

Workplace Motivation & Addressing Sexual Harassment in the Organization

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Abstract

This paper investigates the concept of motivation and its significance to the workplace. Goal-setting theory is discussed first as it has a long history of research in workplace motivation. Self-determination theory, a relatively new theory related to workplace motivation, is then explored. The theories are fundamentally different but ultimately have the same goal, to guide an organization in creating a work environment that allows for maximum production and for employees to experience job satisfaction and express self-efficacy. The paper concludes by highlighting the best ideas from each theory as noted by the author, as well as suggestions that go beyond the theories of goal-setting and self-determination.

Table of Contents

| | |
|---|----|
| Abstract | 2 |
| Motivation in the Workplace | 5 |
| Goal-Setting Theory | 7 |
| Evaluation of the Literature | 8 |
| Strengths, Weaknesses, and Usefulness | 10 |
| Self- Determination Theory | 12 |
| Evaluation of the Literature | 13 |
| Strengths, Weaknesses, and Usefulness | 15 |
| Highlights of Goal-Setting Theory and Self-Determination Theory | 17 |
| Additional Suggestions | 19 |
| Conclusion | 20 |
| References | 22 |

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There are times when an organization may require the unique services and expertise of an industrial organizational psychologist to assist with a situation regarding emotionally charged content (i.e., sexual harassment) and a concern for the motivation of its employees. Although the situation may directly involve a team of 15 employees, the entire organization is susceptible to a weakened human relations climate that may no longer be viewed as being built upon trust and mutual respect. The I/O psychologist will be focused on the issue at hand, but also mindful of the long-term solutions that will serve to strengthen the organization as a whole. With that mindset comes the understanding of various theories of workplace motivation and how they can be leveraged to fortify the organization, even when a matter of difficult emotions, such as sexual harassment, is being addressed simultaneously.

As taught in many introductory psychology courses, Maslow's theory of human motivation (1943) describes meeting the most basic needs—physiological, safety, and love—before moving towards developing the esteem needs of self-respect, self-esteem and esteem for others, eventually working towards reaching self-actualization. It is argued that while Maslow was speaking about the human life cycle in its entirety, it is at work (depending on the occupation) that many humans may travel through the hierarchy. In making that connection as well, Latham and Ernst (2006) remark that organizations establish a framework that meets basic needs (salary for food, benefits for care, colleagues for compatibility) which then allows for employees to build their self-esteem and self-actualization by making the most of their skills and talents.

This paper will begin by investigating the concept of motivation and its significance to the workplace. Goal-setting theory will be discussed first as it has a long history of research in

workplace motivation. Self-determination theory, a relatively new theory being related to workplace motivation, will then be explored. The theories are fundamentally different but ultimately have the same goal: to guide an organization in creating a work environment that allows for maximum production and employees who experience job satisfaction and express self-efficacy. The paper will conclude by highlighting the best ideas from each theory as noted by the author, as well as suggestions that go beyond the theories of goal-setting and self-determination.

Motivation in the Workplace

In relating motivation to the study of work management, Steers, Mowday, and Shapiro (2004) share that motivation is derived from the Latin word *movere*, for movement. It is therefore easy to see how movement directly ties to an organization as leadership, teamwork, change, production, management decisions, and ethical choices all involve moving in a direction (Steers et al., 2004). According to Ambrose and Kulik (1999), work motivation is confined to “events and phenomena related to people in a work context” thereby including environmental elements such as the organization’s compensation system and type of work, as well as an employee’s perceptions of work (their needs and motives; p. 231). Further still, Latham and Ernst (2006) posit that work motivation is a combination of forces with energy that “originate within as well as beyond an individual’s being,” and is a process that is psychological and commonly shared between the person and the organization as options, efforts, and persistence all are affected (p. 181).

According to Latham and Ernst (2006), it was Vroom’s expectancy theory (1964) that put I/O psychology on the path of more definitively studying organizational behavior and workplace

motivation through the three pillars of motivation (choice, effort, persistence), resulting in a coherent decision-making process. Further, Latham and Ernst put forward that:

Psychologists now knew the importance of (1) taking into account a person's needs (Maslow's need hierarchy theory, Hackman and Oldham's job characteristics theory), (2) creating a job environment that is likely to facilitate self-motivation (Herzberg's job enrichment theory, Hackman and Oldham's job characteristics theory), and (3) ways to directly modify, that is, to directly increase or decrease another person's behavior by administering environmental reinforcers and punishers contingent upon a person's response (Skinner's contingency theory). (p. 183)

In viewing a somewhat different perspective, however, Ambrose and Kulik (1999) share that workplace motivation translates into seven categories of theories: “motives and needs; expectancy theory; equity theory; goal-setting; cognitive evaluation theory; work design; reinforcement theory” (p. 231).

