

“THE OBSTINATE EMPLOYEE”*

BY ROBERT N. FORD†

I TRUST that my friend, Professor Raymond A. Bauer, will share with me not only the catchy title of his paper on “The Obstinate Audience,”¹ but that he will also let me draw some parallels between his analysis of the audience situation in general and that of a very special audience, the employee. It would appear that the employee as audience, as someone with whom management is trying to communicate, is becoming more obstinate than ever. We have communicated like mad at him. I'm afraid that he finished listening long before we stopped talking.

TURNOVER AS INDICATOR

The mute testimony to this state of affairs is the ever increasing rate at which employees resign or are dismissed. This problem is being faced by many businessmen, as well as by such other diverse employers as government, hospitals, and the public schools. The total turnover figure, which includes death, retirement, entrance into the armed forces, etc., is not as useful for our analysis as are the resignation-dismissal components.

If I told you that turnover in selected jobs in some locations in some companies runs beyond 100 per cent annually, you had better believe me. Some may say, “That's an impossible rate.” No. All you have to do is fill each job more than once per year on the average, and there you are. As you may guess, selected areas of some large cities are especially troublesome for managers. But I shall lay aside this special environmental situation tonight and talk about the general case of employee disenchantment with work. And I shall not tie the case merely to high turnover. As a friend in Bell Canada remarked, “The turnover is bad enough, Bob, but what *really* bothers me is that we have lost so many people who are still with us!” Older employees, especially, may feel “locked in,” unable to leave. A family situation, for example, can effectively lock a man to his job. Job alienation then shows up in such other ways as reduced productivity, union

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¹ *American Psychologist*, Vol. 19, 1964, pp. 319-328.

grievances, absence, tardiness, and a bad grapevine from plant to employment market.

My topic may seem a bit off-beat for an AAPOR audience, but I trust it will appeal to anyone who has employees reporting to him. If turnover is not yet a problem, give thanks for a bit of lead time. Next, I shall predict that this problem, dissatisfaction with work, will become increasingly a public issue, that people in "dum-dum" jobs will become increasingly hard to manage.

THE SOCIAL MODEL

Employees were not precious, really, during the Great Depression. As late as 1940, the president of a university where I taught is said to have remarked about another faculty member, "Let him leave if he wants to. Tell him we'll go down to the nearest filling station and hire another Ph.D." A communication model aimed at changing the level of employee loyalty did not emerge, for there was no felt need to communicate.

During the years of World War II, the power of various one-way communication media was brought to bear by industry in an effort to keep its employees, to get them to produce more or better: movies, company newspapers, magazines, campaigns, prizes, talks to assembled groups or over closed-circuit loudspeakers. More recently, closed circuit television has been added. By 1969, I believe that only a profound optimist would attempt to find any effect of such approaches on turnover or on other manifestations of job dissatisfaction. So I agree with Bauer that the employee audience, like his general audience, can be most obstinate. About what? That is the question; let us move closer to the problem.

TRANSACTIONAL MODEL: MANAGEMENT AND EMPLOYEE

Those of us lucky enough to have been with Sam Stouffer and Carl Hovland in the War Department during World War II may have first met the transactional model there. What did the soldier think on many issues affecting his very life, his survival? Through the interview and the questionnaire, teams spread around the world did their best to find out. They made these studies for the film makers, for those getting out publications for officers, for any command organization that showed any interest. A publication called "What the Soldier Thinks" was issued monthly for wide distribution to line officers. How effective? Who will ever know. But we were quite sure that this audience, the soldier, *would not hear us, if we would not hear him.*

This model moved into industry rather quickly. The analogy was

perfect. The soldier was merely an employee suffering from a handicap: he could not quit his job. The Bell System hired me in 1947 to work on their employee problems, in the belief that I could bring with me such advanced tools as nondirective and semistructured interviewing, scale analysis, and probability sampling.

