

Faster employees may indirectly motivate colleagues to increase production

June 15 2010

You wouldn't think that there would be much similarity between a hockey line and an automobile assembly line. However, University of Alberta management-science researcher Ken Schultz says that both groups can learn something about line design and human behaviour, which may help them perform better.

Schultz, who recently published an article in [Management Science](#), analyzed production-line data from a [General Motors](#) plant and identified that there seemed to be a shift in how fast the task was completed. What he and his fellow researchers hypothesized was that these workers, who were performing similar tasks, were positively influenced by the performance on a fellow worker who completed his task more efficiently.

Schultz found that an individual's performance level may have a direct effect on what becomes "a good day's work" in that some members may change their work behaviour to match the output of their co-worker.

Schultz ties the results of their study to the principle of equity theory, or the idea that [motivation](#) comes from fair treatment—a good day's work for a good day's pay. "The workers may think 'we're not really connected, so I have no real reason to care about how fast you are working. But I'm a human being and I do care, and I do notice,'" said Schultz, who concluded that is possible for "people [to] change based on what they see."

Part of that change, Schultz found in his analysis of the production-line data, was that, by changing up lines to introduce a higher-performing worker to an average or lower-than-average performing line, an impact can be made on efficiency or [productivity](#).

However, Schultz notes, simple switching people on teams will not produce the desired effect. In a plant, as in hockey, knowing which players to change up will provide the most benefit.

"You'd look for the person who's a good performer but doesn't react to others around him; that's the person you want to move to the low-level team," he said, because "there's a good chance he's going to be a person who has proven to be a leader.

Schultz also noted that the design of the workspace is equally important in influencing productivity, yet is an aspect that is ignored when designing new plants or redesigning workspaces. The key is to arrange the area so that workers are facing each other when performing their tasks, rather than facing away from each other, or in same direction. Allowing the workers to observe and monitor the speed of their co-workers is the necessary catalyst for the behavioural change to occur, he says.

"You don't have to say anything, you don't have to do anything, you don't have to put a flashing light over their head, said Schultz. "Just make sure people can see each other and allow the workers to do what they would naturally do."

Thus, whether seeking to improve productivity or build a strong contender for Lord Stanley's Cup, Schultz says that, while the environments and processes are different, being mindful of the human element and its motivational properties can produce the desired effect.

"Good coaches have seen this, and we have research that shows it's being doing in the factory floor as well," said Schultz. "You want your team to have not just good or average—or even great players—that can play well no matter where they are.

"To get that extra bit, you want to find the good or great players who will perform better around other great players."

Provided by University of Alberta

Citation: Faster employees may indirectly motivate colleagues to increase production (2010, June 15) retrieved 27 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2010-06-faster-employees-indirectly-colleagues-production.html>

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