example, a team with left-brain skills should include individuals with right-brain minded, who could participate creatively in problem solving, and facing the challenges of contemporary projects. Unless they are

internally motivated, employees in organisations with superior systems and procedures and detailed job descriptions, may suffer performance challenges if things are excessively mechanical and formal. Management role lies in accomplishing organisation wide shared common vision, purpose, and sense of mission.

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