Twenty years and one minute later, I want to give you my impression of why not much happened, not until very recently. We were working on the wrong transaction, I now believe. Implicit in the interviewing studies, in the questionnaires that were used on a trend basis with thousands and thousands of employees, was the belief that an improved flow of communication from employee to management would provide the basis for a strikingly improved counter-flow. Out of this would emerge better human relations, better attitudes because of mutual understanding about the work to be done, and thence to better service to customers.

We gave up the trend analysis of employee attitudes in the mid-1950's. There were trend lines on such Guttman blocks of questions as attitude toward supervision, toward the company, toward adequacy of communications, toward the way the company measured productivity; on financial attitudes, financial knowledge, and many others. The lines would wobble from year to year, and an organization that had been in 14th place might find itself in 19th or 11th. Those who improved in the rank order became complacent, and the remainder felt that they were not being helped very much. The trend survey of employee attitude quietly disappeared. This transactional model was dead after having been given a first-class trial.

TRANSACTIONAL MODEL: EMPLOYEE AND CUSTOMER

In retrospect, I feel the problem might be parodied thus. A committee of men, all with the best of intentions, all skilled in communications and the arts of presentation, will not come up with a design for an atomic bomb, if that is their problem, unless one of them has enormous knowledge and understanding about physics. Communications are not enough. This was the fix we were in; we needed information.

Professor Frederick Herzberg's book, *The Motivation to Work*,² precipitated a drastic change in my thinking. Virtually all the factors on which we had assembled data in the employee attitude surveys would be labeled "hygiene," or maintenance factors, in his theory of work. Herzberg holds that an employee is never happy, or satisfied, or motivated deeply to work by such matters as management policies and administration, supervision, benefit plans, salary plans, or good

² Wiley, New York, 1959.

human relations. He will be unhappy if they are *not* good; they are potential dissatisfiers. He *expects* these external motivators to be good in modern American society. And just as good manners have not stopped our cities from burning, neither have good manners kept employees at work they do not want to perform.

Now, perhaps, we were getting closer to the truth. The work itself was the culprit. The transaction that was not adequately understood was the one between employee and customer, not between employee and management. This—to me—was a bold thought. Forget about money, benefits, human relations; let someone else take care of these since some one *must* do it. Dig in exclusively on the nature of the task assigned to each person. See if it can be improved. Is the task really a constant? Certainly we have treated a job as though a job is a job is a job.

I suppose that there are some tasks in every large organization that are so thin, so lacking in stimulating possibilities that they cannot be enriched. Almost without exception, however, the jobs we worked on could be improved for the incumbents. And I came to believe, as our experimental studies progressed from 1965 to date, that the *natural history of a job is to get worse*. Just as tuberculosis leads to death unless someone with knowledge intervenes, so jobs lead to increased turnover with the passage of time. This tentative belief is based on 18 formal experimental studies in our first series, and on more than 100 new ones, mostly nonexperimental.

Why does a job get worse? For reasons such as these:

1. A skill within the job is no longer needed; an automatic tool takes over.
2. As problems are solved, the solutions are written and employees are asked to go by the book. The first guy undoubtedly had fun. No, *fun* is not the right concept; I must return to this.
3. Trainers won't let you try a job until you are perfect. Literally, some desirable employees do not stay to finish training. By analogy, golf would not claim many devotees if we could not play on a course until we were perfect.
4. Job simplifiers break up a meaningful slice of work, thus hoping to gain economically (a) by shorter training requirements; (b) by employing people who can be paid less; or (c) by building up enormous skill at a task that is less and less complex. It is possible, of course, that some jobs are born nude, so utterly simplified that only those with very little ability or a high capacity for fugues or fantasy can tolerate them.
5. By work measurement schemes applied so literally that meaningful and proper exceptions cannot be made. Two examples from a

friend employed by an airline: (a) A beautiful sale of \$20,000 in tickets resulted in a negative score from the management observer because the agent failed to close the contact with "thank you," as prescribed in the check list, and (b) A counter girl was scored negatively by the observer because she failed to show her teeth when she smiled as a customer stepped up.

