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## **Do Academic Supervisors Know What Their Employees Want from Work?**

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### **Introduction and Literature Review**

This research has meaning to higher education learning institutions regarding faculty and staff motivation. Effectively motivating employees has captivated management theorists in search of higher morale and higher productivity. This study challenges the assumption by Hersey and Blanchard (1993) based on Lindahl's (1949) study that supervisors do not know what their employees want from work.

Higher education has seen dramatic shifts in course delivery (more distance learning) organizational and economic structure in recent years, precipitated significantly by a global pandemic. Furthermore, there is a growing leadership bottleneck within higher education, with the average age of institution presidents increasing over the last few decades (Ebersole, 2014). This makes administrative focus on job satisfaction critical, both to improve faculty retention and bolster productivity. Effective leadership strategies can be critical to achieve this goal.

Herzberg's two-factor theory of work motivation states that job satisfaction and dissatisfaction are affected by different factors and thus cannot be measured with a single scale (Hersey & Blanchard, 2008). In this theory, factors that influence feelings related to employment are divided into hygiene factors (e.g., supervisor quality and interpersonal relationships) and motivational factors (e.g., achievement and responsibility). Satisfaction of hygiene factors tend to decrease job dissatisfaction while satisfaction of motivation factors can increase job satisfaction. The basic tenets of this two-factor theory provide critical insight to managers so they can take targeted actions to increase the satisfaction and decrease dissatisfaction of employees. Theoretically, employers can use these factors to discover what each employee values, thus allowing them to customize motivation tactics. In fact, simply the act of collecting employee thoughts regarding hygiene and motivation factors can contribute to employee voice, improving job satisfaction (Alfayad, Arif, & Suriani, 2017; Hersey & Blanchard, 2008).

However, research suggests that supervisors may not really know what employees want from their jobs (Table 1), making it challenging for supervisors to properly motivate employees (Hersey and Blanchard 1993). All job aspects showed differences between what employees indicated they wanted from work and what supervisors thought employees wanted from work. This study was a springboard for the situational leadership model that focuses on the "readiness level of the employee" to determine how to motivate employees. A manager exercising situational leadership adjusts supportiveness and directiveness based on the situation and the motivation of the employee. This requires the manager to understand each employee's characteristics to customize

the leadership style used in a situation. The situational leadership model has been applied to a variety of workplace settings, including the U.S. military, health care and information technology (Carlos Do Rego Furtado, et al., 2011; Irby, 2011). The implementation of situational leadership is strongly correlated with employee productivity (Silverthorne & Wang, 2001). Some research reports satisfaction as an intervening variable between situational leadership style and productivity (Setyorina, Yuesti, & Landra, 2018; Anggraini & Lo, 2020) while other research positively correlates situational leadership with satisfaction (Afshinpour, 2014).

Table 1  
*Assumed Rankings for Supervisors and Employees on  
 What Workers Want from Their Jobs*

	Supervisors	Workers	Difference
Good working conditions	4	9	-5
Feeling “in” on things	10	2	8
Tactful disciplining	7	10	-3
Full appreciation for a job well done	8	1	7
Management loyalty to workers	6	8	-2
Good wages	1	5	-4
Promotion and growth with company	3	7	-4
Sympathetic understanding of personal problems	9	3	6
Job security	2	4	-2
Interesting work	5	6	-1

Note. Adapted from What Do Workers Want from Their Jobs? (Hersey and Blanchard, 1993, p.50, Table 2-1) originally from Lindahl, “What Makes a Good Job?” *Personnel*, 25 January 1949). Because rankings were based on 1 being most important and 10 least important, positive numbers in the difference column mean that employees rated those factors more important than supervisors. Negative numbers in the difference column mean employees rated those areas as less important. Six of ten job aspects had differences of four or more between the two groups. The absolute value of change between the 1949 supervisor and employee survey respondents was 42.

Because higher education institutes have unique leadership structures (e.g. distributed hierarchy and shared governance), incentive schemes (e.g. tenure), and performance measures, situational leadership research from industry and service may not be generalizable to them (Black, 2015; Jones, Harvey, & Ryland, 2012). While higher education leadership frameworks (Astin & Astin, 2000; Bryman, 2007) can generally align with general leadership models (Kouzes & Posner, 2007) some are exploring relevance of frameworks from other sectors, like wildlife conservation, to higher education (Black, 2015). Focusing on situational leadership in higher education, a study of 4 Pakistani universities reported that department heads tended to use selling and participating leadership styles and very rarely used telling and delegating leadership styles (Parveen & Tariq, 2014).

