



Case 9: Stressed and Demotivated Public Servants... Looking for a (Motivational) Miracle at Paywell Agency

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Introduction

Ms. Wolf is the Director of a large Agency, a branch of a national public administration dealing with formal compliance and respect of the law. Her “military branch” is made of civil servants working as inspectors. Ms. Wolf has recently noted a growing level of absenteeism, conflicts at work and rising employee turnover. Not being an expert in the field, she has started reading a book on people management but what she reads does not look totally convincing to her. She read: “Happy employees → happy customers → happy employees”.

Such an employee-customer-employee sequence is the underlying behavioral mantra for many for-profit firms, especially in the service sectors or, more in generally in the front-end customer contact activities. This applies both to profit-oriented organizations, in which higher customer satisfaction could mean higher prices, therefore higher affluence and eventually the possibility to compensate the productive/effective employees via monetary rewards. The same applies also to non-profit organizations – such as public hospitals or volunteering associations – in which the satisfaction of the patients or those being served may be the ultimate trigger and act

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as a powerful implicit incentive for the employees. Unfortunately, for the enthusiasts of the happy-customer-happy-employee supporters, there are institutional and organizational barriers which prevent this from happening. This is especially the case of employees working for organizations whose mission serves a higher, overarching aim and clashes with the “satisfaction” of the very “customers” they interact with—the public audience or citizens. This case focuses on the judicial police officers of inspectors. Such jobs, compared to private employees, are generally performed by public servants, often presenting high levels of dissatisfaction with their job (Baldwin and Farley 2001; Rainey 1989; Steel and Warner 1990). These jobs also offer consideration of great(er) level of bureaucracy and they have to deal with the limited opportunity to realize their professional satisfaction (i.e. because of the lack of measurability of their actual performance, limited career opportunities, public awareness and recognition and so on). In fact, relative to other types of organizations, these public administrations appear to be problematic in terms of work engagement, job satisfaction, and work-related stress (WRS) (De Simone et al. 2016b). Notwithstanding, such employees appear to be infused with an institutional mission they wish to pursue. A mission that often relies upon altruistic or higher order needs, characterizing the so-called “public servant motivation”. When the possibility to offer “traditional” external incentive is limited, and the likelihood to leverage upon implicit incentive (i.e. customer satisfaction) is practically impossible, can organizations such as these still aim at enhancing the employee motivation? This very question that is perturbing Ms. Wolf’s mind.

Public Servants and Public Service Motivation

Some jobs seem to be more stressful than others. Prolonged or intense stress has been proved to have a negative impact on individuals’ health (Cooper et al. 2001). In particular, work-related stress (WRS) is taking the center-stage as one of the major health and safety problems in affecting the EU (EU-OSHA 2014) and the US (AIS 2013). WRS affects both employees’ psycho and social conditions, adversely impacts productivity, increases absenteeism and employee turnover. Furthermore, all these phenomena affect job satisfaction in a negative way, not just in terms of mere productivity but also in terms of absenteeism and turnover (Spector 1997). To this extent, being a judicial police officer of the inspectors puts the employees performing in such a job in a challenge of “chasing” citizens that had some issues with the judicial system and make them aware of the situation. As a matter of fact, inspectors cannot expect the individuals they interact with to be happy and expect happiness from them in return of their services.

Despite the stressors and the uneasy conditions in which they perform their jobs, public servants are motivated by a particular and specific type of motivation—Public Service Motivation (PSM). Following Perry and Wise (1990), such forms of motivation are substantiated by altruistic intentions to serve in the public interest. Hence, individuals operating in public organizations should be expected to achieve a significantly high levels of job satisfaction, performance, and commitment when

Table 1 Study 1: constructs and scales used in the questionnaire

Dimension	Definition	Scales
Work-related stress	The work stressors represent a set of occupational difficulties that affect well-being and organizational performance teaching (De Simone et al. 2016a)	HSE Management Standards Indicator Tool (Kerr et al. 2009): <i>Demands, control, supervisors' support, colleagues' support, relationships, role and change</i>
Public service motivation	Altruistic motivation to delivering services to people with a purpose to do good for others and society (Perry and Wise 1990; Perry and Hondeghem 2008)	PSM (Alonso and Lewis, 2001)
Work engagement	a positive state of mind, related to work and characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption (Schaufeli et al. 2002)	Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (Schaufeli et al. 2002; Balducci et al. 2010)
Job satisfaction	Overall feeling about the job	Brief Overall Job satisfaction measure II (Judge et al. 1998; De Simone et al. 2014)
Life satisfaction	Overall feeling about the life	Life Satisfaction (Lance et al. 1989)

boasting high levels of PSM –or at the very least have higher levels of motivation, compared with individuals with lower PSM.