Regardless of the point of view towards organizational behavior and workplace motivation, it is ultimately understood that an employee's motivation is inherently linked to the leadership displayed in an organization (Latham & Ernst, 2006). As the workplace continues to evolve with new processes, and technology becomes increasingly embedded and necessary for success, organizations' leadership structure will change and in order to “ensure motivation in a global, diverse and increasingly well educated workplace” we will see leadership that is not confined to one person, but synergized through the dynamic relationships among employees (Latham & Ernst, 2006, p. 191).

These organizational relationships should always be professional and designed around respect, but unfortunately that isn't always the case. When accusations of sexual harassment

occur, emotions will factor in and misunderstandings, fear, and concern will undoubtedly be displayed by employees who are part of the accusation or are witness to an event that was obviously inappropriate. Landy and Conte (2004) define emotion as “an effect or feeling, often experienced and displayed in reaction to an event or thought and accompanied by physiological changes in various systems of the body” (p. 79) and this undoubtedly can negatively impact motivation in the workplace. Sexual harassment can be a traumatic experience for the victim, and it can also cause great damage to an organization’s work production and financial health. Whaley (2001) shares that the psychological impact to a victim can result in physical results, such as increased absenteeism, calling in sick, or quitting (turnover). This can cause a significant fiscal impact to an organization.

This leads the I/O psychologist to theories for enhancing workplace motivation and dealing with difficult emotions. According to Oliver and Pressey (2005), occupation psychology’s most consistently supported theory is goal-setting, “which proposes that specific, difficult goals, when they are accepted by the individual, will lead to effective performance” (p. 198).

Goal-Setting Theory

According to Latham and Locke (2007), the originators of goal-setting theory, “the theory of goal-setting states that there is a positive linear relationship between a specific high goal and task performance” (p. 291). Goal-setting theory overtly communicates that a definite difficult goal will result in increased or better performance than simply suggesting a person “do their best” (Latham & Locke, 2007, p. 291). Latham and Locke also share that establishing a goal will have an effect on satisfaction or a sense of fulfillment as the goal establishes a standard for assessing one’s performance, and that a more difficult goal will provide an increased positive

effect as opposed to committing to a more easily achievable goal. Further, there are two aspects which influence the goal choice: “the importance of the goal to the individual and self-efficacy, namely, self-confidence that the goal for a specific task is, indeed, attainable” (Latham & Locke, 2007, p. 291). This translates to purposefulness and intentionality of the individual towards the selection of the goal and whether they believe the goals can be achieved. Landy and Conte (2004) share that an important aspect of goal-setting theory is the feedback loop which provides the awareness of result or the transitional conditions that takes place when a person first commits to the goal and their eventual performance towards reaching the goal.

Evaluation of the Literature

As stated previously, goal-setting theory enjoys an established history of research in motivation alone and workplace motivation specifically. Beginning in the late 1960s, researchers began to see that the straightforward action of specifying objectives could enhance an individual’s performance of a task (Steers et al., 2004). Over the years and through several empirical studies, investigations relating to several other properties and facets of goal-setting theory have been conducted. For instance, Steers et al. mentions that it was in 1990 that Locke and Latham formally proposed their goal-setting theory, and that it was the impetus for work done by Earley and Erez in 1991 relating to time dimensions, and Crown and Rosse in 1995 in their exploration of group goal roles as they relate to individual roles.

The author located a multitude of studies relating to goal-setting theory and its relationship to workplace motivation and will share a few of the more applicable studies in this paper. In a study examining the effect of goal-setting and competition as it can affect task performance, Campbell and Furrer (1995) found that given the same goal (a simple arithmetic task), individuals placed in a non-competitive environment outperformed those placed in a

competitive environment. This finding is quite intriguing as many organizations establish competitive environments for their employees. Could they be causing employees to feel unnecessary stress, which inhibits maximum achievement? Campbell and Furrer acknowledge the preliminary findings and encourage further studies to investigate this area.

