



Research Article

THE IMPACT OF SENIOR MANAGERS ON THE MOTIVATION AND LEADERSHIP OF MIDDLE MANAGEMENT

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Gonzalo Cerón Llorente
Lieutenant Colonel, Guardia Civil
gonzaloceron@guardiacivil.es

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THE IMPACT OF SENIOR MANAGERS ON THE MOTIVATION AND LEADERSHIP OF MIDDLE MANAGEMENT

Summary: 1. INTRODUCTION. 2. THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK. 2.1. People in a workplace organisation. 2.2. People's motivation at work. 2.3. People's job satisfaction. 2.4. Leading people. 2.5. Middle management in a workplace organisation. 3. METHODS AND MATERIALS. 4. RESULTS. 5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS. 5. REFERENCES

Abstract: In the world of work, motivation is essential for efficient and healthy professional performance. Fortunately, in recent decades, significant progress has been made—through the study of leadership styles—in how to motivate our subordinates. Many studies have been published to raise awareness amongst the line management regarding the best way to 'connect' with their staff. However, little has been written about the factors that contribute to the motivation of those who are called upon to motivate others. The author believes that a large part of any organisation's success lies in the way in which the superiors of team leaders are able to motivate them. This study aims to analyse the behaviours of superiors that may impact the motivation of managers—who constitute the sample—in both positive and negative ways, and what this may entail for the organisation in the medium to long term.

Resumen: En el mundo laboral, la motivación es imprescindible para un desempeño profesional eficiente y saludable. Afortunadamente, en las últimas décadas se ha avanzado mucho, mediante el estudio de los estilos de liderazgo, en la manera de motivar a nuestros subordinados. Se han publicado muchos estudios que sensibilizan a la cadena de mando de la mejor manera de "llegar" a sus colaboradores. Sin embargo, poco se ha escrito acerca de los factores que contribuyen a la motivación del que es llamado a motivar. Este autor considera que buena parte del éxito de cualquier organización radica en la manera en que los superiores de los responsables de equipos sean capaces de motivarlos. En el presente estudio se quiere analizar comportamientos de los superiores que pueden impactar en la motivación de los directivos, que constituyen la muestra, tanto en su forma positiva como negativa y lo que ello puede conllevar a la organización a medio/largo plazo.

Keywords: People, Organisation, Leadership, Job Satisfaction, Organisational Culture.

Palabras clave: Personas, Organización, Liderazgo, Satisfacción Laboral, Cultura Organizacional.

1. INTRODUCTION

In today's workplace, it is evident on a daily basis that, however much prestige and material resources an organisation may possess, if it fails to look after the people who make it up, it will have little future. Extensive research has been carried out into the best way to motivate a company's staff, given that this is essential for efficient and healthy professional performance.

To this end, there has been in-depth research into different leadership styles, recognising their crucial role in the job satisfaction of all those who make up the organisation. Fortunately, in recent decades, significant progress has been made in the study of these styles, which have evolved in the quest to find the best and most conducive environment to help motivate our staff.

In turn, many studies have been published to raise awareness amongst the line management about the best way to 'connect' with their staff. However, little has been written about the factors that contribute to the motivation of those who, in turn, are responsible for motivating others. It is considered that a large part of any organisation's success lies in the way in which the superiors of team leaders are able to motivate them. This article aims to analyse the behaviours of superiors that can impact the motivation of middle managers, both positively and negatively, and, within this context, how the leadership style of the former influences that of the latter, and what consequences this may have for the organisation in the medium to long term.

As mentioned in the preceding paragraphs, society has, quite rightly, devoted considerable attention to how to influence the motivation of front-line staff, whilst also developing numerous protocols to prevent undesirable workplace situations that no rule of law can permit. However, there is a lack of such concern for middle managers who, whilst also being members of the organisation, do not seem to require these protocols in their relationships with their superiors and with the staff under their supervision.

Taking all of the above into account, and focusing on the behaviours that superiors may exhibit to influence the motivation of middle managers – and, specifically, their leadership style – numerous hypotheses could be put forward; however, given the limited scope of this article, the aim is to demonstrate that the following hypothesis holds true: the way in which superiors lead has a significant influence on the development of middle managers' leadership style.

The main objectives, as lines of research, will involve an introduction and theoretical framework covering the role of the individual within the organisation, their motivation, their job satisfaction, and how to lead them; following this, the role of the middle manager will be examined as the organisation's key player and the focus of this article; To this end, after setting out a series of considerations regarding their role, their job satisfaction, motivation and perception of their own leadership style will be analysed via a survey, so that senior management can become aware of the influence their leadership style has on the aforementioned factors. The methods and materials used in the research will be outlined, along with the results, as well as the discussion and conclusions, which will include a proposal for best practices aimed specifically at managing middle managers in any organisation, as well as retaining their talent.

2. THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

2.1. PEOPLE IN A WORKPLACE

The relationship between people and their organisations was already a concern for philosophers in Ancient Greece. However, it was not until 1930 that the focus shifted from a more productive perspective to a more humanistic one, and awareness began to grow that the interests of the worker and the organisation had been at odds from the very start of their relationship, and that the necessary rapprochement would require a change in mindset, one oriented towards human relations.

As Peña (2015) states: “The common denominator of all organisations worldwide is that they are made up of people who, in order to achieve the company’s ultimate goal, pool their efforts” (p. 9); thus, organisations succeed and grow, and the more they do so, the more people they require, who, upon joining the organisation, have their own individual interests. Furthermore, the greater their numbers and the later they join, the further they will be from the organisation’s interests. Thus, whilst the organisation selects people who align with its objectives, individuals pursue their own; a circumstance that the organisation must take into account.

