

Trying to Understand People

Doctor Caxton Shonhiwa

Senior Lecturer, Faculty of Commerce and Law, Zimbabwe Open University, Zimbabwe

*Corresponding Author's Email: tshabalalathembinkosi@yahoo.com

Abstract: Knowing how to treat people successfully depends upon understanding them and understanding oneself. Despite research a complete understanding of both factors is not possible so far. Managers have difficulty in assessing employees' behaviour, while employees often see managers' behaviour as amusing or insensitive. On a global level, lack of understanding causes wars, hatred and tension.

Keywords: Understanding, assessing, employees, behaviour, factors

THE PROBLEM

This century an enormous amount of literature and evidence on management and people has accumulated from practical research. Many theories have emerged; some have been strongly disputed while others have been successfully applied. However, many questions remain unanswered.

In view of this problem the paper starts with an outline of the way research is conducted. This study of human behaviour and the way theories are formed is followed by the major features of disciplines which attempt to characterise the human being.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Any scientific research attempts to conform to a number of criteria. These include precise definitions, objective data collection, a systematic and cumulative approach, and the disclosure of the research procedures (Tushman and Nadler 2006). Unlike the physical or biological sciences there is no exact science of behaviour for the following reasons:

- People cannot be controlled or treated like physical elements (chemicals, etc.)
- Individual variations are extensive.
- Behaviour differs according to the internal and external environment.
- Research findings are basically deduced or inferred and limited to suggested truths.
- Conducting experiment is difficult for three main reasons: the interactive effect between the subject and the particular situation, all the intervening variables, and the resultant false situation if the subject is isolated.
- Complete truths or facts are elusive since the inferences are restricted to a finite number of observations.

Scientific Method

The scientific method is used to reduce the risk of arriving at incorrect conclusions about human behaviour. The five main steps are:

1. Establish a hypothesis – an assertion that a statement or line of reasoning is true or false. This is based upon intuition and data that are limited to

personal capability and the availability of information respectively.

2. Test the validity of the hypothesis by observing behaviour or using experiments.
3. Adjust the hypothesis considering the results, bearing in mind the effects of the immediate environment, external and internal influences, and any unusual circumstances.
4. Continue the investigation using the revised hypothesis and adjusting again as new evidence is received.
5. Draw conclusions, bearing in mind the unpredictability and irrationality of people.

Hypotheses and theories

A hypothesis as Mair [1] postulates (used in scientific method) means a starting point for further observation from known facts or data, and is a basis for reasoning without assuming it is true or false. Whereas a theory is a supposition or system of ideas that attempts to explain something, such as the behaviour of an individual or an occurrence. It is often based on general principles or phenomena, and may be speculative, abstract or a collection of propositions.

Behavioural Science

Behavioural science covers many disciplines, including psychology, sociology and anthropology. Although scientific methods are used, methodological and validation problems remain. Completely reliable theories are not available at present because concepts are often contested and abandoned as research continues. The main areas of interests for supervisors are:

- Basic physiological behaviour – limited here to examining the human brain, sensation and homeostasis
- Individual variation – noticeable through the input of senses, stages of growth, intelligence, and the use of common sense
- Mental features – personality, human characteristics, attitudes, temperance and emotion
- Basic mental processes – perception, mental levels and mental experience
- Sociology of work
- Class and status

- Breakdowns in relationships
- Social influences in general
- The stress factor

Information on these areas is derived from experiments, surveys and the case method, which is a thorough study and analysis of one or several employees over a long period. These disciplines are subjected to techniques such as the scientific method, logic and formulation of hypotheses and theories. The main features are now outlined to show their weak and strong points. Basic physiological behaviour is governed by the brain through sensation and homeostasis. These three aspects of major interest are now discussed.

The Human Brain

The brain seems to possess an infinite capacity to assimilate information; it constantly seeks data during consciousness, clarifying and tabulating it for future use. This peculiarity, coupled with its capabilities, means it naturally functions to acquire knowledge and use it effectively, given the opportunity and the right conditions. This learning process develops a vast range of skills by using various muscles and nervous systems. Such a valuable tendency is often overlooked.

A further aspect is the absurd way the brain will arrive at reciprocal answers unless the individual learns appropriate disciplines. Examples are bragging to impress, shouting to make a point, and grossly exaggerating. Generally, they have the opposite to the desired effect on individuals who are subjected to these faulty techniques.

Higher and lower centres

The brain and nervous system combined are similar to a telephone exchange, sending out and receiving messages to and from all parts of the body. Simplified, the brain has two levels. All mental activity is a continuous interaction between the two. Einstein (1989) states that:

- The lower centres are where primitive emotions are felt, the viscera (internal organs such as the heart, liver etc.) are controlled and simple actions are initiated.
- The higher centres partially control the lower centres.

