

Understanding the grumbles

By: [Michael A. Crumpton](#)

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Abstract:

Purpose

This paper aims to advocate the consideration of Maslow's Grumble Theory to advance motivational activities within the organization, as well as matching individual needs to morale concerns. This includes a view of associated costs as an investment instead of a common expense.

Design/methodology/approach

This paper includes a study of Maslow's Needs Hierarchy and related literature that supports a modern interpretation. Suggestions are made for administrators to view solving complaints or grumbles proactively by investing in appropriate activities.

Findings

Overall, if complaints are viewed as opportunities to address individual needs, with the top level of grumbles empowered to help support high-level organizational functions, the organization can benefit greatly.

Originality/value

This paper represents the author's point of view after a study of Grumble Theory and self-application of suggestions.

Keywords: Hierarchy | Motivation | Invest | Complaints | Grumble | Self-actualization

Article:

Psychologist Abraham Maslow is well known for his widely accepted theory of human behavior that explains the pursuit of happiness as a hierarchy of needs nicknamed the "Grumble Theory". This hierarchy of needs is personal, as individuals seek to improve their status or achieve recognition or feel safe, but for an organization, the hierarchy can have some costly elements. Libraries, in particular, can focus attention on organizational complaints, or "Grumbles", so as to better understand the impact on organization efficiency with regard to staff complaints.

Man will always find something to grumble about, and as lower levels of need are satisfied, the grumbles begin again on higher levels (Maslow et al., 1998). Maslow had a "Grumble Theory" that says "the grass looks greener on the other side of the fence". He felt that accomplishments

and relationships only gave temporary motivations before they were taken for granted and people were grumbling again.

Grumble theory in practice

Maslow's hierarchy emphasizes that motivation is based on needs, and as certain needs must be met before others, needs would be considered order-driven. Applying Grumble Theory, motivational needs are ranked as:

- Low: Complaints regarding biological/physiological needs, such as food, shelter, sleep, rest, etc.
- High: Concerns over esteem/self-esteem issues, respect, dignity, praise, rewards, etc.
- Meta-grumbles: Higher-level complaints concerning value of human life, truth, justice, beauty, perfection, etc.

From a study of surveys regarding motivation conducted over 40 years (Wiley, 1997), the top five motivational factors identified covering that time period were: wages, appreciation, job security, opportunity to grow and interesting work. These factors cover many of the issues presented by low and high grumbles. Library organizations that focus on safety issues, equitable pay and employee options for personal assistance (employee assistant plans) needs are covering many of the low grumbles. These can be supplemented with staff development programs related to health and fitness concerns or work/life balance issues.

Comparing "low grumbles" to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs" theory, workplace concerns involving safety, comfort of environment such as temperature, furniture, workspace, etc., should be addressed proactively. Comfort may be considered subjective, such as when one employee likes the temperature at 75° and another wants the temperature maintained at 65°, but these points of disagreement can be negotiated. Low grumbles initiate when the first levels of Maslow's needs (physiological and safety) are not being addressed at all or ignored.

High grumbles can be addressed by the organization with thoughtful intrinsic motivational activities that encourage knowledge sharing and self-efficacy for growth and development (Lin, 2007). Programs that are created to encourage active employee participation and foster reciprocal relationship building become much more motivational than traditional organizational reward or recognition programs. This includes providing a forum and good feedback to those who can help others develop and achieve. This adds a level of complexity to programs and activities geared toward motivating staff but can have a much deeper meaning and thus better results than extrinsic-based programs in which organizational rewards and benefits are expected.

High grumbles correlate to the upper level of Maslow's theory –love/belonging and esteem. High grumbles typically do not originate from employees who have low grumbles. This might be a sign that some element of the lower grumbles have not been addressed as of yet.

Meta-grumbles represent a higher end level of motivation, as it relates to an individual's quality of life. Complaints at this level concern ultimate life values as listed: truth, justice, beauty and perfection. Meta-grumbles arise when other needs are met once low and high grumbles are

addressed. Thus, complaints about carpet colors or furniture placement are beyond basic physiological and psychological needs and create an environment for self-actualizers to be the best they can be.

For an organization, Maslow et al. (1998) implied that the level of health for an organization can be seen in these meta-grumbles. He felt that organizations, which had successfully provided for the needs stemming from low and high grumbles, could concentrate on a higher level of excellence or quality by helping employees manage through their meta-grumbles, toward higher self-actualization. This also means, however, that organizations that abound in employees seeking basic comforts or with poor self-esteem, have others issues of management and authority that are in play and could be damaging the organizational effectiveness.