Consequently, in the pursuit of essential synergy, it is considered that there should be a move towards reciprocity between the organisation and its members, giving rise to a formal contract in which the parties have a clear understanding of their regulated relationship, and a psychological contract in which the organisation has expectations of its members, and vice versa. To this end, it is essential to have an organisational culture that enables its members to internalise that culture: a set of unwritten norms created to guide members’ behaviour and direct their actions towards the organisation’s objectives. In the words of Chiavenato (2011), ‘a set of habits and beliefs established through norms, values, attitudes and expectations shared by all members of the organisation’ (p. 72), and as it is so highly regarded, it is desirable that it be passed on to new members.

This is characterised by the consistency of its behaviours, by the existence of norms, by the fact that the organisation upholds prevailing values and expects its employees to do the same, by having a philosophy of treatment, by having rules that its members must accept, and by a specific working atmosphere—a factor emphasised by Guzmán and Olave (2004) because ‘achieving a good organisational climate that encourages employees to develop a high level of commitment to their work and to the organisation to which they belong is the major challenge facing companies today’ (p. 36).

For, as we shall see in the following chapter on motivation, people are constantly undergoing a process of adaptation to the situations life presents them with, in their quest to maintain emotional balance and satisfy their needs—not only physiological and safety needs, but also social needs, the need for esteem and self-actualisation, which depend on other people. The latter highlights the essential nature of adaptation, which in turn varies from person to person, and even at different stages in the life of the same person; and if it is positive, it improves mental health, as one feels at ease with oneself and with others, and perceives oneself as capable of coping with life’s ups and downs.

Finally, it is important not to lose sight of the fact that, as López (2024) points out, ‘people can enhance or diminish an organisation’s strengths and weaknesses depending

on how they are treated; it is therefore essential to regard them as fundamental elements of organisational efficiency' (p. 14), it is essential that the organisation makes an effort to ensure that its internal environment generates sufficient motivation to drive its members towards the fulfilment of their own needs at work, which will ultimately benefit the organisation.

2.2. WORK MOTIVATION

As Peña (2015) states, 'Motivation plays a crucial role in people management. For an individual to carry out a task, three conditions must be met: that the individual is able to do it (resources), that they have the knowledge to do it (skills and aptitudes), and that they want to do it (motivation)' (p. 9).

Motivation is what drives a person to act in a certain way, or at least leads them to favour a particular behaviour. This can be driven by external stimuli or generated internally through a person's reasoning; in turn, depending on their social values, needs and abilities to achieve a goal, this varies from one person to another, giving rise to different patterns of behaviour, and even varies within the same person over time.

Whilst these patterns are variable, their structure is very similar across all people, shaping behaviour that is caused, motivated and directed towards goals, whether implicit or explicit. However, such behaviour will always differ depending on how the stimulus is perceived, on the individual's desires and needs, and on their cognition.

But when we refer to motives, we are not referring to 'snapshots', but to dynamic forces that create tension within us until they provoke behaviours which, through learning and repetition, are reinforced, thereby satisfying needs ever more effectively. Thus, it follows that a satisfied need does not motivate behaviour; therefore, it would be accurate to state that the process of motivation follows this line of action:

Unmet need => Tension => Incentives => Behaviour => Met need => Reduction in tension

The various motivational theories will now be outlined, distinguishing between 'content' theories—which focus on the aspects that motivate a person—and 'process' theories—which examine the thought process that leads people to become motivated. Those most relevant to the workplace will be described in detail, whilst the others will be mentioned briefly:

* Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1954), or theory of human motivation, which describes motivational needs that, from least to most complex, are: physiological, aimed at human survival; safety, related to our fear of losing control of our lives and our aversion to the unknown; social needs, connected to our need to surround ourselves with other people, in terms of emotional bonds and social interaction; recognition or esteem needs, linked to our need to feel valued within our social group, as well as to enjoy prestige or stand out within it, and to our self-esteem; self-actualisation needs, through which we can achieve our own ideal of who we are, enabling us to transcend our current state and attain the highest level of development.

It should be borne in mind that the satisfaction of a need leads to a decline in interest in the behaviour that was motivated by that need. It is also important to recognise that the first two are primary needs and that, once they have been met, we seek to fulfil the secondary needs, in the order mentioned above and in a step-by-step manner, as their motivational cycle is slower than that of the primary needs. We must be aware that not all of us will reach the highest level, as achieving it is an individual endeavour.

* Two-Factor Theory, Herzberg (1959), whose perspective—widely adopted in the business world—moves away from the prism of human needs to focus on an external perspective, viewing work as an individual's main activity, which can lead to either satisfaction or dissatisfaction.

To this end, it describes two distinct factors: motivational factors, which contribute to satisfaction, and hygiene factors, which prevent dissatisfaction. Among the former are recognition and responsibility, amongst others, all of which are linked to the nature of the work itself; amongst the latter are the working atmosphere, relationships with colleagues and salary, amongst others, which are more focused on the work context. Thus, individuals feel satisfied with the motivational factors they perceive to be present at that moment and do not express dissatisfaction in their absence; however, the absence of hygiene factors does lead to dissatisfaction.

* Theory X and Y, McGregor (1960): this theory, with a clear focus on the workplace, uses two models of worker behaviour—X and Y—to examine how a manager should lead their staff in order to achieve the highest level of motivation.