Leadership style in higher education influences employee perspectives (e.g. job satisfaction) and actions (e.g. leaving the institution). Leadership style has been correlated to employee satisfaction, with leader's gender as a likely moderating variable (Parveen & Tariq, 2014). A separate study confirmed this relationship, noting that servant leadership style had the most positive impact on job satisfaction (Alonderiene, & Majauskaite, 2016). In a study specifically exploring dimensions of servant leadership, job satisfaction was strongly correlated to all six dimensions of servant leadership (Harris et al., 2016). Another study reported no relationship between the supervisor's adaptability (range of leadership styles used) and employee turnover (Reed, 2021), supporting previous research that a wide style range does not guarantee leadership effectiveness. This study also reported a correlation between leadership effectiveness (selecting the appropriate leadership style for the situation and employee) and turnover. Pairing leadership style to employee needs is more important than demonstrating a wide range of leadership styles. It is important to note that employee age may be a moderating variable as a statistically significant relationship between age and overall job satisfaction (Saner & Eyüpoğlu, 2012).

Recognizing the need to develop leaders in academia, structured leadership development programs and conferences have been developed, including Higher Education Resource Services (HERS), which targets women faculty and administrators, and the Leadership in Higher Education Conference (White, 2011; Leadership, 2021). The question remains, though, whether these efforts have made a difference in supervisors' ability to understand what their employees want from work. It can be argued that if such training and education can provide supervisors insight on what employees want from work, supervisors will have more knowledge and tools to help keep employees motivated and satisfied. This comparison uses data from the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century compared to survey data from 2019-2020 to determine if anything has really changed.

### **Hypotheses**

- Ha1. Supervisors will answer differently than employees regarding "Hygiene Factors" such as working conditions, good wages, tactful disciplining, management loyalty to workers and job security.
- Ha2. Supervisors will answer differently than employees regarding "Motivators" such as feeling "in" on things, sympathetic understanding of personal problems, full appreciation for work well done interesting work, and promotion and growth.
- Ha3. Supervisors who took the survey in 2019-20 will more closely align rankings with their employees than supervisors in 1949.

### **Methods**

**Participants.** The population for this study were faculty and staff in supervisory and non-supervisory positions within a college or university. About half of the respondents came from the "distance learning" campus of a university system. Data were gathered from participants and a university introductory leadership course and at an academic chairperson's conference. Fifty survey

respondents self-reported their supervisory status as either supervisors or non-supervisors and completed the survey.

**Demographic data.** Survey respondents included 39 supervisors and 11 employees who worked in university settings. Seventeen respondents indicated they were faculty with 15 of those stating they were in supervisory roles. These responses were compared with data from a 1949 study by Lawrence Lindahl (1949) as reported by Hersey and Blanchard (1993) to determine if there were any differences in findings.

**Design.** The research design involved cross sectional survey data. Participants were assured of confidentiality. No remuneration was offered for their participating and that elect to opt out of the survey at any time. The survey design, distribution and data control were Institutional Review Board approved.

**Treatment of the data.** The first data analysis evaluated differences between supervisors and employee answers on 10 survey questions adapted from a Hersey Blanchard reported survey results (1993) of a 1949 study conducted by Lindahl. Rankings from the 1949 data were compared with the rank order determined by averaging scores for each job aspect from supervisors and employees of this study to identify if any differences existed.

2019-20 Survey data were also compared using a Mann-Whitney U statistic to determine if the two groups answered differently from each other on each job aspect to evaluate the hypothesis. Although a typical alpha for a study is .05, a Bonferroni corrected alpha ( $\alpha=.005$ ) was applied in testing the survey data gathered in this research because answers to each of the ten job aspects had an impact on how the remaining questions were answered. This adjustment was made to avoid any "Type 1" errors in hypothesis testing (Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2009; Gould & Ryan, 2012). Comments of supervisors and employees were also examined to identify significant trends based on three open ended survey questions at the end of the survey.

