Best and Worst Ways to Motivate Staff in Community Agencies: A Brief Survey of Supervisors

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Abstract

Supervisors in community agencies were surveyed regarding the best and worst ways to motivate staff to work diligently and enjoy work. Most respondents (88%) reported that it was very or extremely important for supervisors to motivate their staff, although only 53% reported that supervisors performed well in this regard. Concerning the best way to motivate staff, the most common response category was interacting positively and providing positive feedback for work performance. Regarding the worst way to motivate, the most common response category was interacting negatively with staff and providing negative feedback. Results are discussed in terms of emphasizing positive interaction styles and feedback by supervisors to help ensure that community support staff experience a motivating work environment.

A major factor affecting quality of life among many people with disabilities is how support personnel perform their job responsibilities. Historically, the significance of staff work performance on the provision of supports and services has been well-documented in institutional settings (Ivancic & Helsel, 1998; Sturmey, 1998). More recently, increased attention has been directed to the importance of staff performance in community settings in which supports for people with disabilities are provided (Harchik & Campbell, 1998; Sundram, 1999).

Many variables impact the performance of support staff in community agencies (Larson, Hewitt, & Anderson, 1999; Olney, Fratangelo, & Lehr, 2000). However, in light of the often complex and demanding work requirements of support staff (Larson et al., 1999; Sundram, 1999), as well as noted problems with staff retention (Larson & Lakin, 1999; Wagner, 2000), a major variable is the existence of a motivating work environment. The importance of work environments that help motivate staff performance has been noted repeatedly (LaVigna, Willis, Shaull, Abedi, & Sweitzer, 1994; Wagner, 2000).

If supervisory personnel are to help provide a motivating work environment, then supervisors must know what they can do to support their staff in working diligently and enjoyably. In this regard, a number of supervisory procedures have been investigated. These procedures have been categorized (cf. Green & Reid, 1991; Phillips, 1998; Reid et al., 1989) as supervisory strategies that provide opportunities for desired staff performance to occur (e.g.,...
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by involving staff in decisions that affect their job duties, clearly structuring job expectations) and promote continuation of desired performance through the way supervisors respond to the performance (e.g., by providing various types of feedback). Supervisory procedures for promoting enjoyment in the work place have also been investigated, although less frequently (Parsons, 1998). However, one source of information about supervisory procedures that has not been investigated is the views of experienced, mid-level supervisors. Experienced supervisors represent a potentially valuable source of information concerning what constitutes effective motivational practices. These supervisors are likely to have experience in attempting various ways of motivating their staff and subsequent experience in observing which procedures have been successful versus unsuccessful. Further, mid-level supervisors have likely been the recipients of various motivational practices employed by upper-level management. In the latter situations, the supervisors are likely to have had repeated opportunities to directly experience what did and did not help them.

Our purpose in this investigation was to survey a sample of supervisors in community settings for people with developmental disabilities in order to obtain their views on motivational practices. The particular focus was on what supervisors have found to be the best and worst motivational practices they have experienced.

Method

Participants

Our target population was supervisors in community programs that provide supports and services for people with developmental disabilities. One state was arbitrarily selected from each of five geographic regions of the United States: the Northeast, Midwest, South, West, and Southwest. Addresses of community programs for the 5 selected states were obtained from each state's Office of Mental Retardation or equivalent umbrella agency. Surveys were sent to the first 100 community programs on each mailing list. All surveys were addressed to a program supervisor.

Survey Instrument

The survey instrument consisted of four questions. Questions 1 and 2 were aimed at assessing supervisor views regarding the importance of taking steps to motivate staff and how well supervisors performed these activities, respectively. Specifically, in Question 1 respondents were asked to rate (on a 7-point Likert scale) how important it is for supervisors to help motivate their staff. The answer scale ranged from extremely important to extremely unimportant. For Question 2, respondents were asked to use a 7-point Likert scale to rate how well supervisors typically motivated their staff. The answer scale ranged from extremely well to extremely poorly. Questions 3 and 4 were intended to assess what supervisors viewed as the best and worst ways to motivate staff. To avoid limiting supervisors' responses, we made these questions open-ended, requesting participants to respond with a brief narrative answer. For Question 3 respondents were asked to describe the best strategy they had seen supervisors use to motivate staff to work hard and enjoy their work; and for Question 4 they were asked to describe the worst strategy.

Survey Process

In a cover letter we explained that the purpose of the survey was to gather information about staff motivation practices. Each respondent was asked to complete the survey form and return it in the enclosed self-addressed, stamped envelope. All responses were anonymous. To maximize the return rate, we sent a follow-up letter and second survey approximately one month after the initial survey (Winett, Stewart, & Majors, 1978). The follow-up letter asked the supervisor to complete and return the survey if he or she had not already done so. A stamped, self-addressed envelope was again included. Of the original 500 survey forms mailed, 52 were returned by the post office due to inaccurate or incomplete addresses. Out of the remaining 448 targeted community programs, 224 supervisors returned a completed survey, representing a return rate of 50%.

