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A 3-phased approach to stop frequent strikes by government employees in India and the durability of positive task performance reinforcers

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This paper investigates how frequent strikes resorted to by lower and middle level Government employees in India can be solved. A 3-phase approach, which includes court intervention for a permanent solution, has been successfully employed. This study also shows how three main reinforcers successfully used in many organizations namely, money, feedback and social recognition cease to be reinforcers and have a negative impact on task performance after a certain period of time. These benefits are claimed as a matter of right. It is at this point that punishment is resorted to. This punishment makes the employees realize the privileges given to them when compared to their private counterparts and appreciate them all the more.

A lot of research has gone into methods of improving task performance of workers. Western researchers and scholars have found that money, feedback and social recognition have significant impact on task performance. A few examples where money has been used successfully as a reinforcer are among Retail clerks (Luthans, Paul and Baker, 1981), Real estate brokers (Anderson, Crowell, Sucec, Gilligan and Wikoff, 1983) and Mining workers (Fox, Hopkins and Anger, 1987). Feedback too has yielded the desired results among Production Workers (Adam, 1975), Engineers (Ivancevich and McMohan, 1982) and Machine Workers (Chhokar and Wallin, 1984) to name a few.

Social recognition too has increased the task performance among Emergency Room Personnel in a hospital (Snyder and Luthans, 1982), Bank employees (Luthans, Fox and Davis,

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1991). Research results show that when these three reinforcers were used in combination, they produced the strongest synergistic effect on task performance (Stajkovic and Luthans, 2003). To test whether the theories and techniques in the field of management largely developed in the United States apply to other cultures, a within-subjects experimental design was used to analyze the impacts that the three popular and successful techniques used in U.S. studies had on the performance of workers in the largest textile factory in the Russian Republic of the former Soviet Union.

Two techniques, providing extrinsic rewards and behavior management had significant positive effects but a participative technique led to a decrease in performance (Welsh, Luthans and Sommer, 1981).

Conflicts between the employer and the employees are quite common and even natural since their interests are divergent. But when the employer happens to be the State, there is no conflict of interest as both the State and its employee are there for the service of the same interest, that of the people.

In a private sector, disputes are resolved by conciliation or by adjudication. Government servants, though, for decades have threatened to use strike as a weapon even before the discussion stage, on the assumption that the Government would not take the risk of continuous disruption of public service.

The 2003 strike in the southern state of Tamil Nadu, which this paper investigates, was no different. The unions threatened that their strike would create 'a very serious situation' in the State.

The people under study

The Secretariat Staff (consisting of 33 departments including the Departments of Finance, Revenue, Agriculture, Law and Public), Office Assistants, Subordinate Officers, Junior Assistants, Gazetted Officers, Under Secretaries, Section Officers, Secondary Grade, Graduate and Post Graduate teachers, College teachers, Clerks and Sweepers were the participants in this strike and hence the people under this study.

All these people can be broadly categorized into the lower and middle level management employees.

Knowledge into the reinforcers used by the Government to improve the task performance of the above employees over the past decades deserves a mention here.

Money

Government after Government has been raising the pay and perks of its employees.

The salary and perks are perceived to be much more when compared to the private firms barring top IT professionals and other highly qualified officers. As far as the people who went on strike are concerned, their pay was almost four times higher than of their private counterparts. About three days in a week are holidays on account of weekends and some festival or the other. Retirement benefits too were much higher when compared to the private sector. Time bound promotions and increase in pay and perks only on the basis of seniority were found in government organizations. Moreover, the guarantee of lifetime employment once selected is a feature found nowhere else except in the Government sector.

Social Recognition

Society views a person with a Government job with high regard. Such a person is looked up upon by members in a society. This in itself should have been a great motivator. Besides this, other methods of social recognition employed by researchers in various organizations too have been employed.

Feedback

Goal setting, external feedback and self-generated feedback have been employed for the employees under study for many decades.

