

A Virtue Ethics Perspective on Motivation

Abstract

While the notion of virtue ethics emphasizes individual character as the key element of ethical thinking which may in turn affect individual actions, there is a lack of attention to this aspect in mainstream theories and practices of motivation in organizations. To address this gap, this article focuses on theory of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation and argues that it may be integrated with the conceptual framework of virtue ethics proposed by MacIntyre. A change in value orientation may also enable good work instead of a narrow focus on monetary instruments. The article reviews literatures on motivation and MacIntyre's framework and develops a conceptual model to integrate virtue ethics with motivation. In the end, some avenues for future research are discussed.

Keywords: extrinsic motivation, institution, intrinsic motivation, MacIntyre, practice, virtue ethics

INTRODUCTION

Motivation has gathered immense attention in organization studies (Fisher, 2009; Porter *et al.*, 2003; Steers *et al.*, 2004), and is known to have a significant role in affecting employees' performance in organizations (Chang & Teng, 2017; Latham & Pinder, 2005; Lee & Raschke, 2016). What motivates an employee to achieve excellence or satisfy basic needs has an ethical underpinning (Bauer & Erdogan, 2012). However, barring a few exceptions (e.g., Von Krogh *et al.*, 2012), the issue of ethics in motivation remains largely under-explored (Pinder, 2008).

Within the field of business and management, ethics is defined as personal conduct or character that is desired and expected of employees. It defines concepts such as right and wrong conduct in organizations (Crane & Matten, 2016; Schwartz *et al.*, 2005). Virtue ethics has been defined as dispositions about acting and feeling in particular ways. Widely debated in philosophy, virtue ethics suggests that an action may be right not because it is rational or makes people happy but because it contributes to human flourishing, comprising both motivational and emotional elements (Carr, Arthur & Kristjánsson, 2017; Morales-Sánchez & Cabello-Medina, 2015; Wang *et al.*, 2016). It focuses on what is considered good for people, instead of mere compliance with rules. It emphasizes on the character of agent and asks the question 'what sort of person should I be?' (Sellman, 2017).

In the current era, virtue ethics is explained and exemplified by the work of MacIntyre (1985) who reinforced Aristotle's philosophy through his seminal work *After Virtue*. He delineates that good character is a function of practicing virtues in a specific context (Blackledge & Knight 2011). For example, Wijesinghe (2014) discusses the application of sustainability to the hospitality industry using a virtue ethics framework. Similarly, Hicks and Stapleford (2016) draw on MacIntyre's work in their pursuit of historiography of science.

The present article seeks to explore the degree to which virtue ethics may play a role in employee motivation. The virtues held by an employee motivate them to define individual standard or character of excellence and consequently strive to achieve that standard. In terms of contribution, the article proposes a conceptual model to integrate motivation theory with MacIntyre's notion of virtue ethics. This model highlights the need to consider virtues in shaping motivation. It also addresses the need for an interdisciplinary approach to study motivation (Steers *et al.*, 2004). By incorporating motivation theory with MacIntyre's (1985) notion of virtue ethics

(Kavanagh, 2013; Moore, 2012; VanKrogh *et al.* 2012), the article extends MacIntyre's theory as well contributes to literature on motivation.

A VIRTUE ETHICS PERSPECTIVE ON MOTIVATION

Virtues are required for the development of practices. These virtues are required in every discipline and field. For instance, students are expected to exercise the virtue of humility in order to learn from teachers. Similarly, gatekeepers are expected to exercise their standards justly and respectfully while determining entry to communities of practice. Furthermore, individual practitioners must also exercise virtues of diligence, temperance and fortitude in order to develop technical skills that constitute requirement of practice. The example of such individual practitioners is found in artistic, sporting, and professional disciplines where attention is given to detail of artists, nurses should be resilient in military hospitals, and mechanics should be persistent. Lastly, virtues are also pertinent for the maintenance of institutions (Beadle, 2013).

One such example is Anita Roddick, the founder of the Body shop, who pursued her internal goals and achieved excellence as a result of continual practice of virtues (Grant, 2004). A generic example is of an employee who performs tasks assigned by her employer as part of her job description. After continuing this pattern of work over some time, employee starts taking interest in performing her/his tasks and enjoys their accomplishment. It indicates that individual's own character drives business pursuit of excellence and achieving internal good. Virtue ethics provide an example of how individual's ethical and moral beliefs. One's pursuit of practicing virtues is based on moral character and virtue of an individual (Wang *et al.*, 2015). Based on the above discussion, the following proposition is offered.

