

Theory X? Theory Y? You may be Theory N

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Theory X and Theory Y—well-known to personnel managers in all fields—do not translate well into practice, says this writer. He proposes what he believes is a more practical alternative.

Theory X? Theory Y? You May Be Theory N

Robert R. Newton

PROFESSIONAL MANAGERS in every field are familiar with Douglas McGregor's distinction between Theory X and Theory Y. The former is derived from traditional management theory and maintains a very negative view of the worker; the latter emerges from humanistic, third-force psychology and proposes a dramatically more optimistic view of humanity. Though they are actually philosophical and psychological positions on human nature and human motivation, these theories translate easily into managerial attitudes and decisions.

Theory X, Theory Y

Theory X assumes:

- The average human being has an inherent dislike of work and will avoid it if possible.
- Because of this dislike of work, most people must be coerced, controlled, directed, or threatened with punishment to get them to put forth adequate effort toward achieving organizational objectives.
- The average human being prefers to be directed, wishes to avoid responsibility, has relatively little ambition, and wants security above all.¹

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1. Douglas McGregor, *The Human Side of Enterprise* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1960), pp. 33-34.

Theory Y, on the other hand, operates from opposite premises:

- The expenditure of physical and mental effort in work is as natural as play or rest.
- External controls and the threat of punishment are not the only means for bringing about effort toward organizational objectives. People exercise self-direction and self-control to achieve objectives to which they are committed.
- Commitment is a function of the rewards associated with achievement of objectives.
- The average human being learns, under the proper conditions, not only to accept but to seek responsibility.
- The capacity to exercise a relatively high degree of imagination, ingenuity, and creativity in the solution of organizational problems is widely distributed.
- Under the conditions of modern industrial life, the intellectual potential of the average human being is only partially utilized.²

McGregor contrasted these theories to show that the conventional view of the worker as passive and controlled should be replaced by a new vision of the worker as creative and self-directed. McGregor's assumption, like that of other human relations theorists, is that the most efficient and effective organization is one which simultaneously provides satisfaction and self-actualization for its members.

The Alternative

Educational managers are uneasy with the choice between Theory X and Theory Y because neither fits the practical demands and conflicts of their professional roles. To impose a Theory X approach on a person capable of greater responsibility and self-direction is a mistake; but it is equally erroneous to expect that everyone is motivated by Theory Y values. Some people should be given greater freedom and discretion while others require closer supervision and accountability. A more realistic middle ground between McGregor's two theories is Theory N.

Theory N assumes:

- Motivation for involvement in organizations differs; some people see their work almost exclusively as earning a living; others are more concerned with inherent value and intrinsic satisfaction.
- Acceptance of responsibility differs: some prefer to be less involved and just do their jobs; others prefer to be involved to a greater degree in consultation and decision making.
- Some organizational members need very little direction and mini-

2. *Ibid.*, pp. 47-48.

mal supervision to accomplish their responsibilities; others require more direction, greater supervision, and clearly-defined measures of accountability.

- Managers must adapt to the differences in motivation among individuals; to assume that everyone or that no one is capable of self-direction is a mistake.
- Not everyone has the interest or capacity to contribute to the definition of organizational goals; in any organization some will take the initiative in defining goals, others are content to be followers.
- Though people are not inherently passive or lazy, a good organization clearly defines individual responsibility (often in cooperation with the individual) and holds individuals accountable for fulfilling those responsibilities.
- Although attempts should be made to create conditions in which an individual's goals coincide with the organization's, this is not always possible. When it is impossible, individuals should be expected to shift their goals to those which are best for the organization.
- Some persons have a high level of ambition and genuinely enjoy their work; others have a lower level of ambition and enjoy their work less. A manager must take these factors into account when working with different personalities.
- People resist or welcome change on the basis of how they think their goals and personal involvement in the organization will be affected.
- Without accountability (either cooperatively achieved or implemented from the top), organizational performance will decline.
- Some persons seek opportunities to contribute more fully to the goals of the organization; others are content to perform their jobs within carefully defined limits.
- Individuals' involvement and motivation in an organization changes, depending on age, energy levels, competing interests, shifting perceptions of the value of the organization for them personally, etc.

Theory N recognizes that people are different, that times change, that the need for control and structure or freedom and creativity varies. Human variability and organizational complexity are more dominant realities in the administration of schools than philosophical positions on human nature or psychological theories of motivation. For that reason, Theory N provides a more congenial set of assumptions for the practicing administrator than either Theory X or Theory Y.