To illustrate, touching a very hot object immediately sends a message via the sensory nerves in the spinal cord to the lower through the motor nerves (dealing with movement) that cause the hand to jerk back. This movement may be inhibited by the higher centres, which develop through complex mental processes and partially govern behaviour. Such control applies equally to all emotional situations, typically anger and crying.

The lower centres are often described by psychologists as the unconscious mind and the higher centres as the conscious mind. They help to explain the variance in behavioural which is found in such areas as motivation, boredom, fatigue and rest.

The human mind

Within the brain there exists a mental world of thoughts, ideas, feelings and self-awareness. Various sensations are experienced, typically many different emotions; the ability to recognise, recall and play back previous events; thought processes relating to images and words; and being aware of activity within and outside the brain.

Such complexity is bewildering. Many explanations have been offered and related to biological and evolutionary concepts. Often emphasised are the effects on life and the brain of seasonal changes over millions of years and the creation of speech and language.

The paranormal powers of the mind are also often mentioned. These include telepathy, clairvoyance, [recognition and psychokinesis (the power to move physical objects)]. However, there is no convincing evidence that satisfies all investigators. Certainly the majority of people do not exhibit any such powers considering that casinos, horseracing, lotteries and football pools still flourish.

Sensation

The five common senses are vision, hearing, touch, taste and smell. There are other senses which provide information on pressure, pain and temperature within the body; the position of limbs; tension in muscles; and the position of the head to maintain balance. Without senses there is no perception or understanding of the surrounding environment. However, sensation does not completely influence perception. The perceptual process is also affected by past experiences, learning, and the way sensory data is presented.

Homeostasis

The human body is an open system; it is continually subjected to a changing external environment. Controlling these changes internally is called homeostasis. The process buffers and neutralises external stimuli by means of biophysical and biochemical processes [2].

This control process, often called the systems approach, is the basis of modern organisation theory, new management practices, modern economics and cybernetics. The process is related to the individual (homeostasis) and the organisation (open systems approach). The organisation cannot come to life without people who obviously have an impact, it can survive without particular individuals, and adaptations

are possible by changing people's roles to overcome setbacks.

Individual Variation

Each person is different from all others in many ways. These differences are mainly noticeable through the input of senses which distinguish physical appearance, the stages of growth, the level of intelligence and the approach to common sense [1]. Growth and intelligence are in the province of differential psychology. The aims are to find better ways of measuring the strength of traits so that people may be educated and trained more effectively and be given more appropriate jobs.

Input of Senses

One glance at a person is usually sufficient to see that he or she is different from other people, twins excepted. Over a longer period of observation people are seen to think and react slightly differently from each other in similar situations. Each person has inherited and developed certain mental qualities and feelings as he or she experiences life. Consequently, the supervisor must treat each person as an individual to achieve a sound relationship.

Limitations of observation

True recognition of an individual involves knowing many facets of his or her nature which are difficult to perceive at the workplace. According to Hugo [2], only one side of the person is seen, whereas there will be many additional outside interests which affect his or her outlook. Family ties, religion, politics, hobbies and sports all influence the person's general attitudes. There is also an unlimited range of traits in people, such as greed, dishonesty, kindness, carelessness, perseverance and patience. Everyone is subjected to many pressures which often confuse and irritate. This may lead to distorted thinking and a tendency to keep people at a distance.

Sympathetic observation and treatment help to reduce the mental barriers, although not many people will allow someone to get too close. Hence a 'mask' is always worn which conceals an individual's true feelings in daily contact with others.

Stages of growth

What happens in the very early stages of life governs attitudes to some extent, traits, character and general outlook. This forms the basis of the well-known saying that people are products of their environment as well as the view that environmental and educational problems are the responsibility of the community.

Basic attitudes are formed in the first five years. Habits are established and attitudes develop parents and other close relatives. These attitudes tend to become models that are used later in dealing with

people outside the family. If attitudes work successfully for the child, they gradually become traits which are the core of his or her personality. Examples are aggressiveness, gentleness, greediness, independence, capability, activity, noisiness and cruelty.

Complex phases occur in the sixth and subsequent years. Conscience, personality, repression of emotions and other features continue to develop.

Intelligence

Three typical meanings of intelligence are mental ability, quickness of understanding and the capacity to use intellect effectively. Alternatively, intelligence means using the mental processes of thinking, appreciating, learning, observing, reasoning or problem solving and perception. Views on intelligence are subjective and variable. They are often based upon various observations or interpretations involving such topics as mechanical aptitude, numerical capability, rapid speech, flair such as playing a musical instrument or writing, effective public speaking, accurately visualising complex processes or phenomena, and high creativity.

