EXPECTANCY THEORY

Expectancy Theory, another of the process theories, explains motivation as emerging from the dynamic interaction between a person and the situation. While performance is the ***primary*** goal for managers, performance is merely a means to the realization of personal goals for workers. To understand the worker's motivation to perform, then, one must discern how performance fits into his/her personal expectancy "equation." Expectancy Theory argues that in order to understand people's level of effort towards a task, one must know their causal beliefs about the situation, ***and*** what's important to them. Motivation is conceived as a process, or inter-related set of considerations, which ***together*** explain the flow of effort into a task. For the sake of illustration, I'm going to use the idea of pipes to represent the three connecting considerations/pieces of the expectancy equation/process. The pipes can vary in size depending upon the person's understanding of the situation. When joined together, the pipes determine the amount of energy that can flow through the system—and thereby explain a person's level of motivation.

A person's causal beliefs about a situation grow out of their ***experience***. The beliefs we're interested in are those regarding the person's ability to achieve the required performance, and his/her perception of the likelihood of obtaining the promised outcomes once completed. My belief regarding the probability of my efforts accomplishing the proposed task, my "expectancy," is indicated by the size of the pipe connecting effort to performance. My expectancy can run from very high— where I confidently believe that I will be able to achieve the performance—to very low— where I have no confidence that I'll be able to do accomplish the task. Unless people believe that their efforts will lead to the desired performance, they are ***not*** likely to try very hard. If you believe that no matter how hard you try, you will be ***unable*** to accomplish the task, why would you even try? Under those circumstances, it makes ***little*** sense for you to try very hard. Indeed, high effort would seem irrational under these circumstances— like beating your head against the wall. The amount of effort in the system will be directly related to my expectancy belief. The size of the pipe will determine how much effort gets through.

Even if I believe my efforts will produce the required performance, if I don't think that performance will receive the recognition and outcomes promised (i.e., yield the expected consequences), then why should I waste my time working to perform? Only if I believe that my successful performance of the

required behavior will yield the promised outcomes/consequences will I undertake the task in the first place. This belief is called: “instrumentality.” Like expectancy, it is expressed in terms of a probability—ranging from a high probability, or certainty, that if I perform, I’ll receive the outcome; to a low probability, where there’s little or no connection between performance and outcomes. Have you ever experienced a situation where you worked hard on a project, but no one seemed to notice. It wasn’t that you failed to perform the task, but after you finished, your efforts weren’t recognized. This can happen through no fault of your own. Sometimes the other person just isn’t paying attention or doesn’t care, or doesn’t keep their promise. It feels very frustrating to fulfill your part of the bargain only to be told that the other person changed their mind, or failed to come through. Such an experience makes it difficult to trust that person again, and sometimes makes us not even want to try anymore. Repeated occurrences can lead to a state of general disillusionment and cynicism, where a person has been disappointed so many times that they just stop trying—they don’t believe the promised consequences will material/ they now have a strong expectation that no reward will come. This can happen to employees, too. If the workplace doesn’t seem to make sense, or outcomes/consequences aren’t connected to performance, it can decrease their willingness to try hard. The lack, or seeming randomness, of the consequences mean that people learn very different lessons regarding the consequences of effort/performance. If the person who is widely known among his peers for always stealing other people’s work and presenting it as his own is promoted and given a raise, it sends a strong message to those who worked hard only to be ignored. The message is: working hard doesn’t pay. It doesn’t take long for such a feeling to become a belief about how things work around here. The way to get ahead is to ***appear*** to work hard. And as the learning theorists told us, what gets rewarded gets repeated. People learn the connection between performance and outcomes. And organizations can vary in the connection they establish between the two. Many reward systems intentionally try to link employees’ wages and wealth to personal and corporate performance. This is done through sales commissions, profit-sharing plans, pay-for-performance plans, bonuses, and stock-options. In these ways, employees share in the outcomes they help create. However, in very large organizations, the impact of any one person on the collective outcome can seem so small as to <u>dis</u>connect their performance from the overall outcomes. If this happens, the outcomes can come to be perceived as entitlements, rather than earned rewards.

There's one more pipe. The last pipe represents "valence," or the value, attached to the outcome. Even if I know I can accomplish the task and my performance will produce the expected outcome, if I don't ***value*** the promised outcome I won't be very excited (or motivated) to undertake the task. What's important to a person will depend upon ***his or her*** needs, values and interests. Not everyone will equally value a given outcome. While the outcome may be assured, its reward value can fluctuate. For example, if the prize for winning the game is a pepperoni pizza, and I'm allergic to cheese, I'm not going to work very hard to win the prize. If however, I LOVE pepperoni pizza, I'll play my heart out. This might seem like a facetious example, but I have known incentive programs that offer prizes to the top performers that have little or no appeal to the workers. Just because some manager thinks it would be a cool prize, does not mean everyone else will want it. On the other hand, if the value of the outcome is high enough, I might be willing to undertake a risky task that would be a significant "stretch" for my abilities, or which might not even materialize upon successful completion (i.e., under low expectancy and/or low instrumentality). For example, a prisoner's desire for freedom can be so strong that she will undertake the task of escaping even against seemingly hopeless odds of success and slim chance of avoiding capture (and despite serious negative consequences for failure). As you can see, a person's motivation is implicitly linked to his or her perception of the situation.

Expectancy Theory combines all three of these—expectancy, instrumentality, and valence—into a systemic explanation of people's motivation. The amount of effort that comes out the end of the system will be determined by the size of the pipes connecting the elements. The total flow through the system will be limited by the smallest pipe in the chain. So far we've only talked about positive valences, but the system applies equally to negative valences—except the flow is reversed! Sometimes we know we can do something (positive expectancy) and we're sure the outcomes will follow successful performance (positive instrumentality), but the outcome is something we dislike/ would rather avoid/ have an aversion to. If I'm an engineer and I love working on technical problems, and I'm good at it, chances are I will be offered additional opportunities and/or promotions. Often such promotions entail supervising people. These managerial duties, while they might pay more, take me away from what I really like to do. Therefore, I will be demotivated by the promise of a supervisory role—I might scale back/slack off or even look for a job with another company where they wouldn't make me be a manager!?! In terms of the

model, a negative valence can serve to take effort ***out*** of the system, or reverse the flow of energy away from the task at hand.

So the manager's job is to manage the pipes. That is, the manager must know what rewards his/her workers desire; must be sensitive to his/her workers' sense of efficacy; then the manager must make sure that those people who attain the requisite level of performance actually receive the promised outcome. If expectancy is low, the manager must provide training or encouragement or tools or materials or whatever is necessary to increase the worker's sense of efficacy. And they must create a credible system of rewards that links rewards to performance—one that offers rewards of value to the employees. To the extent that managers can influence their employees' beliefs, they can unleash the flow of employees' effort. It is the manager's job to play "plumber" and manage the pipes.

Interestingly, Expectancy theory incorporates aspects of the other motivational theories. Like need-based theories, in order to understand the valence a person attaches to a particular outcome, one must understand the person's values and needs. Articulating performance standards and linking those to particular outcomes is a central part of goal-setting. Making sure the goals aren't too high as to be perceived to be unattainable is a function of assessing expectancy. Instrumentality, the connection of performance with outcomes, echoes aspects of equity theory. If some people get rewarded for accomplishing a task, and others do not, then not only will people feel cheated, but their beliefs about the expected consequences will be undermined. In sum, Expectancy theory integrates pieces of the various motivation models into a dynamic system of motivational influences.