A manager has to be very astute to stop this natural downward spiral. The pressure to change will come endlessly from the laboratory, competitors, unions, government, and customers. The boss must ask not only what a proposed job change will do to his customer, his costs, his product, but also what it will do to the relation between his employee and whatever it is that he values from day to day, *in his task*. Worry less about what will happen to the relation between the employee and the boss; that is an effect, not a cause, generally.

This leads to some remarks about the concept of "customer" as used here. When we could give an employee a heightened sense of customer, and responsibility for the customer, we did best with our trials. And, in a sense, there was a customer for everyone in our trial series. The telephone operators, the service representatives, and the installers obviously had customers. But the engineers in one trial did, too; whoever within the company asked for the new facilities on which he had worked was his customer. And so does a keypunch operator have a customer if we are careful. I will use this job as my one example tonight; the rest are written elsewhere.³

AN EXAMPLE: KEY PUNCHING

This job, as most of us know, is a high turnover job. What was done to improve the task? In a trial in Minneapolis, the work of 14 keypunch operators in disbursement accounting was enriched by capitalizing on the fact that employees are indeed different. Some are more experienced, brighter, more responsible in their behavior, etc. Why not give them certain responsibilities commensurate with these facts?

Prior to the study, each girl punched approximately 1/14 of whatever came in for punching that day, as distributed by an assignment clerk. Jobs came and went. The operator met the accuracy and volume requirements set by supervision. Our theory said, don't worry about the relation between her and her supervisor, primarily. Worry about the thinness of her job, that she is merely a "hey-girl" for someone else who has to get out a payroll (the supervisor). Could we increase the clerk's feeling of responsibility, of purpose, by letting *her* get out this payroll, this inventory, or whatever, herself?

³ Robert N. Ford, *Motivation through the Work Itself*, New York, American Management Association, 1969.

The supervisors heard the work theory sketched here, saw some films we've made, and answered some test material designed to sensitize them to the difference between motivation from within a task and attempts to motivate through the surround of the task. Then we started building a list of things we *might* do that *might* give a clerk a stronger feeling of completeness in the transaction between her and "customer."

Customer for a keypunch operator? That was easy: Give this girl the entire plant payroll to punch, when it came in twice a month. All the additions, deletions, changes in pay rates, overtime, etc. Then if the payroll comes out completely right, she is completely right, not 1/14 right. Another expert puncher got the traffic department's payroll; a third got marketing's, etc. Each clerk has 4, 5, or 6 kinds of cards to handle each month. They may get help from each other, and like secretaries proofreading letters, they verify for each other. And would you believe that selected, proven clerks set their own verification rates? Some have earned the right to deal directly with other departments, not through a supervisor. Only 2 out of 14 had earned the right to schedule their own work every day by the end of the trial (10 months), but others were showing such good judgment that this privilege, or responsibility, was due. In short, *all* 14 girls had certain new, clear responsibilities or privileges by the end of the trial, and *some* had earned quite a few unusual ones. And the results as compared to the control unit, which was on a different floor of the same building? Much, much better. It was discovered by the end of the trial that only 10 girls were needed in "experimental." It should be clear that the card assigner was not needed once most of the cards were permanently assigned. The plant department offered the clerk who punched their cards a promotion when an opening occurred. Pregnancy took care of some others, etc. Although another job (that of service representative), with almost nine hundred cases divided between the experimental and control groups, yielded equally good results (see the book), I picked keypunch as an example since so many of you know this job.

It occurs to me that this is truly a transactional episode; we enriched the interchange between employee and "customer," an internal one. The interchange existed before, but only in stunted form. There were transactions previously between clerk and supervisor, or clerk and clerk. They occurred over coffee but they were about dates, clothing, etc. These are not potentially rich as work motivators. Turnover dropped appreciably, as you have probably guessed, and so did absenteeism. It is one matter to be feeling poorly on a day when your own payroll is due to go out, and quite another matter to feel poorly on a

day when you are merely one of 14 girls who get that same payroll out.