In Model X, workers are characterised by the following: they find their work unappealing and must be coerced into performing it; consequently, they do not envisage taking the initiative in their work nor do they consider that they need to meet objectives, and so they prefer to be told what to do, as they also reject any form of responsibility. They tend to be easily manipulated due to their naivety and lack of information, and they value job security above all else. For all these reasons, the organisation must adopt a more controlling and directive approach when dealing with them.

In Model Y, workers are characterised by the following: they find their work appealing, so they are naturally motivated to carry it out with a view to improving themselves; as such, they display great creativity and ingenuity, which enables them to easily solve the problems presented by their daily tasks. Furthermore, they respond well to recognition of their achievements, seeking out responsibilities whilst striving to achieve their objectives. For all these reasons, the organisation will be able to engage with them in a more inspiring and empowering way.

To conclude the discussion of theories based on the factors that motivate individuals, we mention Alderfer's (1969) Existence-Relationship-Growth Model, which reduces the number of levels in Maslow's hierarchy, and McClelland's (1961) theory of Learned Needs, concerning the three dominant drives: achievement, power and affiliation.

With regard to theories based on the thought processes that lead people to become motivated—that is, process-based theories—the Theory of Expectancy by Vroom (1964) stands out. According to this theory, the way motivation influences behaviour depends,

on the one hand, on the individual being convinced that the actions they are about to undertake will lead to a specific outcome, and, on the other hand, on whether they find the resulting reward appealing. Also noteworthy is the Equity and Justice Theory by Adams (1968), which maintains that motivation at work depends on what the worker considers they should receive for their efforts and how they compare this with what others in their organisation receive.

Having examined the various theories, Maldonado and Quevedo (2007) describe their application to the world of work as follows:

“In his theoretical description, Maslow (1954) argues that in the workplace, workers’ primary needs—according to the hierarchy he proposed—would be met by the provision of an adequate wage and the physical environment, such as physiological needs; job security and a non- aggressive environment, treatment by managers and job stability would form part of the safety needs; with regard to social needs, colleagues, the relationship with managers and the group in general, self-esteem, professional reputation, competence, progress and responsibility would form part of the needs relating to the ego; whilst the development of one’s own abilities, personal satisfaction, creativity and self-confidence are related to the need for self-actualisation” (p.16).

Thus, and based on the conviction that each level has different interests and expectations regarding the fulfilment of its needs—even amongst its own members—it falls to senior management to facilitate the conditions that contribute to the fulfilment of their employees’ needs. To this end, they must rely on middle management—as the group that best knows the front-line staff— but adopting an approach that does not neglect the needs of senior management themselves—key figures in any organisation and the true bearers of organisational culture—who, in conveying this culture from senior management to front-line staff, must be convinced of its merits; the best way to achieve this is for them to recognise how this culture contributes to the fulfilment of their own needs.

2.3. EMPLOYEES’ JOB SATISFACTION

Having examined work motivation, and knowing that two factors influence it: on the one hand, there are the intrinsic factors—also known as satisfaction factors—which are directly related to the job itself, such as recognition, responsibility, growth, promotion or achievement, amongst others; and on the other hand, extrinsic factors—also known as factors of job dissatisfaction—which are closely linked to the working environment in which the individual operates, such as pay, management, supervision, benefits and interpersonal relationships, amongst others.

How do we define job satisfaction? It is something that was not always a consideration for those managing organisations; however, from the last quarter of the last century right up to the present day, there have been various approaches, ranging from the view that it was a positive emotion resulting from a positive assessment and the experience gained by the employee in their work, through a sense of fulfilment derived from meeting needs beyond the purely physiological, to identifying it as the result of the feelings the employee harbours towards their work, distinguishing between factors specific to performance and factors relating to the working environment. In any case, it

is shaped by the individual's values, their needs and the gap they perceive between what they expect to receive and what they feel they actually receive.

However, whilst an organisation must not lose sight of its employees' subjective sense of satisfaction, it must also ensure a certain level of output; consequently, it seeks a directly proportional relationship between the actual satisfaction of its workers and their productivity, aware that, as Pascual, López and Parrilla (2023) point out:

“According to Garton and Mankins (2015), Bain & Company demonstrated in a 2015 study of 300 senior executives worldwide—the results of which were published in the *Harvard Business Review* (2015), the difference in performance between a dissatisfied person and a committed person is 73 per cent, with the performance of a dissatisfied person being 29 per cent lower than that of a satisfied person and 73 per cent lower than that of a committed person, whose performance is 44 per cent higher than that of a satisfied person.” (p. 177).

For all these reasons, it will be of great interest to any organisation to understand the reasons why its employees feel dissatisfied; a good example of this is provided by Branham (2005), which is based on 19,000 surveys conducted amongst employees of the Saratoga Institute, part of the consultancy firm Pricewaterhouse Coopers, with the aim of analysing the reasons for dissatisfaction, proposing measures to meet employees' needs, and offering them the opportunity to develop and prevent them from leaving:

“Unmet expectations/Mismatch between the individual and the role/insufficient supervision and guidance for the employee/stress due to work overload and an imbalance between work and personal life/ few opportunities for growth and promotion/ feeling undervalued or unrecognised/ loss of confidence in senior leadership.” (n.d.)

All of this will contribute to an appropriate staff turnover rate, thereby preventing the organisation from wasting resources on training staff who, on the one hand, do not make sufficient use of their skills by leaving the company, and who, on the other hand, may apply their knowledge in another organisation.

