

An Ethical Choice

I don't hate my job...I hate you

Though most employees find coworkers among the most satisfying aspects of their job, if a co-worker is dissatisfying, he or she is often very dissatisfying. Consider the case of “Jane,” executive assistant at a large consumer products company. At one time, Jane and a co-worker were close work friends. They had lunch together, went on Starbucks runs for one another, and routinely helped each other with work. However, when both Jane and the co-worker wanted the same vacation slot and Jane won because of greater seniority, the relationship quickly turned sour. The coworker would deposit smelly items in Jane’s wastebasket, toss tissues in it that “just missed,” and engage in other passive-aggressive unpleasantries. Despite mining plenty of revenge ideas from *The Office* (like putting the coworker’s stapler in JELL-O), Jane says, “So far I haven’t had the guts. But I’m working up to it.” Here are a few steps for handling a dissatisfying co-worker in an effective and ethical way:

- First, try a direct but conciliatory approach. Invite the co-worker to coffee, and be forward but evenhanded (try to see the situation from his or her point of view). A direct approach can clarify misunderstandings, alert co-workers to unintentional irritations (or, conversely, let them know you see their actions for what they are), and allow you to take some responsibility for the problem (few conflicts are totally one sided).
- Resist the urge to play tit for tat. Though tempting, such games often escalate and may only make you appear as petty as your co-worker.
- If you can’t solve the problem, ignore it. This is easier said than done, but sometimes the best way to extinguish petty, childish behavior is to ignore it. Involve management only when you have a proactive, positive solution in mind (to avoid appearing to be a whiner or, worse, a backstabber) or when you feel your safety or career is threatened.

Class Exercise

- Form groups of three to five students
- Have each group discuss whether or not anyone has observed similar relationship development in a work situation or in school.
- Evaluate how students indicate such situations manifested themselves and how they were treated in the social setting.
- Did these situations result in poorer work performance? Did they make the environment a difficult place to be?

International OB

Chinese Employees and Organizational Commitment

Are employees from different cultures committed to their organizations in similar ways? A 2003 study explored this question and compared the organizational commitment of Chinese employees to the commitment of Canadian and South Korean workers. Although results revealed that the three types of commitment—normative, continuance, and affective—are present in all three cultures, results also showed that there are some differences among the three countries in how important each type of commitment is.

Normative commitment, an obligation to remain with the organization for moral or ethical reasons, was higher in the Chinese sample of employees than in the Canadian and South Korean sample. Affective commitment, an emotional attachment to the organization and a belief in its values, was also stronger in China compared to Canada and South Korea. Chinese culture may explain why. The Chinese emphasize loyalty to one's group, and in this case, one's "group" may be the organization that one works for, so employees may feel a certain loyalty from the start and may become more emotionally attached as their time with the organization grows. To the extent that the Chinese view their organization as part of their group and become emotionally attached to that group, they will be more committed to their organization. Perhaps as a result of this emphasis on loyalty, the normative commitment of Chinese employees strongly predicted intentions to maintain employment with the organization.

Continuance commitment, the perceived economic value of remaining with an organization compared to leaving it, was lower in the Chinese sample than in the Canadian and South Korean sample. One reason for the lower degree of continuance commitment is that Chinese workers value loyalty towards the group more than individual concerns. It appears that although all three countries experience normative, continuance, and affective commitment, the degree to which each form of commitment is important differs across countries.

Source: Based on Y. Cheng and M. S. Stockdale, "The Validity of the Three-Component Model of Organizational Commitment in a Chinese Context," *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, June 2003, pp. 465–489.

Class Exercise

1. Divide students into groups of three to five each.
2. Ask each group to prepare a short white paper to define how it would approach establishing organizational commitment among employees in a new Chinese manufacturing facility.
3. Would the group try to install a Western Approach or maintain the Chinese Approach?
4. Have the groups present their positions to the class.

Myth or Science?

“Happy Workers Are Productive Workers”

This statement is generally true. The idea that “happy workers are productive workers” developed in the 1930s and 1940s, largely as a result of findings drawn by researchers conducting the Hawthorne studies at Western Electric. Based on those conclusions, managers worked to make their employees happier by focusing on working conditions and the work environment. Then, in the 1980s, an influential review of the research suggested that the relationship between job satisfaction and job performance was not particularly high. The authors of this review even went so far as to label the relationship as “illusory.”¹

More recently, a review of more than 300 studies corrected some errors in this earlier review. It estimated that the correlation between job satisfaction and job performance is moderately strong. This conclusion also appears to be generalizable across international contexts. The correlation is higher for complex jobs that provide employees with more discretion to act on their attitudes.

It’s important to recognize that the reverse causality might be true—productive workers are likely to be happy workers, or productivity leads to satisfaction.² In other words, if you do a good job, you intrinsically feel good about it. In addition, your higher productivity should increase your recognition, your pay level, and your probabilities for promotion. Cumulatively, these rewards, in turn, increase your level of satisfaction with the job.

It’s probably the case that both arguments are right: That satisfaction can lead to high levels of performance for some people, while for others, high performance may cause them to be satisfied.