According to Alonso and Lewis (2001), *Public Service Motivation* (PSM) can be captured by the following five statements:

1. *Meaningful public service is very important to me.*
2. *I am not afraid to go to bat for the rights of others even if it means I will be ridiculed.*
3. *Making a difference in society means more to me than personal achievements.*
4. *I am prepared to make enormous sacrifices for the good of society.*
5. *I am often reminded by daily events about how dependent we are on one another.*

An individual experiences different situations at work that have an impact upon his/her personal and professional life. Any public administration aiming at enhancing the work engagement has to balance PSM with work-related stress and job satisfaction activities (see Table 1).

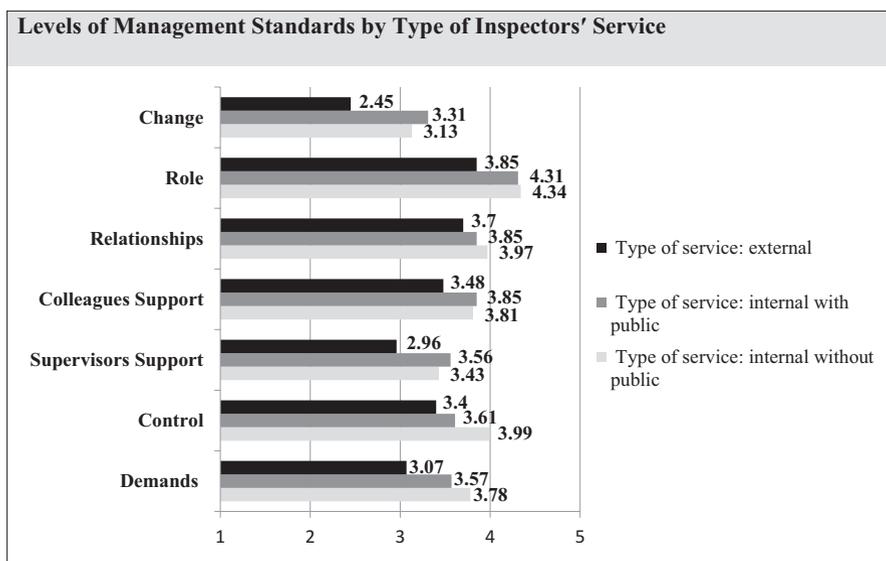
The Paywell Agency that Ms. Wolf is leading in a South Italian branch of the Italian Public Administration, takes care of the formal compliance in work-related activities. Among other categories of employees, the Agency employs a large number of “inspectors” and knowledge workers who are in-charge of verifying companies and firms that comply with the national laws. Such inspections might take place in three possible work settings: externally (i.e., at the firm headquarters), internally with direct contact with the public (i.e. at the front office of the firm’s representatives showing up at Paywell Agency’s windows) and internally without any contact

with public (i.e. through back-office work wherein inspectors simply interact with their colleagues).

Following a grant received by the agency’s management, these employees have been studied by a group of consultants with the aim of unveiling how PSM and WRS were affecting their professional and personal life. The analysis included two complementary studies: one based on an anonymous online questionnaire and the second study focused on conducting five focus groups involving members of the inspection service to unveil the specific stressors related to their jobs.

The first study was able to identify the main sources of stress at work and their relationships with PSM, job satisfaction, work engagement, and life satisfaction in a specific profession, that of inspectors (see Exhibit 1).