Next, returning to the positive correlation between productivity and job satisfaction, we present Pushpakumari's comprehensive study conducted in 2008, analysed by Barrera (2015), which reaches the following conclusions:

* Job satisfaction has a significant impact on the productivity of employees in private-sector organisations, where higher-level employees are more satisfied than lower-level ones.

* Employees at higher levels tend to derive greater satisfaction from intrinsic rewards, whilst those at lower levels do so from extrinsic rewards, with the former being more willing to put in extra effort at work.

* Employees in highly competitive industries are more satisfied than those in less competitive industries. Similarly, older employees are more satisfied than younger ones, as are those with more experience than those with less.

* Satisfied employees tend to have lower absenteeism rates than dissatisfied employees, which also affects staff turnover; similarly, financial benefits satisfy, retain and attract staff, resulting in satisfied employees who are more committed to their jobs.

Having outlined the intrinsic and extrinsic factors that contribute to job satisfaction, we cannot conclude without mentioning Dimitrova's (2017) contribution regarding workers' social interaction: 'Work satisfies their need for social interaction. It should therefore come as no surprise that having friendly and supportive colleagues increases employee satisfaction. A manager's behaviour is also a key determinant of satisfaction.' (p. 32).

Elaborating on this last concept, and paraphrasing the well-known assertion that 'people do not leave a job, but rather leave a boss', Döring, Pihl-Thingvad, and Vogel (2025) noted: 'Well-being at work is a multifaceted construct that goes far beyond the limited dimension of staff satisfaction with their work' (p. 2).

2.4. LEADING PEOPLE

Many of us have led and been led at some point, and the latter may have influenced our personal leadership style, in which our temperament, character and personality coexist with the contributions of those who have led us—contributions that are always positive, as they have allowed us to experience first-hand aspects that we may choose to implement ourselves, or that we will never adopt because they are counterproductive to motivating the staff under our charge, or may even demotivate them.

Lescano (2016) stated: "Although we will discuss the leadership role of middle managers later on, it is worth emphasising that this leadership is influenced by the leadership of senior managers" (p. 6).

However, our interaction with the staff we have led also influences our leadership style, and although the staff under our charge differ in each role we have held—due to their own personalities and the working environment in which they find themselves—we are able to recognise patterns which, far from leading us to form prejudices towards future colleagues, should help us identify the best way to connect with the staff under our charge so that we can all achieve our common goal.

For all these reasons, it is necessary at this point to discuss the various leadership styles, highlighting their advantages and disadvantages. We shall begin with the traditional styles, merely listing them, as they are well known to all and their terminology is very intuitive, before moving on to those that are currently regarded as more appropriate.

The traditional leadership styles – namely, autocratic, bureaucratic, charismatic, democratic, passive, people-oriented, task-oriented, natural and transactional – gave way at the end of the last century to others, based on various components of what is known as emotional intelligence, once it became clear that a leader requires not so much technical knowledge as an understanding of human behaviour in order to influence it. Thus, Goleman (2002) argues that, whilst every type of task requires two parts emotional intelligence to one part IQ, in the case of leadership, six parts emotional intelligence are required for every one part IQ.

The good news is that, whilst IQ is largely genetic, emotional intelligence—and the skills that characterise it—can be learnt at any age; one simply needs to practise them and commit to them. This is impossible, however, without positively valuing the change they will bring about, which will contribute decisively to a working environment characterised by the flexibility that allows for innovation without fear of bureaucracy, where employees have a clear understanding of the organisation's values and mission—which will foster a sense of responsibility towards it—and, together with precise feedback on performance appraisals and the awarding of rewards, will determine their level of commitment to the shared purpose. Even so, success is not guaranteed, given that, as Aunin, Lüde, Sander, Vogel and Wiesner (2024) pointed out, 'the idea that effective leaders respond to each follower individually is widespread in public leadership studies.' (p.2).

Finally, before describing these leadership styles, it is important to recognise that to be an effective leader, one must employ one style or another depending on the circumstances; although you may feel more comfortable practising one of them, you must be familiar with all of them so as to apply them when necessary, switching from one to another quickly and naturally.

* Visionary leader: provides staff with the goal without dictating the path to it, so that each employee has scope to innovate – with calculated risks – whilst being able to try something new. This ensures that every team member knows what is expected of them in achieving the common goal, encourages their commitment and initiative, and shares knowledge by training the team and instilling confidence in their abilities, which helps with staff retention. Very useful when facing imminent change, but less so with experienced teams.

* The coaching leader: more people-oriented than task-oriented, they may set aside short-term concerns to focus on what matters to their team on a personal level. They show greater concern for developing their staff than for achieving objectives; by connecting with their personal goals, they find it easy to link these in turn to their professional ones; they seek personal growth through feedback rather than the organisation's interests; and they foster their staff's autonomy and self-confidence. Very useful for developing staff, though less so with those who do not wish to receive feedback or develop themselves.

* Affiliative leader: with a greater focus on interpersonal relationships, they aim to create a close-knit and harmonious working environment, not ruling out the possibility of friendship, thereby securing the loyalty of their staff and fostering a sense of belonging. However, they cannot help but lose sight of the objective; it becomes more difficult to deal with any conflict, which limits performance, and this style cannot be used exclusively, as the team may perceive it as laxity. Very useful for strengthening relationships, but not so much in a crisis or when clear instructions are needed.

* Democratic leader: interested in their staff's views and concerns, they value their opinions, which instils flexibility and a sense of responsibility in them. They manage conflict well by smoothing over differences to foster harmony, acting as one of the team rather than 'playing the boss'. They spend too much time consulting their team, so it is sometimes inadvisable to rely on them so heavily. Very useful for building consensus or encouraging participation, but less so in a crisis, when facing an unpopular decision, or where opinions are divided.

