

## Chapter 4 Case: Team-based working

This case would be useful for use in a lecture or seminar looking at:

- Behavioural issues related to flexible working
- Implementation issues in flexible working
- The utility of motivation theories within practical settings

Issues that are raised by the case include:

1. To what extent could the problems created by the implementation of flexible working have been avoided?
2. Which, if any, motivation theory is best able to explain the situation described in the case?

### Suggested response

*To what extent could the problems created by the implementation of flexible working have been avoided?*

A key issue raised by the case is the *context* in which flexible working practices are introduced into organizations. 'Resistance' or opposition to changes in working practices is more likely to occur when employees perceive that the organization is facing some sort of crisis, as they may believe that the changes are being introduced to mask or justify job cuts. Given that the new practices described in the case were introduced to help the company maintain their market position, some resistance is inevitable and it is probably naïve to suggest that the changes could in some way be 'sold' to employees (see chapter 8 on power and resistance).

Despite the difficult contextual factors surrounding the implementation of flexible working practices, a further issue compounding the problem is the loss of status for the supervisors and the lack of remuneration for the new multi-skilled work-force. One way the company might consider addressing the latter issue is through the implementation of some sort of performance related pay, most specifically, team-based pay. This might help pull the team together in order to achieve the necessary superordinate goals needed for a team-based pay award. Dealing with the issues related to the former supervisors is less easy. To a large extent, the organization would need to rely on the quality of the relationship existing between the former supervisor and the rest of the team. To this extent, the placement of former supervisors into teams is likely to be a key issue and one that would have needed careful consideration.

*Which, if any, motivation theory is best able to explain the situation described in the case?*

In many ways, the case illustrates the limitations of many theories of motivation currently available within Organizational Behaviour. Theories such as Maslow's hierarchy of needs and Vroom's expectancy theory are fundamentally *individual-level* theories that don't very well explain what happens in organised settings such as that described in the case. The loss of motivation (absenteeism and non-improvements in productivity) that is illustrated in the case cannot adequately be explained by many of the theories we presented in chapter 3, other than in very self-evident ways. For instance we could argue that the employee's safety needs have been compromised by the organizational changes (Maslow), or that the employees clearly do not value the outcomes associated with multi-skilling (Vroom), or that the loss of hygiene factors is causing job dissatisfaction (Herzberg), but this doesn't actually take us anywhere in understanding what is going in the case.

Adams's equity theory perhaps takes us a little further. This theory argues that in making judgements about the fairness of our inputs (work efforts) and outputs (rewards) we rely on *social comparison* processes. That is, we compare what we do and what we receive, with similar others. From the employees' point of view, the increase in responsibility created by multi-skilling means that the former supervisor is now part of their comparison group. However, while they are all performing similar jobs (inputs are equal), the supervisors are earning more money (outputs are unequal). Hence the employees are experiencing inequity which they are motivated to reduce by changing their inputs (attendance and productivity). On the other hand, the former supervisors believe that their pay differential is justified by the fact that they have more experience and qualifications than the employees (different inputs), and that this adequately justifies the similarities and differences in outputs (same job but better pay).

While Adam's theory provides us with a reasonably elegant means of analysing the case, it doesn't really help us resolve the problems, however. This is because the problems illustrated by the case are not going to be resolved, nor are they all caused by, individual-level actions. The company is in trouble and much of what it can do in terms of rewards, is likely to depend on the extent and scope of its recovery. We don't know much about the industrial relations history in this company. However, research suggests that the successful resolution of problems such as those described in the case is likely to be related to the nature of the historical relationship existing between management and workers. Where a relatively harmonious relationship history exists, the more likely it is that a positive outcome will eventually be brought about. What this case illustrates, therefore, is that the types of motivational problems that occur in organizations are far more complex than motivation theories suggest.