Proposition 1. The pursuit of virtue leads to its practice among employees.

The relationship between virtues and practices is also affected by motivation. For example, it is because of intrinsic motivation that employees are able to exercise virtues which leads to recognition of practices and eventually attainment of excellence (Sison, 2017; Von Krogh *et al.*, 2012).

Wang *et al.* (2015), in her study of wine companies in New Zealand, highlights that employees practice beliefs termed as virtues due to intrinsic motivation. The source of motivation behind such behavior is virtuous beliefs held by an employee. The employee may be committed to engage in such an activity not only because it is virtuous but also because it is closely related to them and personal in nature (Wang *et al.*, 2015). The distinct beliefs and values held by transformational leaders in the presence of intrinsic motivation compel employees to practice virtues.

Virtues in the presence of intrinsic motivation may lead to actual practice and the subsequent achieving of excellence (Eggers, 2015). Virtues preferred by an individual may motivate him or her to practice intrinsic values (Eggers, 2015; Lo, 2009). Employees practice virtues when they are intrinsically motivated to do so. Within organizations, this process is termed as humanizing of businesses (Moore, 2005). Employees' own intrinsic motivation plays an important role in fostering or hindering virtues (Hemingway, 2005). Furthermore, virtuous agent takes pleasure in virtuous activity which coincides with motivational state depicted as intrinsic motivation and Csikszentmihalyi's term 'flow' (Besser-Jones, 2012).

Thus, we offer our second proposition:

Proposition 2. The relationship between virtues and practices is stronger in the presence of intrinsic motivation.

The relationship between institutions and achievement of success has been indicated through numerous studies (Beadle & Könyöt, 2006; Moore, 2012). We argue that intrinsic motivation of employees facilitates the process of achieving organizational or institutional excellence. The exercise of virtues by employees is facilitated by an increase in level of intrinsic motivation (Eggers, 2015). In an organizational environment conducive to practice of virtues, employees' level of intrinsic motivation is heightened, which enables the attainment of excellence.

There are numerous characteristics of organizational environment which may motivate employees to practice virtues over a long period of time (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2003; Wang *et al.*, 2015). These characteristics comprise: wage, bonus, team based culture, participatory management style etc. Culture enables sustained collective action by providing employees with similarity of approach and priorities (Fernando & Moore, 2015). Institutional policies lead to attainment of excellence only when such policies increase intrinsic motivation of employees. Thus, we offer the following proposition:

Proposition 3: The relationship between institution and excellence becomes stronger in the presence of intrinsic motivation.

Furthermore, employees are also motivated to attain individual and institutional or organizational success due to extrinsic reasons (Leete, 2000). Institutions are primarily concerned with the pursuit of external goods. This undermines quest for internal goods and extrinsically motivate employees. This is also termed as over-justification effect where extrinsic incentive undermines the effect of intrinsic motivation (Garcia-Ruiz & Rodriguez-Lluesma, 2014).

Extrinsic motivation of employees along with institutional arrangements and policies fostering this motivation leads to success. Such organizations may not be able to achieve excellence if their employees are not motivated (Deci & Ryan, 2002). Employees in such organizations engage in successful completion of tasks for extrinsic and institutional benefits. Consequently, institution is able to achieve success including profit and fame as a result of pursuit of external goods by employees (Beadle & Moore, 2006). Extrinsic motivation makes the relationship between institutions and the achievement of success by institution stronger. Thus, the following two propositions are offered:

Proposition 4: Institutional pursuit of external goods leads to attainment of success by employees.

Proposition 5: Relationship between institutions and success is stronger in the presence of extrinsic motivation.

Finally, the achievement of organizational or institutional success may lead to individual excellence. For instance, a student learns piano and hits the right notes in hope of being rewarded. After practicing piano for some time, he/she develops a habit of playing piano. She starts enjoying while playing music and feels satisfaction. This example illustrates how continuation of task over time may lead to success and in turn may result in excellence (Sison, 2017). This is also applicable to employees working to achieve excellence and success in organizations. Hence, the article proposes:

Proposition 6: Success leads to excellence after practice of virtues for some period of time.