TOOLS VS. THEORY

As we move into this "work itself" effort, as we call it, the importance of skills in interviewing, questionnaire construction, and sampling recedes. I now see that we loaded an awful burden onto these hardworking tools. We were asking them to deliver to us an idea no one in the group knew, so to speak—the idea that work itself is the basic motivator once the needs or expectations of the employee are reasonably well met. This is the neglected variable; a job must not be viewed as a constant.

I would now say, regarding employee attitude research, that the tools were better than the theory. The former surveys now seem as empty transactionalism, aimed at yielding a pile of data. Now I see the effort as transactionalism with a goal. We want the supervisor to work back and forth with an employee so that every employee ends up with a piece of the business, one that is big enough for him, anyhow.

Many thought the keypunch job was hopeless. But we now have enough evidence to suggest we were wrong. Bear in mind that the clerk is still punching keys, as before, but now she has a complete mission. I trust that you understand me when I say: To punch green cards, then yellow ones, then striped or smelly ones does not meet the objective. Neither does sheer freedom for movement from desk to desk, from punching to verifying, from punching to an adding machine—unless these are natural parts of finishing a job, her job, for the plant department by a specified date.

CERTAIN WEAKNESSES

On the theoretical side, I acknowledge a number of weaknesses. Twenty years and *two* minutes from now I am sure this statement will appear naive. But, I hope, not basically wrong. For we are at last making inroads on dissatisfaction with work. In trials on the service representative's job, with $N = 600$ in 12 locations, turnover dropped 14 percentage points from a base of 39 per cent, a most pleasing improvement.

Nevertheless, there are some weaknesses:

1. We do not yet adequately understand the great value of work to a human being. Surely it is not a constant; it changes as the society changes.

2. When I present the theory of work and the results, someone always suspects that I disapprove of maintenance factors—money, good human relations, good policies. And some "clever" managers want us to slough off the surrounding items, to offer better jobs for less money,

now that we know that people like work. If I could write the regression equation, I would not. But I can't. In some way still not clear to me, I want to maximize both. This is no zero-sum game, although I suspect we treat it that way when we add money or benefits to offset the natural downward spiral of so many jobs.

3. Work does not have meaning and value for everyone, merely on the average. Employees perform better under this supposition than under the set of assumptions that emphasizes the surround.

4. Even desirable work can be fatiguing; people must be free to leave it when they need to do so. I don't know how to help my company on this problem. I know that "martini logic" does not apply to work either; if one martini makes me feel this good, just think what two or three will do for me!

5. Sooner or later many employees will need to be "re-potted" into bigger jobs if they are to be retained, and I know it. Job enrichment for an individual is not necessarily permanent, but there is a pot somewhere, I suppose, that is big enough for any of us. Things are pretty wishy-washy here. I love Professor Lawrence Peter's theory that all managers rise to their own level of incompetence, where they stay. But I stopped using it when the article came back to me from my boss with the comment, "Why did you send this to me?"

6. The greatest weakness in my current effort to help managers is in the feedback area. I have been subsuming this under the category, "recognition." We handle this poorly, as Richard Farson pointed out in his article, "Praise Reappraised."⁴ Praise is hard to give and hard to receive. Somehow—after a while—we management people have got to get out of this part of the transaction. We've got to get it over onto a direct feedback basis. Reinforcement theory and operant conditioning, in general, leave me uneasy where adults are concerned (to any straight psychologists present, I'm sorry about that).

7. We must—and we can—state in better fashion than I have the principles of job enrichment. By principles, I do not mean "chief things." I use principles in the sense, if A, then B.

8. I save to last this weakness; our "before versus after" attitude questionnaire is probably a flop despite repeated factorial analyses. In the most conclusive series of studies, where turnover dropped enormously by both corporate standards and by formal tests of statistical significance, the attitude questionnaire said "no change." We don't believe the questionnaire (I'm sorry about that, too). Perhaps job satisfaction is not the right concept. I believe the concept is better connoted by "job involvement." For instance, we observed one of our

⁴ *Harvard Business Review*, September-October 1963.

service representatives crying at her desk because she—all by herself—had deprived a customer of service in error. Under our plan of enrichment, she had earned the right to make such a decision although there was a time when a management person would have had to concur. In fact, initials from several levels of managers would have been required. I doubt that she was satisfied with herself or the job, but the evidence would suggest that she'll stay on this job longer than a girl who is safe from mistakes. I can assure you that we need her.