In 2002, Brown and Latham published a study involving the development and evaluation of a training program that could improve the teamwork behavior of employees. Based on previous findings, Brown and Latham theorized that in a complex group-problem-solving task, individuals who decided upon a difficult learning goal would display more teamwork behaviors than those who were simply encouraged to put forth their best effort. Further, Brown and Latham hypothesized that those who decided upon a difficult behavior outcome goal would exhibit more teamwork behavior than those who simply selected a learning goal. This study was distinctive as it involved behavior outcome goals as opposed to “hard criterion (e.g., number of widgets produced)” (p. 282). Brown and Latham wisely shared that for many middle and upper management type jobs there are often factors beyond an employee’s control that could have an effect on meeting an established standard; therefore, defining a job by specific behaviors could be explored to help an organization increase its effectiveness. Moreover, the behaviors expected from employees can be clearly articulated to them (as was done in this study) thereby possibly reducing incorrect approaches or actions (Brown & Latham, 2002).

Erez and Judge (2001) conducted a research study on core self-evaluations (packaged individual traits of self-esteem, self-efficacy, locus of control, and neuroticism) and goal-setting which “revealed that goal-setting motivation was related to agents' activity level and that activity level was significantly related to sales volume and rated performance”; further, “sales volume influenced rated performance” (p. 1275) of the insurance agents. These findings could be

significant to organizations as the ability to more consistently predict production and performance of employees who self-regulate towards high-level and difficult goals can translate into more precise hiring practices of employees who may be driven to offer much to an organization.

Finally, Hertel, Konradt, and Orlikowski (2004) studied virtual teams, goal-setting theory, task interdependence, and team-based rewards. In this intriguing study, the researchers explored management practices (e.g., high quality goal-setting) as a means of enhancing effectiveness and productivity of virtual teams based on the challenges of reduced connectedness (primary communication and production through electronic means as opposed to physical proximity). Hertel et al. found that the more successful (efficient and productive) teams had goal-setting processes that were of high quality. The researchers acknowledge that goal-setting principles can vary widely among organizations so they utilized a 6-item scale to assess goal conflict, participation, and goal adaptation by team members. This study may directly benefit organizations that use virtual teams towards adopting a workplace motivational theory (goal-setting) that will prove advantageous. Hertel et al. recommends that organizations preserve the psychological connections to employees by “(1) assuring high quality of goal-setting processes, (2) creating high task interdependence in the beginning of the virtual teamwork, and (3) using team-based rewards to maintain high perceived outcome interdependence within the teams” (p. 24).

Strengths, Weaknesses, and Usefulness

There are apparent strengths to using the goal-setting theory for an organization. The clear-cut application is easy enough for most everyone to understand: Set a goal and consistently communicate that goal to employees for simple and complex tasks. It is more than that however.

Ambrose and Kulik (1999) posit that the integration of personal variables such as self-efficacy, self-esteem, and conscientiousness with goal-setting will be useful in predicting whether goal-setting is likely to be effective for particular individuals (p. 253). Latham and Ernst share that standpoint and also discuss the ability for goal-setting to create a “strong situation” in that individuality disparities among employees will be minimized, “that is, on tasks that are complex for people, setting a specific high learning goal to discover specific procedures or processes for mastering a task is beneficial regardless of a person's goal orientation” (Seijts, Latham, Tasa, & Latham as cited in Latham & Ernst, 2006, p. 188).

There are also weaknesses with the goal-setting theory in the workplace. According to research by Ambrose and Kulik (1999), having multiple goals may cause conflict for the individual and result in reduction or sacrifice of performance of one of the goals in order to meet that second goal. This could be perceived as a trade-off between quantity and quality of goals and should be considered by an organization. Further, Latham and Locke (2007) put forth that there may be conflicts found between a team goal and an individual goal, as individuals may decide to pursue a personal goal even if it is damaging to the team’s performance (e.g., financial reward such as money). Finally, Latham and Locke also shared that in an environment of competitiveness, an individual may withhold their own ideas and knowledge if they perceive that their goal attainment will decrease among the competition and may even impede another’s goal pursuit to assure their own accomplishment.

Goal-setting theory is very useful to an organization for motivating employees and communicating job performance expectations. It can also be used to establish goals related to the working environment (e.g., no safety incidents or a zero tolerance discrimination policy). Attaining these types of goals requires collaboration among the employees. According to

Latham and Locke (2007) this is possible through deliberate framing and perception of the goal. If it is viewed as an overall vision, employees may be more likely to support and cooperate on reaching the goal (Latham & Locke, 2007).