Exhibit 1



The results show the work setting seems to affect the individual perceptions of work-related features (e.g. stressors or management instruments). The three groupings were: internal inspectors in contact with the public working within the facilities of the Agency, providing assistance to citizens; inspectors in internal service without public contact working within the offices of the agency but interact only in contact with colleagues; and the inspectors who perform external service by carrying out unannounced inspections in local firms. Furthermore, the analysis of the data showed that the group of inspectors in external service had different levels of engagement, job satisfaction, and PSM, which were lower than that of the other groups. A more direct interaction with the inspectors, in the second study, allowed the consultants to investigate the specificity of stressors that characterize the work of judicial police officers of the inspectors. The inspectors took part to the focus

groups on a voluntary basis. The group sessions focused on the topic of “stressors at work”. Here some quotes:

I'd love my job more if I could do it—actually and mostly—in favor of citizens, getting rid of the rush for figures. [Here she refers to the “number of sanctions” as a parameter for performance evaluation.] (Mary, 56 years old (y.o.), female)

Rather than punish the companies we should inform them and give them the opportunity to remedy the deficiencies instead of issue penalties which are so severe that they have to stop the business and fire personnel. (Allison, 38 y.o., female)

To educate companies to be inspected in order to inform them of the risks related to penalties. (Bill, 52 y.o., female)

It's not surprising that the inspection activity is seen as unpleasant to a part of the [companies'] owner's culture, being resistant to any form of control. Controls on respect of rules exercised by the inspectors are seen as a major threat, something to tackle. What is unacceptable is that the management displays indifference and annoyance in the face of violence, threats, and retorts to which inspectors are exposed every day during their job. (Donald, 56 y.o., male)

The tension in doing our job is perceived mostly when we are outside [at companies]. You do not feel either protected or supported by anybody. You feel at the mercy of the mood of the others [visited companies]. (Katie, 44 y.o., female)

We need to be trained for coping with the aggressions we suffer from the subjects we control. (Samantha, 41 y.o., female)

“The State we serve sees us as mere collection agents, leaving us alone without a lead ... with no guidelines, also physically, considering that also the police forces do not rescue us in case of aggression.” (Chuck, 40 y.o., male)

The external perception of the role of the inspector is highly disappointing. Only a few people appreciate my job, while most of them disregard it. (Michael, 38 y.o., male)

I feel unmotivated and I'm almost convinced my job is socially useless. Maybe we should have more credibility. (Nick, 62 y.o., male)

We are not educated and trained properly. That generates high stress, since we are called to confront very updated subjects [companies' personnel]. (Violet, 39 y.o., female)

More than the job itself, the legislative changes create stress. (Felix, 56 y.o., male)

The main problem is often represented by the colleagues we work with. Not all of them are able to control their temper. Some of them are not well mannered or tend to boast about their job title (as it would mean anything, per se!). Some statements can often be misunderstood and generate conflicts with the users under their control. (Philip, 58 y.o., male)

I believe that having available colleagues and in line with your way of thinking is important for doing your job well ... here it does not happen though. (Arianna, 39 y.o., female)

I consider my job a service to the state and for the workers that refer to us, and I want to do it at the best. So even if we have plenty of duties and worries, I don't care as they are part of my job. (Leslie, 51 y.o., female)

Despite the common sense around public employees, I'm very proud of being one a 'state employee' working for the general interest. (Xavier, 57 y.o., male)

I love my job. I do it with attention, dedication, satisfaction, and professionalism. (Eloise, 60 y.o., female)

Overall, I'm satisfied by my job. (Todd, 47 y.o., male)

My job is stimulating. (Lilly, 52 y.o., female)

The data analysis showed five principal themes, which explain the work stressors of inspectors interviewed: job impoverishment, aggressions and protections, social recognition, need for training, and relationships with colleagues. After having read the first preliminary results of the studies, Ms. Wolf started to jot down another set of question to ask to the consultants:

Questions

1. Does the work setting of the Agency (external, internal with/without the public) affect the perception of stress? Why/why not? Would it be possible to mitigate its effects in any possible way?
2. What is the relationship between work related stress and job satisfaction? And between job satisfaction and engagement?
3. Is it possible to identify some typologies of inspectors? For example, considering the quotes, to analyse any gender- or age-related themes in relation to work stressors?
4. If the organization can offer a good quality of working life, can managers rely on that? Would that be enough to mitigate the work-related stress and trigger employee engagement in a sustainable way?

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