## Results

### Quantitative

Data were evaluated to determine if supervisors and employees answered differently from each other on ranking 10 job aspects of working. The structure of the survey was that items ranked lower were more important meaning the top ranked aspect of work was ranked 1 and the least important was ranked 10. The tables below show comparisons of different groups and how they ranked the 10 aspects of work.

**Comparing Rankings.** The difference column in tables 2, 3 and 4 show the difference in rankings. Table 2 shows how supervisors in 1949 ranked the 10 aspects of work compared to supervisors in this study's 2019-2020 data. Aspects followed by an (H) are hygiene factors and those followed by (M) are motivators.

**Table 2**  
*1949 Results Compared to Rank Order of Supervisors  
 In Current 2019-2020 Survey*

Job Aspect	Supervisors 1949	Supervisors in 2019-20 Survey	Difference
Good working conditions (H)	4	2	2
Feeling “in” on things (M)	10	8	2
Tactful disciplining (H)	7	10	-3
Full appreciation for a job well done (M)	8	3	5
Management loyalty to workers (H)	6	7	-1
Good wages (H)	1	1	0
Promotion and growth with company (M)	3	4	-1
Sympathetic understanding of personal problems (M)	9	9	0
Job security (H)	2	5	-3
Interesting work (M)	5	6	-1

Note. 1949 supervisor rank – rank of supervisors who took the survey in this study summed in difference column. Because rankings were based on 1 being most important and 10 least important, positive numbers in difference column indicate supervisors in the 2019-20 study ranked the area as more important than supervisors in 1949. Negative differences in Rank indicate supervisors surveyed in this study rated the area as less important than supervisors in 1949.

Supervisors in the 2019-2020 survey ranked good working conditions, feeling “in” on things, and full appreciation for a job well done as more important job aspects than supervisors surveyed in 1949. Supervisors in the 2019-20 survey rated tactful disciplining, management loyalty to workers, promotion and growth with company, job security and interesting work as less important than supervisors in 1949. Nine of ten job aspects had differences of three or less between the two groups. The absolute value of changes between the 1949 and 2019-20 supervisor survey respondents was 18.

We also analyzed the differences between how employees in this study ranked the 10 job aspects and how employees in the Lindahl study responded in 1949. Aspects followed by an (H) are hygiene factors and those followed by (M) are motivators. Table 3 shows this comparison.

Employees surveyed in 2019-20 rated good working conditions, good wages, and promotion and growth with the company as more important than employees in 1949. 2019-20 survey takers rated feeling in on things, full appreciation for a job well done, sympathetic understanding of personal problems, job security and interesting work less important than employees in the 1949 study. It is interesting to note that in five job aspects had differences between four and six ranked places. The absolute value of rank changes between the 1949 and 2019-20 employee survey takers was 30.



We then compared how 2019-2020 survey respondents ranked the 10 aspects of work to determine what the differences were. These data are shown in Table 4.

Table 3  
*Employees in 1949 Compared to Employee Rank Order Surveyed in This Study*

Job Aspect	Employees 1949	Employees in 2019-20 Survey	Difference
Good working conditions (H)	9	3	6
Feeling “in” on things (M)	2	6	-4
Tactful disciplining (H)	10	10	0
Full appreciation for a job well done (M)	1	4	-3
Management loyalty to workers (H)	8	8	0
Good wages (H)	5	1	4
Promotion and growth with company (M)	7	2	5
Sympathetic understanding of personal problems (M)	3	7	-4
Job security (H)	4	5	-1
Interesting work (M)	6	9	-3

Note. 1949 employee rank – rank of employees who took the survey in this study summed in difference column. Because rankings were based on 1 being most important and 10 least important, positive numbers in difference column indicate employees in this study ranked the area as more important than employees in 1949. Negative differences in rank indicate employees surveyed in this study rated the area as less important than employees did in 1949.