Self-Determination Theory

Self-determination theory is a relatively new premise in the study of workplace motivation. It has been used more often towards health, school, and relationship aspects but is beginning to be developed in other areas of study. Greguras and Diefendorff (2009) share that self-determination theory (developed by Deci and Ryan) is a motivation theory founded upon the principle that individuals have an innate need to reach their fullest potential. In accordance with self-determination theory, this is accomplished by satisfying three instinctive psychological needs: “need for autonomy (i.e., need to exercise control over one’s actions), need for relatedness (i.e., need to feel connected with others), and need for competence (i.e., need to have an effect on one’s outcomes and surroundings)” (Greguras & Diefendorff, 2009, p. 466).

This can directly relate to a work environment and workplace motivation, as satisfying the psychological needs of autonomy, relatedness, and competence is often described by employees when discussing their career and professional pursuits although they may not use those words exactly. Thus, based on self-determination theory, work environments that provide conditions which allow for the facilitation of intrinsic motivation and personal growth will realize much more substantial and positive outcomes than a work environment that impedes or prevents an employee’s inherent motivation and desire for development.

Ryan and Deci (2000) communicate that self-determination theory uses long-established empirical methods to study human motivation and personality through an “organismic metatheory” to emphasize the significance of the development of personality and self-regulation

of behavior (p. 68). Ryan and Deci expand on this further by stating their theory investigates the intrinsic development propensities of a person along with the instinctive psychological needs of competence, relatedness and autonomy as these “appear to be essential for facilitating optimal functioning of the natural propensities for growth and integration, as well as for constructive social development and personal well-being” (p. 68).

Self-determination theory can be related to work motivation and attitudes toward the job, and Steers et al. (2004) credit and mention Herzberg’s argument that “work motivation is largely influenced by the extent to which a job is intrinsically challenging and provides opportunities for recognition and reinforcement” (p. 381). Self-determination theory differentiates itself from goal-setting theory as it takes the approach that certain psychological needs must be met to gain satisfaction (Deci & Ryan, 2000). While goal-setting theory uses a cognitive approach that focuses on the process of goal selection and pursuit, self-determination theory explores the concept of needs and “the content of the goals being selected and pursued” (Deci & Ryan, 2000, p. 228).

Evaluation of the Literature

In contrast to goal-setting theory, the author obtained fewer studies relating to self-determination theory and workplace motivation. According to Deci, Connell, and Ryan (1989) the first self-determination theory studies done in the field in the early to mid-1980s were conducted in school settings to examine how teachers “who were oriented toward supporting students' self-determination had a positive effect on the intrinsic motivation, self-esteem, and perceived competence of their students, relative to teachers who were oriented toward controlling their students' behavior” (p. 581). The study mentioned by Deci et al. focused on children but it is quite logical to convert that same situation or phenomenon to a work

environment (e.g., managers and employees) to determine how workplace motivation may be affected and that is precisely what the researchers did in the late 1980s.

Deci et al. (1989) describe a study in which “the dependent variables were the subordinates' perceptions, affects, and satisfactions with respect to their immediate work team and the corporation more generally” (p. 581). The researchers posited that if management supplies an environment that supports self-determination, the employees will trust that offer and actively engage in fulfilling their individual needs— again, the needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci et al., 1989). The study consisted of two interconnected components:

The first explored the relation of managers' interpersonal orientations (i.e., the extent to which they tend to support the self-determination of their subordinates) to a variety of subordinate variables; the second evaluated an intervention that focused on training these same managers to promote the self-determination of their subordinates. The ideas of autonomy support, noncontrolling feedback, and acknowledgment of the subordinate's perspective guided the research; these ideas were implicit in the measure of managers' orientations and were the foci of the intervention. (Deci et al., 1989, p. 581)

The hypothesis was supported in that positive outcomes were related to managers with interpersonal styles that supported self-determination and negative outcomes were realized for managers who demonstrated controlling styles that inhibited self-determination (Deci et al., 1989).