Sometimes as I am watching television, I speculate on what I am doing and how I am feeling. "Program satisfaction" would be as poor a descriptive phrase as is job satisfaction. It's program involvement. Am I involved at all in my thinking and feeling with these cowboys and Indians—or whatever—or am I completely passive? If I am involved, I continue. If not, I become a case of channel turnover. "Satisfaction" is quite inadequate obviously, for I watch programs about troubles in the ghetto, on campus, and I watch an occasional who-done-it. Many kinds of programs will involve me. In much the same way, the challenge is to add elements to jobs so that employees can get involved, can make up their own "program" or soap opera for the day.

SHOULD WE BE BOLD

From War Department days until now, never have I felt so certain that research people can be helpful. There has been a real continuity, as I said; soldiers were employees too. I have declared a personal moratorium for five years on all survey studies that aim to find *the one* factor in the job situation which is most important. Go experimental, I suggest, which almost surely will drive you to handling only one variable. So, you've got to specify the variable. If you would help, help us to learn how to handle this neglected variable, *the work itself*. There is a great need—in industry, government, schools, wherever people work for someone else.

RIGHT FOR OUR TIMES

When you elect a president in AAPOR, you automatically confer upon him the right to a mini-modicum of preachment, such as the above. Here is a bit more; then I'll stop. The obstinate employee was (is) trying to tell us something, but he doesn't know what it is. It's not *recognize me*, as implied by the Hawthorne studies, nor *treat me well*. We have tried both of these earnestly from 1940 to date.

The employee is saying, *use me well*. Let my life mean something. More than half of all Americans were not alive in my dear Depression (1930-39), where I learned to panic at the thought of leaving a job. The modern employee in our industrial society, where we have

almost no general unemployment, will not respond to a system where we ask him to barter his effort for our benefit plan, a charming place to work, and good manners.

John W. Gardner put it well when he said:

The release of human potential, the enhancement of individual dignity, the liberation of the human spirit—those are the deepest and truest goals to be conceived by the hearts and minds of the American people. And those are ideas that sustain and strengthen a great civilization—if we believe in them, if we are honest about them, if we have the courage and the stamina to live for them.⁵

Then he goes on to say:

Of all the ways in which society serves the individual, few are more meaningful than to provide him with a decent job. . . . It isn't going to be a decent society for any of us until it is for all of us. If our sense of responsibility fails us, our sheer self-interest should come to the rescue.⁶

Some people may assume that Gardner was talking about the hard-core unemployed. Actually, he was talking about a just society for all; but in any case, his words amply support the aphorism, "A difference which makes no difference is not different."

A statement of deep truth that appeared at the time of these studies was made by a fellow social psychologist, Kenneth B. Clark, who said:

The roots of the multiple pathology in the dark ghetto are not easy to isolate. They do not lie primarily in unemployment. In fact, if all of its residents were employed it would not materially alter the pathology of the community. More relevant is the status of the jobs held . . . more important than merely having a job, is the kind of job it is.⁷

You may think that to be an odd switch at the very end of a talk that did not once mention the ghetto problem. If so, forgive me. But we have found not the slightest reason to think our findings on the importance of the wholeness of a piece of work apply only to this group or that one. Both younger and older employees have responded well, as have men and women, blacks and whites, grade school, high school, and college graduates.

So I leave you, I hope, in less of a quandary about this particular obstinate audience—the employee—than when you came in. *Inadequacies in the work itself have been the basis for much of his obstinacy*, not the message about it from management.

⁵ *No Easy Victories*, New York, Harper, 1968, p. 16.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

⁷ Kenneth B. Clark, "Explosion in the Ghetto," *Psychology Today*, September 1967.