The Government recruits the cream of the people through competitive examinations. Yet the machinery is thought to be corrupt and highly inefficient. Constant bestowal of benefits especially on the monetary side only, spoils the employees. A period comes when they forget that both rights and duties go hand in hand. Unfortunately, all these measures have failed to improve the quality of service. Moreover, the employees were making frequent demands for pay rise without considering the financial situation of the Government. Another point to be noted is that always all these three reinforcers have been used in tandem. Strictly speaking, this should have increased task performance. Initially it did, but over a period of time rights and duties did not go hand in hand. Government servants became too well aware of their rights and the dangerous belief that the State administration would come to a grinding halt if they indulged in stoppage of work. This is proved by the questionnaire later mentioned in the paper.

Background of the Study

The State found itself facing a budgetary deficit of 8650,000,000 Indian rupees. Moreover 90% of the direct tax collected was utilized only for payment of salaries and pensions to the 1200000 Government staff, which was perceived to be much on the higher side. The Government spent 40000000000 Indian rupees towards pension and gratuity payment. Pension bills were ballooning at 25% per year. With 98% of the population enduring the pain of financial reconstruction, the

Govovernment staff; constituting 2% could not be oblivious to the suffering of others in asking for more and more. The priority of any Government should be to deliver goods to the general public and not just look after a minuscule minority.

The Government therefore decided to take three main measures to improve its fiscal condition with respect to Government employee's benefits.

- * Eligibility for full pensions to be raised from 30 to 33 years of service keeping in trend with the all-India pattern.

- * An average of the last 10 month's pay would be worked out, instead of the last drawn pay to fix the pension.

- * Encashment of accumulated leave at the time of retirement would be allowed only for 300 days instead of 330 days and only Pay and Dearness Allowance be given.

The measures would result in a saving of approximately 19000000000 Indian rupees annually. Talks were held between all the union leaders and the Government decided to concede to many of the demands made by the employees. In all, concessions up to the tune of 552,00,00,000 Indian Rupees were made.

On July 1, 2003 the union leaders rejected the Government offer and undertook a strike (complete stoppage of work), crippling normal functioning of Government offices, Schools, Colleges and Universities. Valuation of end semester examination papers too did not get off. With road-blocks, preventing other employees from reporting to duty, Government arrested many Union Leaders and threatened invocation of the Essential Services Maintenance Act (ESMA) in which a person, if convicted, faces a maximum of three year imprisonment or a fine of Rs. 5000 or both. Both these measures failed to stop the agitation.

A three-phase measure was then employed not only to put an end to the strike but also to make the employees realize the value of their job.

Phase 1

On July 4, 2003, a measure was taken which was unparalleled in history. Nearly 170,000 employees from gazetted officers; teachers to record clerks and sweepers who participated in complete stoppage of work were dismissed. The total number of Government employees in the State is about 1200,000.

Phase 2

On July 7, 2003, the Government started by making a massive recruitment drive for about 15,000 vacancies caused by the dismissal of the above employees. A consolidated pay of 4,000 Indian rupees per month was fixed. This was three to

four times less than what the Government employees were getting. The response from the public was overwhelming. Thousands and thousands of graduates and postgraduates even in their late 30's and 40's thronged the office, reflecting the severe unemployment/underemployment rate in the State. Recruitments were made on a temporary and contract basis for one month.

(At this stage, a complete climb down by the trade unions was witnessed. They withdrew their strike unanimously without any conditions.)

Phase 3

Even though the unions had decided to end their strike, in order to get a permanent solution to the problem, the Government fought its case in the Supreme Court of India. The Apex court gave its verdict on July 21, July 2003. It ruled the strike as 'illegal'. The highest judiciary body in the country, the Supreme Court suggested that the State Government show 'magnanimity and grace' and take back the 170,000 dismissed employees (except those against whom specific cases of violence were recorded), on their tendering an unconditional apology for participating in the strike, and an undertaking that they would abide by the 'Conduct Rules' in future. The Supreme Court came down heavily on the Tamil Nadu Government employees for resorting to a strike and 'holding the state to ransom' and bringing the state administration to a grinding halt. It noted that 'the State had taken appropriate action and there is no alternative today to deal with the strike'. The bench observed that 'strike as a weapon by Government employees is always misused which results in chaos and total mal-administration'. Further the court ruled that, 'there was no constitutional provision under which the Government employees can claim as a matter of right to go on strike'.

(The three-phase measure was very effective. The public too appreciated the measures employed as the results of the questionnaire reveal.)