* The Helmsman Leader: more focused on achieving objectives and concerned with performance, they set the pace and direction, whilst being overly preoccupied with the short term. They give the impression of being a coaching leader, but their team feels merely controlled, as they pay little heed to their needs and aspirations, which ultimately undermines the team atmosphere. Despite believing they give clear instructions, their team has to guess what they want, leading them to lose confidence in their own abilities and feel adrift when the leader is absent. Very useful only with motivated and competent teams.

* Coercive leader: with a greater focus on achieving objectives, they are solely concerned with ensuring that their staff obey them blindly, thereby stifling initiative. They do not delegate, explain or train; they only provide negative feedback, assuming that doing things correctly is the starting point. This style is useful only in emergencies, in the face of imminent change or when dealing with problematic staff.

In the last decade of the last century, people began to talk about another style – the transformational style – which is more oriented towards flexibility and participation within the organisation by giving meaning to performance. In this way, staff are transformed, fostering the development of their motivations, values and abilities, without focusing solely on improving their performance. By showing them that their work serves a purpose for each individual, it inspires them whilst conveying the manager's enthusiasm.

It transforms because it takes care of each of its employees, with their different qualities, abilities, characteristics and needs, providing them with challenges tailored to these; it stimulates the team, as innovating and stepping outside the 'comfort zone' promotes their development; it identifies opportunities, strengths, weaknesses and threats to set a scenario that generates high expectations; he influences his team by building trust through his honesty, commitment and tenacity, so that following him comes naturally. To conclude, in the words of Gagné et al (2022), 'Transactional leadership, centred on supervising, rewarding and punishing, could boost self-determined motivation during organisational crises' (p.12).

2.5. MIDDLE MANAGEMENT IN A WORKPLACE ORGANISATION

Returning to the beginning and the way in which an organisation is structured, mention was made of senior management, which bears ultimate responsibility for the company's success and is tasked with communicating its mission, vision and values to the rest of the staff, for which it relies on middle management, as highlighted by Asif, Li, Hussain, Jameel and Hu (2023): "Supervisors facilitate two-way communication with their subordinates by acting as agents of the organisation." (p.9).

Reference was also made to middle management, who, in the words of Barrera (2015), "are those employees within a company who have people under their responsibility (subordinates) and, in turn, report to another person (superiors, heads of department, managers), regardless of the number of subordinates reporting to them, or the area or functions in which they work." (p. 60), who are expected to be so aligned with the organisation that they can convince the rank-and-file staff of this, with senior management assuming that they are highly motivated because, amongst other things, they do not usually put obstacles in the way of their ideas and try to implement them. Aware

of the difficulty of this task, Tyskbo and Styhre (2023) acknowledged: “Navigating this middle ground required a delicate balance: responding to and aligning with senior management’s organisational expectations, whilst at the same time guiding those under their charge and identifying with them through solid, close relationships” (p. 15).

And then there are the rank-and-file staff, who are expected to contribute their efforts towards the common goal—a goal that originates with senior management but is conveyed to them via middle management. These staff members are valued by the organisation, although the organisation takes full account of Pruneda’s (2013) observation that “workers in managerial positions have higher levels of motivation than those in other types of roles” (p. 26).

If we add to this the assertion made by Isasi (2023), referring to the various models of corporate governance, in which he highlighted the existence of common denominators in the most advanced countries with the greatest legal certainty, including: ‘The inappropriateness of the participation of workers’ representatives on the Board of Directors.’ (p. 15), both statements show us that organisations have lower expectations of this group in terms of involvement, motivation and development within the company than they do of middle management.

Indeed, as Ávila (2017) points out, “The role of middle management has undergone significant evolution since the early 1970s, initially being viewed as agents of organisational control, and now being regarded as agents of change” (p. 9). For all these reasons, given that middle management is regarded as a fundamental cog in the organisation’s machinery, it seems essential to understand their expectations, so that senior management—who have the greatest stake in the company’s success—have the opportunity to implement the necessary measures to retain the best talent within this group.

However, we must bear in mind the point raised by Mula (2016): “there are many people who, whilst in their jobs and aligned with their companies’ objectives, wish to create value, yet find themselves held back by the working environment or because they have been assigned an unsuitable task” (p. 53). Consequently, people join the company highly motivated, but this motivation can gradually wane if there are no appropriate incentive policies in place; what begins as an unpleasant situation ends in frustration and personal and professional decline.

To prevent this, or to help eradicate demotivation as soon as it arises, senior management has a vital role to play, based on seven principles: to use all available means to ascertain the cause of the issue, which must then be corroborated with the person concerned; to form a clear picture of what has happened; to thoroughly investigate the reasons behind the situation; to implement measures to address this demotivation; to demonstrate trust and a positive attitude throughout the process; and to identify the goals the employee needs to restart the motivational cycle.

Even so, whilst relying on the goodwill of senior management and middle managers—who are responsible for conveying the sentiments of front-line staff, as well as their own—as Chiavenato (2009) noted: ‘Various problems affect people’s performance. Some manage to deal with such problems on their own, others do not and become problematic employees’ (p. 447).

However, there is no need to go to extremes; it is more common than it seems, for as the author cited in the previous paragraph also noted in his work:

“For conflict to arise, in addition to differences in objectives and interests, there must necessarily be deliberate interference by one of the parties involved... whether active or passive, but deliberate, to block the other party’s attempt to achieve its objectives” (p. 459).