The next study was conducted by Greguras and Diefendorff (2009) and explored the psychological needs of autonomy, relatedness, and competence (self-determination theory) related to the different types of person-environment fit. Person-environment fit (PE fit) is “the match between characteristics of individuals and their work environments” (p. 465). Greguras

and Diefendorff claim with regards to PE fit that “much of the theoretical rationale suggests that fit influences outcomes through the fulfillment of needs” (p. 465). While there are apparently a variety of different types of PE fit, this study explored person-organization fit (PO fit), person-group fit (PG fit) and job demands-abilities fit (DA fit) along with “employee affective organizational commitment and overall job performance” for insight on self-determination theory relationships (Greguras & Diefendorff, 2009, p. 465). The researchers found that PO fit “influenced affective commitment both directly and indirectly through autonomy, relatedness, and competence need satisfactions” and this may have occurred because if an organization and employee’s values are in congruence, the employee may feel their basic psychological needs have been met (p. 473). PG fit was found to be connected to “relatedness need satisfaction such that employees who shared similar values with their coworkers reported liking others, and being liked by others, more than employees who did not share similar values with their coworkers” (p. 473). Finally, DA fit was not found to be directly related to autonomy, relatedness, or competence, but the authors theorize that “when employees perceive that their abilities and skills match the requirements of the job, they feel more competent in performing their jobs, and those who feel more competent perform at higher levels than employees who feel less competent” (p. 473).

Strengths, Weaknesses, and Usefulness

Self-determination theory brings certain strengths towards the study of workplace motivation. For instance, Gagné and Forest (2008) describe how self-determination theory makes a distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation:

Intrinsic motivation refers to doing an activity for its own sake, because one finds the activity inherently interesting and satisfying. In contrast, extrinsic motivation refers to

doing an activity for an instrumental reason. There are different types of extrinsic motivation that can be relatively controlled by external factors, or that can be relatively autonomous, that is, regulated through a person's acquired goals and values. (p. 225)

Related to this, Vallerand, Pelletier, and Koestner (2008) speculate that by focusing on self-determination theory and supporting an individual's psychological need by providing a supportive and non-controlling environment, a person's motivation will be optimized towards a given task.

There are also weaknesses noted with the self-determination theory. Deci and Ryan (2000) share that "a direct corollary of the SDT perspective is that people will tend to pursue goals, domains, and relationships that allow or support their need satisfaction," but the author questions whether other factors affect this (p. 230). For instance, could unhealthy beliefs in relationship expectations prevent an individual from pursuing a need satisfaction, such as relatedness (feeling a connectedness with others)? Greguras and Diefendorff (2009) also point out important questions that have been raised about self-determination theory, such as whether there are really only 3 fundamental psychological needs, and whether not meeting a psychological need could also be beneficial (e.g., an employee not wanting autonomy and instead preferring to be monitored closely). These are important questions that should be explored. Regardless, self-determination theory does appear to be relevant towards an employee's attitudes and their behaviors towards work motivation (Greguras & Diefendorff, 2009).

Self-determination theory can be quite useful to organizations that have the structure and desire to support it. In self-determination theory, controlling attitudes or behaviors, such as giving feedback that is more directional than simply informational is considered a negative

orientation. From a total organization perspective, self-determination theory may be embraced by a creative or concept-building company, but it might seem quite alien to an assembly factory. Regardless, self-determination theory recognizes there are states such as amotivation which occurs when an individual no longer has the intention to work or function, or they simply go through the motions no longer valuing their activities (Ryan & Deci, 2000). This would be an important realization for a manager so they can take the necessary steps to determine *why*. Could it be because of self-efficacy and not feeling competent to accomplish a task? Or could it be caused by stresses from external sources (such as being sexually harassed at work)?

Highlights of Goal-Setting Theory and Self-Determination Theory

Each theory presents an organization with powerful options to promote success and achievement. Interestingly, Landy and Conte (2004) describe four approaches which can be used at work to increase self-efficacy, and the author could categorize each approach as either prescribing to goal-setting theory or self-determination theory. The first approach recommends providing direction (guidance feedback) to the individual to increase the probability they will have success on a difficult task (Landy & Conte, 2004); the author views this as falling under goal-setting theory. The next approach recommends exposing or pairing employees to successful role models (guidance feedback) who have mastered a complex assignment (Landy & Conte, 2004); again, the author views this as goal-setting theory. The third approach recommends being a “targeted ‘cheerleader’ emphasizing the individual’s knowledge and ability” (Landy & Conte, 2004, p. 362); the author views this as applying to self-determination theory (competence). The final recommendation is to address any stresses that are not related to the difficult assignment in the workplace environment and reduce them so employees can focus

(Landy & Conte, 2004); the author also views this as applying to self-determination theory (relatedness and autonomy).