Organization of Survey Responses

Following an initial review of the types of responses to the first surveys mailed using previous categorizations of supervisory procedures as noted earlier (again, see Green & Reid, 1991; Phillips, 1998; Reid et al., 1989), respondent answers to the two open-ended questions regarding the best and worst motivation strategies were grouped into six categories, respectively. For responses associated with the best motivation strategies, the first category was rewards, defined as any item or event (oth-
er than positive feedback) provided as a consequence for good work performance. Examples of actual responses categorized as rewards included giving staff money, flowers, and an extra day off. The second category, positive interactions and feedback, was defined as any vocal or written interaction from a supervisor that expressed (a) positive regard, empathy, or good will or (b) verbal or written information specifically reflecting a favorable judgment of work performance. Examples of responses in the positive interactions and feedback category included thanking staff members for their work and sending them a note of congratulations. The third category, participative management, was defined as actions that involve staff in decision-making, requests for their input, or delegation of responsibility. Examples of responses categorized as participative management included listening to staff ideas and making them feel that their opinions count. The fourth category, assisting with staff work, was defined as actions that involve a supervisor assisting with or doing a staff member's job or parts of a staff member's job. Examples of responses in the assisting with staff work category included jumping in to help staff, doing the job before being critical of staff, and covering for staff in emergency situations. Attention to job structure, the fifth category, was defined as taking actions that make job expectations more clear, providing or arranging training, providing adequate resources to do the job, or offering ways intended to make the job more enjoyable or attractive. Examples of this category include making available family friendly policies, a fun atmosphere, adequate staff training, and reasonable duty assignments. Finally, a miscellaneous category was included for any response that did not fit into any of the five previously defined categories. Examples of reported responses in the latter category included dealing with any agency politics so that staff members could do their teaching and supervisors acting excited to be at work.

With regard to responses to the open-ended question concerning the worst motivation strategy, the first category was negative interactions and feedback, defined as any interaction that expressed negative regard, ill will, or lack of empathy by the supervisor toward a staff person or verbal or written information specifically indicating disapproval of staff work performance. Examples of negative interactions and feedback that were reported included criticizing work, degrading a staff member in the presence of others, treating staff with no respect, and talking "down" to staff members. The second category was authoritative management, defined as actions that exclude staff from participating in agency decision-making, denote disinterest in staff opinion, withhold information from staff, or singularly accept credit for the accomplishments of staff. Examples of responses categorized as authoritative management included keeping information from all but a chosen few, acting as if what the supervisor says is law, and taking control rather than empowering. The third category was supervisor inaccessibility, defined as actions that remove a supervisor from involvement with staff members and limit supervisors' knowledge of staff members' job. Examples of responses categorized as supervisor inaccessibility included telling staff to do things the supervisor is unwilling to do, sitting in the office, and having a "just do your job and don’t bother me attitude."

The fourth category, inattention to job structure, was defined as the supervisor not taking actions to clarify work expectations or not providing staff with sufficient training or adequate resources. Examples of responses in this category included being unpredictable in expectations, providing no support for attendance at conferences or workshops, and delegating responsibility to staff members who do not have the authority or resources to do the job. The fifth category, general supervisory inaction, was defined as taking no action to (a) resolve a problem (other than problems involving job structure), (b) motivate staff, or (c) improve the work environment. Examples of responses in this category included avoiding decision-making, never telling staff members that they have done a good job, and doing nothing all day. A sixth category, labeled miscellaneous, included responses that did not fit into any of the previously defined categories, for example, micro management of a situation and general statements about a person's incompetence to other staff members when the person was not present.

When recording survey responses by category, we counted each category a maximum of one time per respondent. For example, if the respondent's description of the best motivation strategy was "giving staff extra time off, treating staff nicely, and telling staff they are appreciated," the response was recorded once under the category of rewards (giving staff extra time off) and once under the category of positive interactions and feedback, although two examples of this category were mentioned (treating
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Figure 1 Percentage of respondents reporting each category in response to Questions 1 and 2 on the survey.

Figure 2 Percentage of all category responses to questions about the best and worst motivation strategies that were represented by responses to each category.

staff nicely and telling them that they are appreciated).

Interrater Agreement of Categorization of Survey Responses

To assess the interrater agreement regarding the categorization of survey responses, we had two raters independently categorize responses for 100 of the total surveys returned (45%). Interrater agreement was determined on a per category basis by dividing the smaller percentage of all responses recorded within a given category by one rater by the larger percentage recorded by the other rater and multiplying the result by 100%. For the categories regarding the best way to motivate, the average interrater agreement was 85% (range of 70% to 100% across the six categories). For categories involving the worst way to motivate, interrater agreement averaged 88% (range of 77% to 93%).

Results

As indicated in Figure 1, 88% of the respondents reported in response to Question 1 on the survey that it was either very or extremely important for supervisors to motivate their staff. Only 7% of the respondents viewed staff motivation by supervisors as unimportant. In contrast, in response to Question 2, relatively few respondents (16%) reported that supervisors motivated their staff very or extremely well, 37% reported that supervisors did somewhat well in this regard, and 29% reported that supervisors performed poorly.