This causes clearly defined harm, as described by Mula (2016): “A poor working atmosphere can facilitate the emergence of interpersonal conflicts which, in turn, worsen the atmosphere... ultimate responsibility for the working atmosphere lies with management” (p. 22).

All levels of the organisation must bear this firmly in mind, although the burden of management falls mainly on middle management, who have more staff under their charge and who may follow advice such as that offered by Cembrero, Díez, Gómez, Hernández and Molinos (2017): “Among the measures to prevent conflicts is not concealing the organisation’s problems or difficulties in order to avoid rumours” (p. 69), and those of Ávila (2017) himself, who pointed out that one of the general objectives of mediation and conflict resolution is “to accept conflict as something inevitable and commonplace, whilst recognising that it can indeed be managed effectively.” (p. 25) – in contrast to senior management’s temptation to avoid ‘noise’ by seeking ‘industrial peace’ with employee representatives.

Chiavenato (2009) had already warned of this: “A successful disciplinary policy requires far more than a simple written procedure. It requires the commitment of the entire organisation, from the top down to the bottom. This is the behaviour that creates an ethical working environment” (p. 453), or, to put it more forcefully, EXECYL (2012) “We must be fair and show solidarity with one another, but it is vitally important that we are all able to dismiss toxic, individualistic and uncommitted employees (and that this is not solely the responsibility of managers or direct supervisors) because they do neither their colleagues’ well-being nor the company’s future any favours.” (p. 18); the aspect of “dismissal”, whilst difficult for organisations to implement, but which attests to the clarity of thought one must possess if one wishes to be productive and fair to one’s colleagues, should we find ourselves managing staff who, despite every effort made by their managers, have no intention of aligning themselves with the organisational culture and believe they can get away with it.

This is the situation that middle managers frequently find themselves in, and they therefore require as much support as possible from senior management, in recognising their role as being responsible for fostering the best possible working environment – one that ensures their entire team ‘pulls in the same direction’, that no team member is left behind, and that the collective effort yields productivity rather than the comfort of a few of its members, amongst other achievements. And all this because, as Alemany (2025) points out:

“There is a layer within the organisation that does not sign off on the strategy, but puts it into practice. That does not decide the direction, but sets the pace. That does not hold a grand title but does have a decisive influence over what is done—or not done—every day. That layer is that of middle management. And although they

rarely feature in institutional speeches, it is they who determine whether people get involved... or disengage. Whether teams move forward... or grind to a halt. Whether transformation progresses or fizzles out before it begins.” (p. 1).

3. METHODS AND MATERIALS

The method employed involved quantitative research, using the procedure defined below, which seeks to capture the range of information regarding middle managers’ perceptions of how their superiors’ behaviour impacts their motivation.

It is also exploratory, given that research of this kind is uncommon, owing to the usual focus on front-line staff and the best ways to influence them. Furthermore, questions on leadership have been included in order to investigate a possible correlation between middle managers’ motivation and job satisfaction and their superiors’ leadership style, and whether the latter may have influenced the former.

Finally, it is a non-experimental study, as it aims to observe the aforementioned impact within the usual working environment, without any manipulation, simply by recalling past experiences, and always from the perspective of how those experiences made them feel.

To assess middle managers’ perceptions of their job satisfaction and leadership style within organisations, an online survey was published using the ‘Google Docs’ application, seeking their views on the matter; the questions were approved by Dr Josefa Elisa López Gómez, the Director of the research on which this article is based.

It is estimated that the main limitation of this study stems from the fact that, despite the survey having been sent out to numerous groups, the author considers that a significant proportion of the respondents belong to the same organisation as the author. However, according to the literature consulted for the drafting of this article, the results appear to be fairly similar to those of the wider society.

The results, detailed below, are based on a sample of 341 middle managers; although 27 per cent of them are considered senior management, they were previously middle managers and were therefore able to answer the questions as such; the aforementioned survey is reproduced in full in Appendix I of the previously cited work, where readers will find all the responses reflected in the figures, as well as the positive and negative factors affecting motivation, as noted by each respondent. The questions relevant to this article are set out below, with the results for each one presented in the figures.

4. RESULTS

Figure 1

Results of the second question in the survey compiled by the author using Google Docs

2. Looking back on your career, how satisfied are you with your job?

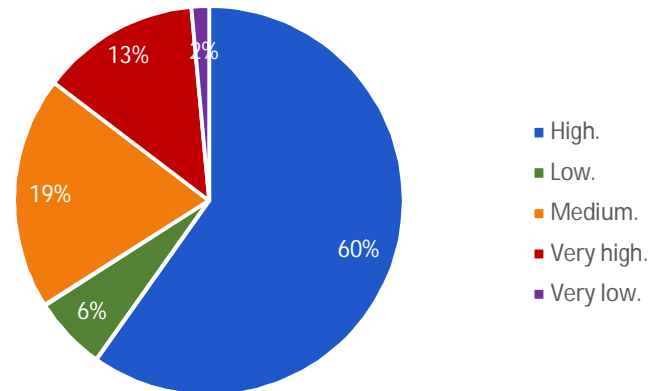


Figure 2

Results of the third question in the survey created by the author using Google Docs