Grumbles across organizational spectrums

Each individual organization will determine how to define its own culture and how that culture will be reinforced. For example, in working at a university, within the larger university, there are numerous subcultures; what is troubling to someone in the library may not be an issue for someone who works in student financial aid. Administrators should be aware of organizational grumbles and in many cases do conduct assessments of employee morale. Asking questions that related to the needs hierarchy within the purview of a work environment, and looking at the results through the lens of the Grumble Theory, might provide different and non-predictable actions to improve morale.

One thing that makes the higher education community unique is the issue of “shared governance” which means that there are three internal groups which have a say in the running of the campus: faculty, staff and students. As an example, one of the issues that can come up as a grumble is the issue of “transparency”. For many transparency means that any select stakeholder group might feel that decisions are being made and they not only were not consulted prior to the decision, but that the rationale for these decisions was not disclosed (or it was not disclosed to their satisfaction). Depending on the issue, this can be a low or high grumble, and it is important to determine what need is not being met to address the real issue.

According to Maslow’s hierarchy, those who are at the level of self-actualization do not have to focus on lower-level needs such as safety, food, etc., as those needs have been met. To translate that to an employment perspective, the employees whose physiological, safety, desire to belong and esteem needs are the ones making the meta-grumbles and can come across as petty when other organizational priorities are present. It is not that the concerns by these employees are not valid, but it will have to be determined by each organization how to balance different levels of grumbles from different individuals and in what manner to address the grumbles.

What about costs?

Addressing employee satisfaction and motivation through a lens of satisfying needs can be considered an investment. Low-level grumbles relating to comfort and basic needs within the workplace should have a place in the operating budget that can invest in employees’ well-being. This could include items such as furniture and equipment replacements, training and

development activities, assistance programs or referrals and options for off-setting peripheral expenses such as dress code guidelines or parking expenses. Some related departments or sectors within the larger organization might have costs that seem unreasonable but are there to create accountability and matched usage (Olson, 2007). Helping employees adjust or modify these costs would be an unexpected but appropriate action to offset a low grumble.

High grumbles can form an opportunity for the organization to work within itself to meet the needs of self-esteem, respect and recognition. Upon further study of Maslow's work, it is revealed that success also comes from actions related to the social aspect of meeting an individual's needs (Villarica, 2011). Investing in more group or larger organizational activity and providing individual guidance into the execution of those activities can help boost individual responsiveness. The cost would be related to time spent and logistics paid for, i.e. speakers, refreshments and supplies, but the benefit can be individuals working together, sharing knowledge or resources to improve the average feeling of esteem by members of the organization.

Other costs in this level of grumbles can be to keep an eye on human resources policies and procedures with regard to managing and other relationships within the organization. Issues of harassment, favoritism or unjust treatment apply to this level of grumbles and should be taken seriously. If not, a grumble can move into a formal complaint or serious performance problems. Filing a formal, legal complaint can produce tremendous cost to both individuals and the organization. In addition to legal costs, true expended value must include time, of everyone involved, psychological stress and anxiety and longer-term career considerations for the individuals (Rudman, 1999).

Maslow observed that high-level self-actualizers focused on getting on with living, according to their values and avoided blaming and resenting others or discounting the past. Employees who are at this level of need are often looking for humanitarian or philanthropic opportunities to satisfy this need to contribute at a higher level (Sadri and Bowen, 2011).

The library can utilize people such as these to move the mission of the organization forward and partner them with organizations that can support and provide organizational benefit. Maslow felt that individuals at the self-actualization level wanted to achieve a higher potential for themselves and had great ambition. Investing in these people to represent and move the organization forward could benefit everyone. This investment might be in the form of training, memberships to partner organizations, travel or related expenses and compensation as appropriate.

Conclusion

Using Grumble Theory to help identify the needs of people to become more aware, confident and in control will not mitigate all problems or complaints, but it can reduce them. Motivational assessments should be viewed through the needs hierarchy, and budgetary dollars should be segmented to invest in improving the levels of grumbles coming from the organization. At lower levels, individual grumbles should be treated seriously and either remedied for satisfaction or negotiated for better understanding.

The costs of employee complaints can add up unless an effort is made to invest in the grumbles proactively (Bartram, 2014). Listening to and understanding employee grumbles can help solve larger organizational issues and improve overall morale, even in a tough economic environment. Strategically investing in areas from which grumbles develop can help improve organizational and thus individual health and happiness.

Meta-grumbles should not be seen as complaints, but instead as an opportunity to move the organization forward with individuals who have the drive and ambition to see something better in the future. Their insights can provide the organization with feedback to make improvements beyond addressing basic needs; it is just a matter of leading the results.

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