We summarized responses to survey Question 3 concerning the best motivational strategies by dividing the number of times a specific category was mentioned by all respondents by the number of times all categories were mentioned by all respondents and multiplying the quotient by 100%. The top panel of Figure 2 reflects survey responses to this question. The most frequently mentioned category was positive interactions and feedback, which accounted for 38% of the total category responses; assisting with staff work, 20% of the category responses, followed by participative management (17%), increasing job structure (15%), rewards (8%), and miscellaneous (2%).

We summarized responses to Question 4 in the same way as Question 3, using the six categories depicting the worst motivational strategies. The bottom panel on Figure 2 presents the summary of survey responses to this question. Negative interactions and feedback was the most frequently mentioned category, comprising 41% of the total cat-
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category responses. General supervisory inaction constituted 19% of the category responses, followed by authoritative management (15%) and inattention to job structure (11%). The miscellaneous and supervisor inaccessibility categories constituted 9% and 6% of the categories mentioned, respectively.

Discussion

Responses to the first question on the survey reveal that the vast majority of respondents (88%) believed that at the least it is very important for supervisors in community-based agencies to help motivate their staff members to work diligently and enjoy their vocation. However, a large majority of respondents indicated that when it comes to actually motivating staff in this regard, supervisors are only moderately successful at best. Nineteen percent of respondents reported that based on their experience, supervisors conduct this aspect of their jobs neither well nor poorly, and 29% reported that supervisors motivate staff somewhat or very poorly. The finding that motivating staff is viewed as important but frequently not accomplished very well tends to support the significance of ascertaining what supervisors have found to be the best and worst motivational practices (responses to Questions 3 and 4 on the survey).

The most apparent finding concerning supervisors views about the best and worst ways to motivate staff is the importance placed on how supervisors interact with staff. Interacting positively and providing positive feedback was the most frequently reported category in terms of the best way to motivate staff, with the percentage of responses in this category almost double the percentage in any other category. The motivational importance of positive feedback coincides with results of an earlier survey of institutional supervisors (Green & Reid, 1991). Somewhat conversely in regard to interaction styles, interacting in a negative manner and providing negative feedback was the most frequently reported category regarding the worst way to motivate staff. Percentage of responses in the latter category were more than double the percentage of responses in any other category concerning the worst way to motivate staff.

A practical implication of these results is that it is likely to be helpful from a motivational perspective if supervisors focus on positive interaction styles and provision of positive feedback, and attempt to limit negative interactions and feedback. Of course, negative or corrective feedback is necessary at times in order to correct inadequate work performance. Nonetheless, based on the opinions of experienced supervisors, it would be advantageous if administrators who hired and trained supervisors emphasized effective and pleasant social skills as well as provision of positive feedback regarding staff work performance. Further, it should not be assumed that all supervisors naturally possess or apply these skills; training and monitoring of supervisors in their interactions and feedback styles is likely to be necessary in a number of cases to enhance effectiveness in motivating staff (Parsons & Reid, 1995).

Beyond interaction styles and feedback, the second most frequently reported best and worst ways to motivate staff were closely divided across three categories. For the second most frequently reported best motivational strategies, responses were approximately equally distributed across supervisors assisting with staff work (20% of category responses), participative management (17%), and providing job structure (15%). In a somewhat parallel fashion, the second most frequently reported worst strategies were supervisor inaction with regard to impacting staff work performance (19%), authoritative management (15%), and lack of provision of job structure (11%). The practical implication of these findings is that from a staff motivational perspective, it would be helpful if supervisors periodically assisted them with work, attempted to involve them in decisions that affect their duties and work place, made job responsibilities clear, and provided sufficient resources to fulfill specifically assigned responsibilities.

Another noteworthy finding is the relative unimportance the supervisory respondents placed on the role of rewards for performance, such as tangible gifts and special days off (cf. Green & Reid, 1991). There has been considerable discussion about the relative utility of tangible rewards from a staff supervision perspective, with differing views expressed (Daniels, 1994; Reid & Parsons, 1995). Considering that rewards constituted 8% of the category responses for best ways to motivate (and were never mentioned among the worst ways), a logical conclusion based on the survey results would seem to be that tangible rewards can be helpful for motivational purposes at times but should not be relied on very heavily.
In considering the results and implications just summarized, we must note several qualifications. First, the survey findings are limited to responses to a small number of questions concerning only one view of what constitutes motivation. Second, variables other than supervisory actions that may affect staff work motivation, such as salary levels and job benefits, were not addressed. Third, the results are based entirely on expressed opinions of supervisors. Experimental evaluation of the efficacy of various types of responses for enhancing work performance and enjoyment was not conducted. Although some of the most frequently reported motivational strategies do have a history of experimental demonstrations of their effectiveness for enhancing performance and staff acceptance of supervisory actions (e.g., positive feedback; for reviews see Harchik & Campbell, 1998; Parsons, 1998), the results as a whole should be qualified due to the sole reliance on supervisor opinion. Nevertheless, as indicated previously, mid-level supervisors are in a rather unique position to evaluate various motivational procedures. Their opinions warrant attention when considering how to support and maintain a work force that is both diligent and content in community-based agencies.

References


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