3. Looking back on your career, what leadership style do you tend to recognise in the managers you have worked under?

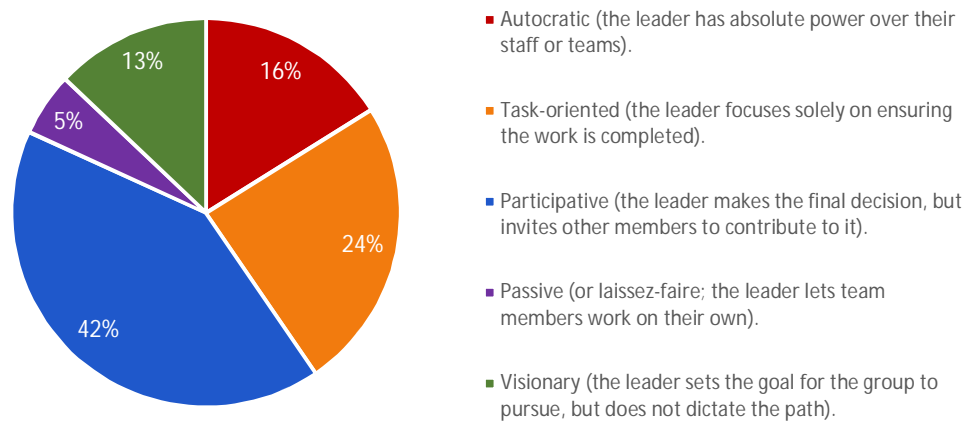


Figure 3

Results of the fourth question in the survey created by the author using Google Docs

4. With regard to your own leadership style, which of the following do you think best describes you?

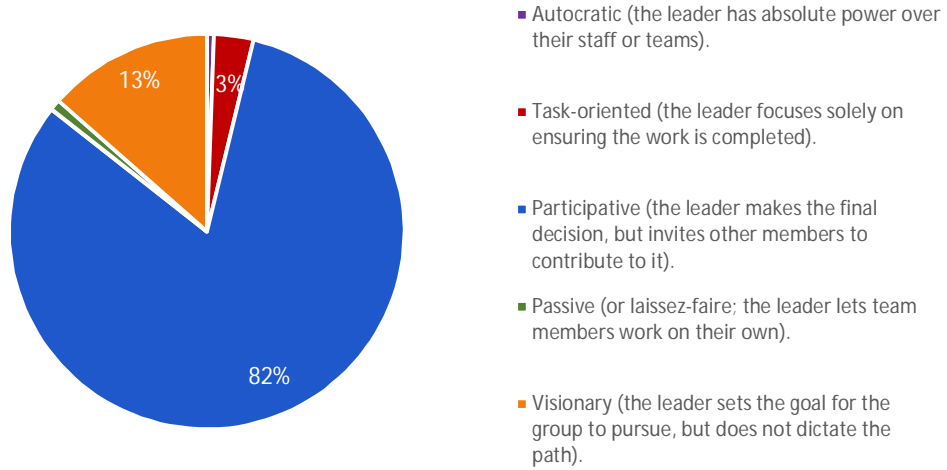


Figure 4

Results of the fifth question in the survey created by the author using Google Docs

5. Have you experienced any changes in your personal leadership style throughout your career?

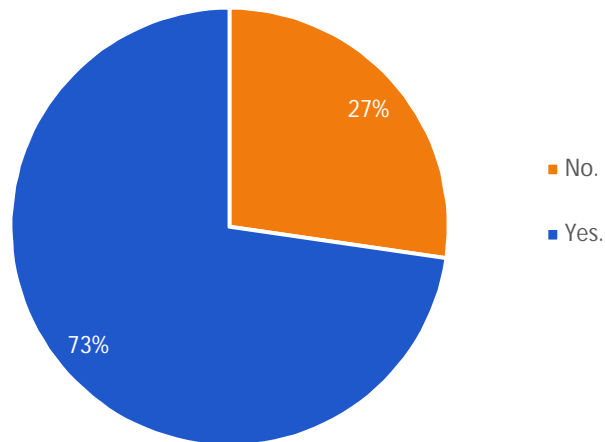
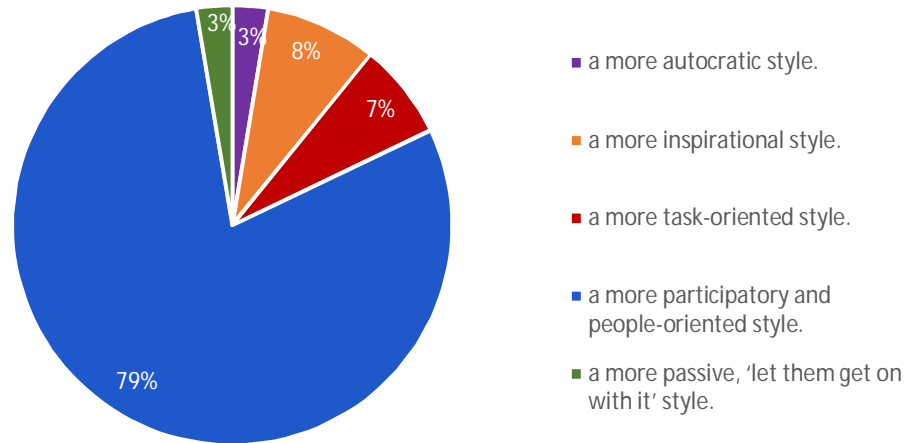


Figure 5

Results of the sixth question in the survey created by the author using Google Docs

6. If your answer is 'yes', do you feel that your style has moved towards:



5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Firstly, it is essential to verify whether the hypothesis has been confirmed: that the leadership style of senior managers has a significant influence on the development of middle managers' leadership style.