Table 4  
*Employee and Supervisor Rank Order Comparison of  
Those Who Took the Survey in 2019-20*

Job Aspect	Supervisors Surveyed	Employees Surveyed	Difference
Good working conditions (H)	2	3	-1
Feeling “in” on things (M)	8	6	2
Tactful disciplining (H)	10	10	0
Full appreciation for a job well done (M)	3	4	-1
Management loyalty to workers (H)	7	8	-1
Good wages (H)	1	1	0
Promotion and growth with company (M)	4	2	2
Sympathetic understanding of personal problems (M)	9	7	2
Job security (H)	5	5	0
Interesting work (M)	6	9	-3

Note. Supervisor rank order of those who took the survey in this study – rank order of employees who took the survey in this study summed in difference column. Because rankings were based on 1 being most important and 10 least important, positive numbers in difference column indicate employees in this study ranked the area as more important than supervisors in this survey. Negative differences in rank indicate employees surveyed in this study rated the area as less important than supervisors.

Employees ranked feeling in on things, promotion and growth with the company and sympathetic understanding of personal problems as more important aspects of work than supervisors. Employees ranked good working conditions, full appreciation for a job well done, management loyalty to workers and interesting work as less important job aspects than what was reported by supervisors. It is important to note that 9 of the 10 job aspects had rank differences of two or less with the highest difference being 3 places (interesting work). The absolute value of rank change between 2019-20 supervisors and employees was 12.

The final quantitative analysis evaluated the median differences of each job aspect between supervisors and employees who participated in the 2019-2020 survey. Aspects followed by an (H) are hygiene factors and those followed by (M) are motivators. These data are shown in table 5.

Table 5  
*Employee and Supervisor Survey Mann-Whitney U Test Results on Each Area*

Job Aspect	Estimated Difference in Median Rank	Mann-Whitney U	P Value
Good Working Conditions (H)	0	973.5	.628
Feeling “In” on Things (M)	1	1061	.119
Tactful Disciplining (H)	0	968.5	.646
Full Appreciation for a Job Well Done (M)	0	981	.759
Management Loyalty to Workers (H)	0	989.5	.915
Good Wages (H)	0	1013	.669
Promotion and Growth Within the Organization (M)	1	1029	.421
Sympathetic Understanding of Personal Problems (M)	1	1073	.064
Job Security (H)	0	1010	.723
Interesting Work (M)	-1	960.5	.430

Note. N=50, (39 supervisors and 11 employees). Hypothesis was supervisor median – median of employees did not = 0. Positive differences in Estimated Median Rank indicate employees rated the area as more important than supervisors. Negative differences in Mean Rank indicate employees rated the area as less important than supervisors. None of the results were statistically significant ( $\alpha=.005$ ). There was not enough evidence to reject the any of the three null hypotheses evaluated in this study.

There were no statistically significant differences in median ranks between supervisors and employees when evaluated with the Mann-Whitney U statistic. Both research hypotheses were not supported. Responses from supervisors and employees regarding hygiene factors (working conditions, good wages, tactful disciplining, management loyalty to workers and job security) and motivators (feeling “in” on things, sympathetic understanding of personal problems, full appreciation for work well done, interesting work and promotion and growth) were statistically similar. Employees indicated a slightly higher importance (than supervisors) to feeling “in” on

things, promotion and growth within the organization and sympathetic understanding of personal problems. Employees rated interesting work as slightly less important than supervisors. However, none of the differences were statistically significant. These data suggest that supervisors in this study were well informed of the job aspects that were important to their employees.

### **Qualitative: Open ended survey results**

Survey respondents were asked to comment on three areas: (1) Most important factor in their job, (2) Most important factor that would make a worker quit, and (3) Most important factor that would make most workers stay in their jobs. The three questions were answered by all 50 respondents. The top five responses on the most important factor for a job was respect, appreciation, security, working conditions and support. One respondent summed up this idea by saying:

“Acknowledgement of work done and accomplishments matter to workers. This is followed by growth” (Respondent 28). Another respondent (39) summed up their feeling by saying: “The most important factor a worker needs from their job is feeling like the work produced actually means something”.

The top four reasons why employees would leave their jobs were poor leadership or management (26 comments- by far the most comments for any of the three questions) followed by lack of respect or appreciation and working conditions. One respondent summed up this idea by writing:

When coping with work environment issues - unclear or inconsistent communication from management, hostility, or threatening tones between workers or from management, lack of cooperation towards a common goal, misalignment of stated goals/policy with practice - becomes unbearable (Survey Respondent 49).