Intelligence testing

Considering all the attributes involved and the many interpretations, the concept of intelligence testing (or the intelligence quotient) is debatable. Here are some typical opinions as proffered by Lockyer and Gordon [3]:

- Against testing: Improvements are possible by practising the tests; validating results is not scientific; findings are not valuable compared with many other important attributes; extensive general education can improve results; and test conditions may intimidate some people.
- For testing: Apparently scientific and genetically sound; practising tests does not make a significant difference; identifies high ability for further development; does not discriminate against race, class, nationality or income; and identifies low ability, therefore indicates job suitability.

Common sense

Some people possess so-called high intelligence but seem to lack sound common sense. Perhaps this is simply forgetfulness or carelessness. Maybe common sense is flair as it partly involves certain sensitivity towards people's feelings, the human race and the community.

Most people according to Cattell [4] make adverse comments about an individual's common sense although there may be insufficient information on the particular situation to warrant an opinion; or they make a favourable comment based upon their knowledge of the problem and its solution, that has an obvious answer. In most cases the key point is knowledge or

information available at the time. Therefore, this term should be used with caution since it is often misunderstood, misused and misinterpreted. Also when further information is revealed the accusation of poor common sense may become invalid.

Certainly the term is widely used but it has many meanings: an obvious choice, an obvious course of action, accurate reasoning, rational reasoning, a trait, sanity, intelligence, a logical application of knowledge, instinct and a practical approach. Views vary widely: common sense is uncommon; a decision may be sound common sense to one observer but poor common sense to another; everybody has a good measure of common sense. Hugo [2] claimed that common sense was acquired in spite of, not because of, education; Einstein (1989) defined it as the collection of prejudices people have accrued by the age of 18; a judge stated, 'common sense as agreeing with his particular thoughts). Clearly it seems very difficult to define measure and use common sense as a factor for selection.

Supervisors and managers are often accused of having poor common sense. However, as Stammers and Patrick [5] postulate, the real reasons for an error (apart from lack of information or poor information) may be disguised; there could be an emotional and training, undue influence, low intelligence, forgetfulness and faulty reasoning. Claims are made that managing is common sense but these are not substantiated by explaining why such claims seem to invalidate all the disciplines of management science.

Recognising mental features

Substantial knowledge and experience of mental features are essential before a supervisor can accurately note behaviour and analyse findings. Suitable allowances for employees have to be made when they behave in certain ways that do not coincide with their usual personality or attitudes. The supervisor should avoid categorising people based upon his or her own particular values, outlook, likes, dislikes and shortcomings.

Developing recognition skill may be divided into the study of personality, human characteristics, attitudes, temperament and emotion. Equally important are the basic mental levels and mental experience are explained.

Simply described, personality is a collection of attributes observed in the individual. Each one varies in strength and is seen as a habit or mode of behaviour. These habit patterns develop in sequence with maturity and are seen as responses to various stimuli. Any definition includes certain features. First, as Mair [1] argues, a person behaves in a consistent and enduring way from situation to situation. Consequently, behaviour is predictable in certain situations: if shy today he or she will probably be shy tomorrow.

Second, there seems to be a system operating that produces a style of behaviour. Third, each person is unique in his or her behaviour pattern. People are predictable in some situations, unpredictable in other ways, undergo change as they develop and continually gain experience.

The Hidden Personality

As relationships between two people develop, more self-disclosure and feedback occur which reveal aspects of personality hidden before. This natural process is explained by the Johari window, a technique for improving perception through the reduction of stereotyping and individual biases.

The theoretical window has three parts to awareness of personality: open, blind (or hidden) and unknown. The open part illustrates a person's own awareness of his or her personality that is obvious to others. The blind part illustrates a person's hidden part of his or her personality that might be apparent to others since it compromises attitudes and feelings in the subconscious which tend to manifest themselves through behaviour. The unknown part remains hidden to both parties, nevertheless it influences behaviour.

Naturally a person is reticent at a first meeting; therefore the open part of the window is small. As the relationship grows the open part increases and the blind part decreases, thus revealing a more definite recognition of personality. Clearly the supervisor should develop a relationship to assess the reasons for behaviour and attitudes through personality problems.

CONCLUSIONS

It is very important to fully understand people that are part of an organisation's human resources in order to fully utilise the potential in each of them. Each person is different from all others in many ways. These differences are mainly noticeable through the input of senses which distinguish physical appearance, the stages of growth, the level of intelligence and the approach to common sense. Growth and intelligence are in the province of differential psychology. The aims are to find better ways of measuring the strength of traits so that and trained more effectively and be given more appropriate jobs.

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