Thus, according to the findings, the hypothesis is confirmed, as it has been shown that the respondents, whilst perceiving their superiors as having varied leadership styles—though predominantly participatory, at 42 per cent— followed by a not inconsiderable proportion who were perceived as task-oriented and autocratic, totalling 40 per cent – the polar opposite of those perceived as participative – they perceive their own leadership style as predominantly participative, with 82 per cent of respondents holding this view, which indicates their desire to move away from the way in which they were led. Furthermore, almost three-quarters of the sample state that their leadership style has evolved over time, which is consistent with what was previously outlined in the theoretical framework, which highlighted this evolution as a result of interaction with managers and subordinates.

Continuing with the structure of the article, it is concluded that, however many material resources an organisation may have, it will not succeed if it fails to meet the needs of its staff, who seek to satisfy their own needs; and, reviewing theories of motivation, it has been established that it must fulfil not only physiological and safety needs, but also social, esteem and self-actualisation needs. Furthermore, the survey—as a source of research, in line with the theoretical framework—indicates that job satisfaction amongst middle managers is in the high range.

In this satisfaction, both those who lead and have led middle managers, and the staff currently under their charge and those who have been under their charge in the past, play a fundamental role; for, through the treatment they have received, they have influenced the way middle managers treat their subordinates both now and in the future.

Therefore, to maintain this level of satisfaction amongst middle managers, the author—apart from compiling the best practices set out below—can think of nothing else, given his conviction that the social and working conditions of front-line staff, fortunately leaves no room for improvement, senior management and middle managers who lead other middle managers must focus not so much on the outcome or on how a working situation inconsistent with ‘industrial peace’ might harm them, but rather on the genuine needs of their middle managers; to do so, they will need to get to know them better, devoting more time to them and ensuring effective communication.

In this way, middle managers such as those surveyed will dispel the notion they often hold—that their superiors care little about the social and labour tensions prevailing within teams— as they consider this to be something middle managers simply have to ‘put up with’ – that it is their job to endure the ‘sour faces’ of front-line staff when they arise, an interaction that is highly detrimental to the occupational well-being of middle managers and which, of course, is not part of their salary.

It is important to be aware of this situation, as senior management and the managers who lead other middle managers are often unaware of it, given that the latter treat them well – whether because they are more deeply immersed in the organisational culture, because they are more understanding towards their boss, or simply because they want to be promoted; but the ‘ ’ type of workplace stressor mentioned above is not usually experienced by either the managers who lead other middle managers or, of course, senior management. Therefore, faced with the temptation senior management may feel to believe that most middle managers lack sufficient leadership ability, they might consider what Alemany (2025) points out: “It is not a question of ability, but of focus. The problem with most middle managers is not that they do not know how to lead, but that the context leaves them no room to do so, and the system does not recognise their efforts.” (p.2).

As best practices to boost the motivation of middle managers—without claiming to be exhaustive, given the limited scope of this article—the following are set out:

Firstly, effective communication between the different levels of the organisation must be more fluid than it has been to date; in other words, middle managers must not have negative expectations ahead of a meeting with their line manager, thinking that they are only being called in to be told what is wrong; nor should front-line staff harbour such expectations towards their middle managers.

Continuing on the subject of communication, middle managers receive training in leadership skills to improve working relationships with their staff, but not the other way round – something considered essential, as new leadership styles can be confusing for front-line staff.

Whilst it is essential that information coming from senior management is clear, it is imperative that it reaches middle managers before it reaches front-line staff; this ensures

they are not undermined, and allows the proper respect between them to be maintained, taking precedence over the pursuit of the desired ‘industrial peace’ with the trade unions.

Similarly, it is essential that senior management and those in charge of other middle managers are aware that many of the measures they wish to implement within the organisation are unpopular, and that it falls to middle management to communicate these to the staff under their charge; they must therefore show them particular understanding, based on an appreciation of the difficulty of their task and on offering them support in the face of any obstacles that front-line staff may raise.

Even so, tensions may arise in the working environment that undermine it when a manager implements the changes required by the organisation; and when this happens, it will be essential for the line management to identify those managers whose subordinates are questioning them, for two reasons: if that manager is treating their staff inappropriately, they will need to set them back on the right track, providing training and, if necessary, assigning them a different role; but if their behaviour is appropriate and in line with the organisational culture, they will need to demonstrate to both the manager and the staff under their charge the trust the organisation places in them.

Obviously, it is very difficult to ascertain what has happened within a team, but given that the team leader should be the person best known to their superior amongst all the staff under their charge, the superior will need to ascertain what is happening within the team in the face of a crisis; it is therefore essential that they have a clear understanding of their direct subordinate’s behaviour. However, if they do not know their direct subordinate, or have not considered it important to get to know them, they still have an opportunity to uncover the truth behind the crisis in their subordinate’s team: by conducting a team tension analysis to understand the dynamics of the conflict and thus be able to ‘get down to work’ to resolve a crisis which, like all such crises, can help the team grow.

The organisation to which the author belongs has a procedure of this kind, known as the tension analysis protocol, which can be initiated at any stage of identifying the tension – preferably before the conflict erupts. It is requested by the head of the provincial administrative unit, and is carried out by a psychologist from the nearest provincial administrative unit and a manager from the original administrative unit who holds a position immediately senior to the head of the team under assessment. The body issues a report, in the form of recommendations, to the head of the administrative unit that requested it; these are non-binding, as ultimate responsibility lies with them, but they cover everything from training and removal from post to the application of disciplinary measures to the team leader or any of its members.

In any case, any measures that superiors may implement to ensure that middle management truly feels part of the organisation, that they have their place within it, and that they are not merely a tool, will always be good practice in terms of their motivation.

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