A Unifying Model for Occupational Psychology?

This article goes a small way towards addressing questions raised by Chris Ridgeway, in the December edition of OP Matters, regarding the lack of a 'General Theory' for occupational psychology. There are numerous theories, models and approaches outlined in the literature and it can be difficult for practitioners, and their clients, to understand which to choose, how they link, and what value they really add. Here is a brief review of the research basis for a unified approach and of its practical applications. The *Psychologica Model™* was developed during a ten year study of customers' perceptions of service quality and the organizational factors which impact them. Findings confirmed a competency structure as a basis for a range of diagnostic tools and applied approaches for psychologists, coaches and HR practitioners. These show links with a number of established theories and approaches and help support an integrated approach to individual and organizational learning.

The Model

Central to the model is a database of *Skills* and *Qualities* arrayed according to fundamental dimensions, which were induced through factor analysis and validated through organizational trials. Convergences were identified with existing theories, such as: personality trait (Costa & McCrae. 1980); emotional intelligence (Bardzil & Slaski. 2003); motivation (McClelland. 1985); and attributional style (Seligman et al. 1979), among others, and these have been incorporated into the model where possible. The aim was to integrate the best that psychological theory has to offer into a meaningful holistic and unified approach, allowing practitioners to find simple 'joined-up' solutions relevant to needs of leaders, teams and individuals in the world of modern business. The 'universal structure' has enabled realistic comparisons to be made between customer perceptions of service quality (*criteria*) and organisational climate and competence (*predictors*), in service organisations from a range of sectors, including: health; finance; IT; legal; recruitment; telecoms; and manufacturing. This approach allows development resources to be focused effectively on criteria of central importance for service improvement. This is likely to vary by sector, emphasizing different aspects of the model according to the nature of the service.

'The Psychologica Model of Service Competences' (Bardzil. 2002)

Research Background

The *service experience* is very complex and can be considered as a 'cumulative construct' (or psychological situation) embracing *affective perceptions of satisfaction* as well as *cognitive assessments of quality*, over and above any 'objective' measures of tangible quality and other situational factors (Bardzil et al. 2000). Initial research into Customer Perceptions of Service Quality established a psychological component to this experience. Two national postal surveys of service users (n=5000) identified associations between customers' internal characteristics (eg: personality and attributional style) and their assessments of quality (1999. SHL/UMIST Research Centre). Further, factor analysis of data from a subsequent controlled study (Bardzil et al. 2000) suggested a provisional structure for understanding the components of customers' service experiences:

1. Service Delivery – related to company knowledge, systems and capability
2. Customer Service – staff orientation towards customer needs
3. Tangible Content – the material manifestations and outcomes of the service

This offered potential for criteria-predictor matching and highlighted the need for a related service-focused competency framework, as a basis for this, and provided a rationale for a research programme, the aims of which were:

- To develop a 'common framework' for understanding service quality, which may hold across a range of services and organizational types
- To identify causal associations between customers' service experiences and the organizational beliefs, behaviours and practices which may influence them
- To establish appropriate selection and training criteria – in order to address such associations within a generic framework

Follow-on research, supported by the European Social Fund, identified key service competences in relation to these aims, across a sample of staff and customers of sector-representative organizations in a number of studies. Further confirmatory factor analyses, of customer and staff data, replicated original findings and allowed interpretation of item clusters which loaded on more than one factor, leading to development of the structural model shown. Good internal consistencies were established for dimensions – with Cronbach's alpha typically between 0.7 and 0.9 (Bardzil et al. 2000, 2002). Diagnostics based on this proved more robust than the existing SERVQUAL (aka: RATER) measure of customer perceptions (Parasuraman et al. 1998) and were used in subsequent research.