Questionnaire

Since the employees who went on strike were supposed to be serving the public, three questions posed to the general public brought to light the perception of the striking employees. For the respondents, 500 people were selected at random throughout the state.

Responses

> 90 % of the respondents felt that the employees were wrong in demanding restoration of benefits.

> 92% of the public supported the Government's 3-phased strategy to find a permanent solution to solve the strike.

> 81% people surveyed felt that it is easier to find a needle in a haystack rather than a person who says his/her interaction with a Government employee was a delight and that he genuinely felt that he/she was treated as an esteemed customer by the highly paid Government servants (paid out of the tax-payer's money).

Addressing the real problem

With customer satisfaction and cost-effective service being the order of the day, an organization can ill-afford to be paralyzed by the right to use the deadly weapon -- strike, especially when the people to be served are the general public.

The questionnaire, which reveals the complete lack of public sympathy, throws light on many things, which need to be done by the Government. The problem of poor quality service with huge delays and extra costs needs to be looked into. With the realization setting in among the employees knowing the worth of their jobs, the Government should take advantage of the psychological effect of the shock treatment by speeding up reforms and bringing down administrative costs considerably and improving the service provided. The Government should also put in a wholehearted effort to win the cooperation of its employees and spare them unnecessary humiliation.

Alternative methods to going on strike

In case of genuine grievance, employees can try alternative peaceful means, like tying black bands or/and working for an extra hour as is done in Japan. This will go a long way in winning the support of the general public.

Results

The three-phase approach employed made the employees under study realize that they were already paid highly and that they should not take their jobs for granted, by showing them as to how many equally qualified and experienced people are ready to work for 1/3rd of the pay, and lastly, a permanent solution was sought for, not merely by bringing in a legislation, but by asking the Supreme Court to intervene and give a verdict which would be binding on the employees. The employees who went on strike tendered an unconditional apology for doing so. They also under the Court directive gave a written undertaking to abide by 'Conduct Rules' in future. The Government on its part took the advice of the court and reinstated the 164,000 employees, turning their dismissal into suspension. A three-member bench comprising retired High Court Judges was formed to look into the cases of the remaining 6,000 odd employees against whom specific cases of violence were registered, and asked to submit its recommendations within one month.

Another point, which this paper highlights, is that the reinforcers of money, feedback and social recognition do not have an indefinite period of effectiveness. It must be

consistently monitored and at times punishment/negative reinforcements too need to be enforced. This will add value to the above-mentioned reinforcers with employees not taking it for granted.

Discussion

In a service sector, as highlighted in this paper, possibility exists where employees' demands may be unreasonable, keeping in mind that the Government will succumb to their demand, as it would like to avoid disruption in public service. Though in this case, the employee's demand is only restoration of benefits, past strikes where employees have crippled the administration demanding unjust pay hikes is the cause for public anger against Government employees. The higher levels of officers in the Government service are not included in this study, as they do not resort to strikes frequently. The main reason for that may be attributed to them not having resorted to such strikes may be lack of numbers when compared to the middle and lower level employees who constitute a major work force in the set-up. Percentage improvement in task performance because of the measures employed cannot be measured in such a study covering so many people and diverse occupations. A questionnaire will be the best method but that would have to be done after a period of time. The realization of the employees is in itself a big achievement. Under normal research, only a limited section of people can be covered. This paper attempts to get a holistic picture of a wide section of Government employees in India. In today's scenario where people keep jumping from one job to another for a rise in pay, these 170,000 employees failed to get similar or better employment anywhere else. This was evident as they were prepared to suffer the humiliation of tendering an 'unconditional apology' and a written undertaking not to participate in future strikes.

The three-five week period in which they were dismissed (later turned to suspension) wasn't enough for them to find alternate jobs. This paper does not encourage exploitation of employees in a labour-intensive country like India. On the other hand, it makes well-placed employees in the Government realize that they cannot be satisfied by sacrificing the interests of the remaining 98% population. The verdict by the Supreme Court assumes a lot of importance as the judgment covers not only the employees who went on strike this time but also puts a stop to other strikes that could happen in future by Government employees in other States in the country or even by the Central Government employees. Moreover, the Supreme Court is respected by one and all in this country.

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