

The Key to a Productive Workforce

By Vincent J. Natoli, Jr.

The secret? Be sure you have the right employees – ones that fit into your organization’s personality.

Your organization can’t prosper unless you hire and manage employees effectively. Doing so requires an understanding of a process I call employee survival.

Employee Survival

Employee survival is the equivalent of life and death in a biological system. To understand employee survival, it’s first necessary to understand authoritarianism theory.

An organization that’s high in authoritarianism will be high in three attitudinal clusters:

- aggression
- submission
- conventionalism.

Authoritarians are more likely than non-authoritarians to use punishment to control others. Authoritarian punishment is triggered by feelings of self-righteousness and perceptions of the world as a dangerous place.

Employee survival is based on an authoritarianism congruence between employer and employee. Employees whose authoritarianism matches that of the organization will become a healthy part of the workplace. If there isn’t a good match, it will be difficult for employees to survive in a healthy, flourishing, and creative way. Both they and the organization will likely suffer.

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The Most Effective Ways to Recruit Employees

The process of employee survival begins in the recruitment process, where the employer and applicant bring their authoritarian attitudes to the labor market. Their initial probing of each other begins the process of authoritarianism congruence. If employers feel applicants won’t submit to their conventions, they won’t invite those applicants back. Applicants, likewise, will withdraw from the hiring process if they’re unwilling to submit to the organization’s conventions.

While the employer’s purported purpose is to select the “best” applicant for the job (that is, the applicant who will provide the employer with the highest economic return), this often isn’t done. The following selection methods generally range from least to most valid:

1. unstructured interviews (least valid)
2. reference checking
3. personality tests
4. work samples
5. ability tests
6. structured interviews (most valid).

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Although the unstructured interview is the most prevalent selection method, it has the lowest validity. The structured interview, which removes much of the interviewer's discretion, has the highest validity. As the hiring authority's influence in the selection process decreases, the quality of the hiring decision rises.

Why Some Employees Are So Unmotivated

After the selection stage, the parties begin a deeper probing of the authoritarianism fit. Employers put new staff through a number of socialization processes which encourage them to comply with the organization's conventions. Depending on the authoritarianism fit, one of three situations will occur:

- 1. Some employees willingly submit to these conventions** and continue their employment with a high level of job motivation and organizational commitment.
- 2. Some employees refuse to submit** and quit or face aggression in the form of a discharge.
- 3. Other employees unwillingly submit** and continue their employment with reduced motivation and commitment.

This third situation is possibly the most problematic for employers. Because unwilling submitters are conflicted by what they want to do and what the job requires, they enter a state of cognitive dissonance. This dissonance creates tension, which manifests itself in the following:

- **Job performance suffers**, and productivity drops off.
- **Organizational commitment**, quality, attendance, and creativity decline.
- **Employees may manifest their tension through**
 - **violence**
 - **bullying**
 - **engaging in a formal complaint process**, such as filing a grievance, lawsuit, or complaint to a government agency.

As unwilling submitters continue their employment and experience more socialization, they may feel a greater sense of conflict, making them even less likely to submit. Fearing reprisal, they often mask their disagreement with the organization's conventions by creating facades of conformity. They develop outward appearances of acquiescence through such behaviors as modeling others, expressing appropriate emotions, wearing proper attire, expressing agreement with the authority's opinions, and acquiescing to bad decisions.

An organization high in authoritarianism results in more employees refusing to submit and, perhaps worse, submitting unwillingly. While

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some authoritarianism is needed to maintain structure and attain goals, too much leads to negative outcomes and poor organizational performance.

Finding the Golden Mean

The fields of mathematics and economics provide us with models for optimizing decisions. In reality, however, many decisions don't attain optimality. Psychological variables often explain the divergence between optimal and sub-optimal decisions.

In the organizational realm, authoritarianism is a major variable leading to sub-optimal decisions. Organizations constantly must navigate the treacherous managerial waters between too much and too little authoritarianism.

Too much authoritarianism and the organization becomes sclerotic, with low quality, low productivity, high turnover, and a dearth of creativity. Too little authoritarianism and the organization lacks the structure to complete its objectives. At the extreme, a lack of authoritarianism is the organizational equivalent of anarchy and chaos.

Organizations that are closest to optimality on authoritarianism will survive and prosper. Those furthest from optimality will not survive.

It's a matter of finding the balance that's right for you to be sure employees are thriving in your organization. If you've hired well in the first place, this balance will be easier to maintain. 



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