The top five reasons a worker would stay at their current job were noted as, appreciation, good management, respect, support, and good working conditions. One respondent replied: “Feeling like they are appreciated, and their work is making a difference or an impact on the department and the goals that have been set forth” (Respondent 39). Another respondent stated: “In order for a worker to maintain the motivation and the drive to do good work for a company, they need to have a manager they believe in” (Respondent 4).

### **Discussion**

A comparison of Tables 1 and 4 showed the ranks of supervisors in this study had a much better idea of what their employees wanted from work than supervisors in 1949. The absolute value of change between the 1949 supervisor and employee survey responses was 42 whereas the total difference in absolute value ranks was 12 for the 2019-20 survey respondents.

Tables 2 and 3 showed how views of supervisors and employees respectively changed over the past 70 years. When compared separately, supervisor ranks between the 1949 and 2019-20 survey results had an absolute value difference of 18, whereas employee ranks showed a difference of 30 between 1949 and 2019-20 survey responses. However, as mentioned earlier, 2019-20 survey

responses from supervisors and employees showed an absolute value difference of only 12 ranks. The Mann-Whitney U analysis on table 5 yielded no (statistically) significant differences between how employees ranked the 10 job aspects and how supervisors believed employees would rank those job aspects. The idea postulated by Hersey and Blanchard that supervisors did not know what employees wanted from work was supported in 1949 after Lindahl's valuable study. However, results in this study indicate that current academic supervisors have a much better understanding than their 1949 counterparts. As such, the alternate hypotheses in this study were not supported - actually a positive is finding for supervisors and employees alike. Employee comments indicated that appreciation, respect, and good working conditions were the most important reasons to stay in a job. Respondents cited "poor management" as the number one reason why they would leave a job. Survey respondents indicated the main reasons to stay at an organization revolve around appreciation, respect, good management, and good working conditions. Most of these reflect arguments asserted by Hersey and Blanchard (1993) as a reason to explore management theories such as Herzberg's two factor theory, the situational leadership model, servant leadership, and transformational vs transitional leadership theory.

### **Conclusions**

The quantitative data indicated a shift in what employees wanted from work and a better understanding by supervisors of job aspects their employees value most. It was clear that supervisors in 1949 had less of an understanding of job aspects their employees valued than supervisors who completed the survey in this study in 2019 and 2020. The hallmark findings of the Hawthorne studies was employees improved performance because they knew someone (management) was watching them. The assumption is that management showed a "caring" for employees that translated into better performance. Employees continue to value appreciation and respect. Through education either at the university level, on the job or at conferences aimed at helping supervisors understand the job aspects their employees value can have great dividends on motivation. The lack of difference between the median ranks of employees and supervisors is in stark contrast to the results in Table 1 from the 1949 study. The words of the employees themselves in the open area comments reflect a desire for what Herzberg called "motivating factors" and what Maslow called "higher level needs".

As seen in tables 2 and 3, employee assessment of the most important job aspects shift over time and there is no reason to expect that dynamic to change in the future. Leaders who continue to educate themselves and complete leadership training in their careers have a better chance of understanding what motivates their employees and will be more prepared to provide the correct support for their employees to be successful.

### **Limitations**

Limitations of this study include the idea that the survey was given to academic leaders within either an introductory leadership course or an academic chairperson's conference. In both instances it can be argued that supervisors in this study were exposed to current motivational theory which may have been reflected in their answers.

Generalization of these results should be made with caution due to the self-reporting nature of survey research. Although great care was taken to ensure objectivity, the results in this study reflect the views of the participants and should not be generalized beyond this group.

Factors employees desire in work environments may also be culture specific. Studies from other countries (other than the United States) may yield different results. For example, Bulgarian researchers found that academicians were more satisfied with salary, co-workers, promotion, operating procedures, and supervision, but dissatisfied with fringe benefits, contingent rewards, nature of work, and communication (Stankovska et al., 2017).

### Recommendations

This study should be replicated in different college settings (community colleges, distance learning and primarily face to face universities) to determine if supervisors have a good understanding of what their employees want from work. The methodology of this study could be used on an expanded scale to determine if results can be replicated.

This study methodology could be useful in other industries beyond education. Motivating employees is a key part of management theory highlighting importance of such research. Gender and age should be a part of any research replications of this study. It is very conceivable that people of different genders may rank job aspects in a dissimilar way and have different points of view on what motivates employees.

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