Class Exercise

1. Brainstorm with students about situations where they knew workers/employees were unhappy with the company or their jobs, but still did a reasonably good job. Perhaps have them share insights into their own feelings about their school, or a particular class they disliked but still tried very hard.
2. Discuss why someone who is unhappy with his/her job might work hard at it and do good work.
3. Why would someone who is happy with his/her job not perform at a higher level than the disgruntled worker?
4. Students should come to realize that most effort comes from internal drive, not external motivation. As a result, a highly internally motivated individual might perform well in any circumstance whereas his/her organizational environment would not positively affect a non-internally motivated individual.

Point/CounterPoint

Managers Can Create Satisfied Employees

Point

A review of the evidence has identified four factors conducive to high levels of employee job satisfaction: mentally challenging work, equitable rewards, supportive working conditions, and supportive colleagues.³ Importantly, each of these factors is controllable by management.

Mentally challenging work. Generally, people prefer jobs that give them opportunities to use their skills and abilities and offer a variety of tasks, freedom, and feedback on how well they're doing. These characteristics make work mentally challenging.

Equitable rewards. Employees want pay systems that they perceive as being just, unambiguous, and in line with their expectations. When pay is seen as fair, based on job demands, individual skill level, and community pay standards, satisfaction is likely to result.

Supportive working conditions. Employees are concerned with their work environment for both personal comfort and facilitating doing a good job. Studies demonstrate that employees prefer physical surroundings that are not dangerous or uncomfortable. In addition, most employees prefer working relatively close to home, in clean and relatively modern facilities, and with adequate tools and equipment.

Supportive colleagues. People get more out of work than merely money or tangible achievements.

For most employees, work also fulfills the need for social interaction. Not surprisingly, therefore, having friendly and supportive coworkers leads to increased job satisfaction. The behavior of one's boss is also a major determinant of satisfaction. Studies find that employee satisfaction is increased when the immediate supervisor is understanding and friendly, offers praise for good performance, listens to employees' opinions, and shows a personal interest in them.

Counterpoint

The notion that managers and organizations can control the level of employee job satisfaction is inherently attractive. It fits nicely with the view that managers directly influence organizational processes and outcomes. Unfortunately, there is a growing body of evidence that challenges the notion that managers control the factors that influence employee job satisfaction. The most recent findings indicate that employee job satisfaction is largely genetically determined.

Whether a person is happy or not is essentially determined by gene structure. Approximately 50–80 percent of people's differences in happiness, or subjective well-being, have been found to be attributable to their genes. Identical twins, for example, tend to have very similar careers, have similar levels of job satisfaction, and change jobs at similar rates.

Analysis of satisfaction data for a selected sample of individuals over a 50-year period found that individual results were consistently stable over time, even when these people changed employers and occupations. This and other research suggests that an individual's disposition

toward life—positive or negative—is established by genetic makeup, holds over time, and carries over into a disposition toward work.

Given these findings, there is probably little that most managers can do to influence employee satisfaction. In spite of the fact that managers and organizations go to extensive lengths to try to improve employee job satisfaction through actions such as manipulating job characteristics, working conditions, and rewards, people will inevitably return to their own “set point.” A bonus may temporarily increase the satisfaction level of a negatively disposed worker, but it is unlikely to sustain it. Sooner or later, new areas of fault will be found with the job. The only place where managers will have any significant influence will be through their control of the selection process. If managers want satisfied workers, they need to make sure their selection process screens out negative people who derive little satisfaction from their jobs, irrespective of its conditions.

Class Exercise

Do this exercise before having the students read Point/Counterpoint.

1. Have students think about two to three jobs they have had, outside of family chores. [Working for a family business is okay.]
2. Ask them to list the jobs at the top of a sheet of paper.
3. Next have them list what they really liked about the jobs and what they disliked about the jobs.
4. Ask five-to-ten volunteers to write their job titles on the board and list 3–5 things they really liked/disliked about each job.
5. With the class, look for commonalties across jobs and consolidate them into a list of things people like and do not like about work.
6. Have students then discuss what managers or supervisors could do to increase the likes and decrease the dislikes.
7. Ask if these changes would cause them or others to work harder. Have them explain why it would or would not.
8. Lead the students to draw conclusions about how much their supervisors or managers control things that would increase their like or dislike, motivation or demotivation for the job.

¹M. T. Iaffaldano and M. Muchinsky, “Job Satisfaction and Job Performance: A Meta-Analysis,” *Psychological Bulletin*, March 1985, pp. 251–73.

²C. N. Greene, “The Satisfaction-Performance Controversy,” *Business Horizons*, February 1972, pp. 31–41; E. E. Lawler III, *Motivation in Organizations* (Monterey, CA: Brooks/Cole, 1973); and M. M. Petty, G. W. McGee, and J. W. Cavender, “A Meta-Analysis of the Relationship Between Individual Job Satisfaction and Individual Performance,” *Academy of Management Review*, October 1984, pp. 712–21.

³T. Judge, S. Parker, A. E. Colbert, D. Heller, and R. Ilies, “Job Satisfaction: A Cross-Cultural Review,” in N. Anderson, D. S. Ones, H. K. Sinangil, and C. Viswesvaran (eds.), *Handbook of Industrial, Work, & Organizational Psychology*, vol. 2 (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2001); T. A. Judge and A. H. Church, “Job Satisfaction: Research and Practice,” in C. L. Cooper and E. A. Locke (eds.), *Industrial and Organizational Psychology: Linking Theory with Practice* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 2000), pp. 166–98; L. Saari and T. A. Judge, “Employee Attitudes and Job Satisfaction,” *Human Resource Management* 43, no. 4 (2004), pp. 395–407.