Further sponsorship, from the European Regional Development Fund, allowed development of best-practice approaches, based on this structure, which were extended to approximately 50 service organizations in the UK. The model was modified, for ease of use in commercial contexts, by developing a logical colour-coding for each dimension, based on primary colours: *Service Delivery/Mental Abilities* was represented as blue; *Customer Service/Emotion Management* was represented as yellow; and *Tangible Content/Actions* as red. The 'areas of overlap' (communication, organization and adaptation) were represented as 'secondary colours': green; purple and orange respectively. The aim was to create a universal system, for diagnostics and development, which was simple and easily understood at all levels within the organization and allowed comparisons of 'like with like' – ie: specific aspects of the service experience with associated organizational or individual skills or aspects of the service climate. Diagnostics based on this approach included 360° Analysis for senior managers and both staff and customer surveys. Clear relationships were established between leader characteristics and customer experiences (r=.46, *p< 0.001 level*) which were mediated by the service climate, as anticipated (eg: Schneider et al, 1998). This provided strong support for a developmental approach addressing 'links' in the 'customer service chain' (Heskett et al. 1997).

Validation of the overall concept was made in a PhD Thesis (Bardzil. 2007) confirming the theoretical constructs of service quality and related psychometric measures: customer service experience; staff competence; organizational service climate; leadership style; job analysis; and associated personality dimensions (using the Five Factor Model). Tools and approaches, based on the service quality model described, have been refined through use in both private and public sectors over a period of nearly 15 years and are now available to occupational psychologists and qualified HR practitioners. Uses have been extended beyond development of service competences to support a wide range of individual and organizational development applications.

Applications

Since 2002 the model has been applied in various ways, within a range of organisations of all sizes and sectors (from SME to NHS). Practitioners have used these to address six of the main areas of occupational psychology:

Personnel selection and assessment: for example, job analysis and competency mapping in assessment centre design and as a basis for structured interviews for job applicants. The model is also used as a framework for conducting talent management processes, across organizations, to address mismatches between identified customer needs and prevailing service climates.

Performance appraisal and career development: as a basis for designing performance appraisal systems that enable organizations to measure, manage and reward values-led behaviours – as a way of embedding positive culture change.

Personal development: as a structure to guide development when working one-to-one with individuals in executive, performance, and career coaching contexts. A number of related techniques help to establish a holistic and balanced developmental approach addressing cognitive style, emotion management and behaviour change. Diagnostics, such as 360° Analyses, are used to support these processes.

Training: the model, and measures based on the underlying competency framework, has been used to analyse the training needs of employees - identifying skills gaps and determining how to address these. It is also used frequently in designing, developing and delivering training programmes – particularly for team and leadership development workshops. This proves extremely helpful in drawing together individual styles, strategic considerations, engagement and emotion management, and performance outcomes, into cohesive programmes - which are centred on shared vision and are values led, with clear focus on customer outcomes.

Employee relations and motivation: tools based on the model have been used in mediation situations, where there is interpersonal conflict, and for workshops focused on increasing motivation, managing stress, and developing collaborative ways of working.

Organizational development and change: at the macro level the model has been used to guide OD and change, as an alternative to the established '7s McKinsey Model' (eg: Burke & Letwin, 1992). This has the advantage of incorporating established change management approaches, based on each dimension, with particular emphasis on helping employees adapt successfully to structural changes.

Conclusion

There are numerous advantages for practitioners in this approach, allowing users to: link service outcomes with organizational inputs; relate leadership behaviours to both climate and bottom line consequences; ensure balance of skills within individuals and teams; identify appropriate characteristics for improved staff selection; support meaningful coaching and development of coaching cultures; relate OD to service improvement; and so on. However, perhaps the most significant advantage of this approach lies in the ability to complement existing concepts, models and approaches in order build on learning and 'freshen up' development agendas. During the radical changes taking place in the NHS, over recent years, we have found this invaluable for ensuring that 'emotional intelligence' and *values of compassion* remain central to development programmes, despite the pressures of austerity, and clients see the cost-benefits of adopting a single 'unified' approach to continuous service quality improvement.

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