Goal-setting theory establishes that high performance goals can be set by individuals and they will strive to reach them. Feedback is critical in this theory as direction is given to allow for continuous improvement. That feedback can include the organization's stance on sexual harassment in the workplace (eg., zero tolerance and active prosecution). Self-determination theory takes a different stance of feedback and posits that providing information and not controlling language will allow for an individual to grow to their full potential. That noncontrolling feedback can be expressed to employees in a different manner (e.g., "You shouldn't have to deal with behaviors like sexual harassment so let us know if you are having a problem"). Regardless, both theories state that self-efficacy is critical in workplace motivation, and when dealing with difficult emotions, the belief that one can complete a task (e.g., lodge a complaint) or reach a goal (help others to combat sexual harassment) is paramount.

Any organization that does not address discrimination issues and concerns of sexual harassment is surely placing their livelihood in jeopardy. This means not only the blatant and obvious incidents but also the subtle trends and settings that can exist. According to Guenter-Schlesinger (1999), allowing a male-dominated culture, where women are valued less than men, to persist can cause discrimination to occur. This can negatively impact workplace motivation for the victim as well as the team members who are working in the same environment. Encouragement of emotional maturity can assist in keeping a healthy and secure workplace environment for all employees. Organizational leaders are ultimately responsible for the work environment, and Yukl (2006) describes leaders with emotional maturity as less self-centered,

more self-controlled, less defensive, and able to establish more supportive interactions with fellow personnel—all important qualities when dealing with difficult emotions.

Additional Suggestions

Unlawful discrimination and sexual harassment are phenomena that have certain characteristics or indicators an organization should be familiar with. According to Dansby (2001):

Women are much more likely to experience harassment than men; junior personnel are more likely to be victims than senior personnel; black men experience harassment more frequently than white men; and the most likely perpetrators are coworkers, followed by superiors. (p. 316)

With that knowledge, organizations should follow the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission's (EEOC) recommendations for helping employers prevent sexual harassment. Landy and Conte (2004) share the three EEOC recommendations: clear communication that sexual harassment will not be tolerated, the establishment of an effective process for handling complaints or grievances, and the desire and ability to take proper and instantaneous action.

Besides the reactive processes that must be established to protect employees and employers from unlawful discrimination, organizations can also adopt proactive approaches to maintain a healthy human relations working climate and prevent issues from developing in the first place. For instance, conducting human relations climate surveys on a regular basis can convey to employees a desire to learn how they are doing and solicit feedback for suggestions, recommendations, improvements, and concerns that leadership should know about. The critical component to conducting a survey is to follow up afterwards, as this demonstrates participation was valued by the organization (for continued input) and a strategy to build action plans with

employee involvement is the next logical step. Another proactive measure an organization can take is to study the organization from different perspectives. For instance, a review of the demographics of the organizational levels (e.g., senior leaders, middle managers, career and entry level employees) may be quite revealing from a diversity and gender role perspective. Is there a certain race or gender evident for any organizational level?

An organization can then use the survey data and demographic study to conduct a broad intersectional analysis concerning representation and perceptions of treatment. Hall (1999) shares that studying these areas can give insight into promotions and attrition as well as treatment issues of sexual harassment, allowing for a larger outlook of an organization.

Conclusion

Organizations may require the expertise of an industrial organizational psychologist to assist with a situation regarding emotionally charged content, such as sexual harassment, and concern for the continued motivation of its employees. The I/O psychologist is aware that the entire organization is vulnerable to a weakened human relations climate, which is a main point of focus. Workplace motivation theories will be explored to see whether their use can be leveraged to strengthen the organization. Approaches to dealing with difficult emotions and addressing sexual harassment issues can be addressed simultaneously. This paper explored goal-setting theory and self-determination theory sharing the differences and similarities as well as strengths, weaknesses and best practices. Finally, suggestions that go beyond the theories were provided.

The workplace motivation path an organization chooses may allow for great success, mediocre accomplishments, or no success. Karseras (2005) shares that quality relationships between managers and team members, with specific regards to conflict resolution, are the real key. If managers are not motivated, not trained appropriately, or not aware of the benefits of

establishing relationships with employees, they will find themselves quite busy trying to make things work, as opposed to simply working.

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