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PEOPLE DON'T LEAVE JOBS, THEY LEAVE LEADERS: READING THE MOTIVATION CONNECTION THROUGH HERZBERG'S TWO -FACTOR THEORY

-Sristi Dutta

One of the most repeated lines in management circles: people don't leave jobs, they leave leaders. It sounds like a LinkedIn slogan, but there's real organizational psychology underneath it — Frederick Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory, also called the Motivation-Hygiene Theory.¹ Herzberg, interviewing engineers and accountants in the 1950s, found that the things which make people dissatisfied at work and the things which make people genuinely motivated aren't opposite ends of one scale. They're two separate systems.²

TWO SYSTEMS, NOT ONE SLIDING SCALE

Herzberg split workplace factors into two buckets. The first is hygiene factors which are salary, job security, working conditions, company policy, relationship with peers. These don't make people love their jobs. What they do is prevent active dissatisfaction. Fix them and people stop complaining; they don't suddenly become inspired. Neglect them and resentment builds fast.

The second bucket is motivators like recognition, achievement, meaningful responsibility, growth, the actual content of the work. These are what create real engagement. Crucially, the

¹ Frederick Herzberg, One More Time: How Do You Motivate Employees?, 46 Harv. Bus. Rev. 53 (Jan.–Feb. 1968).

² Frederick Herzberg, Bernard Mausner & Barbara B. Snyderman, The Motivation to Work (2d ed., John Wiley & Sons 1959).

absence of motivators doesn't necessarily make someone miserable; it just leaves them flat, going through the motions, doing enough to get by.

Most hygiene factors like pay scales, leave policy, office setup are decided by the organization, not by any one manager. But almost every motivator on Herzberg's list is delivered, or withheld, by a single person: your direct leader. Whether your effort gets noticed. Whether you're trusted with real responsibility. Whether your work feels like it's going somewhere. That's not HR's job day to day. That's the leader's job, every single day.

WHY "FIXING" THE JOB IS NOT ENOUGH

This is where most organizations get the diagnosis wrong. When people start leaving, the instinctive response is to throw hygiene fixes at the problem, for example a raise, a new chair, an extra leave day, free snacks in the break room. Herzberg would tell you this buys time, not loyalty. Hygiene factors stop the bleeding; they don't build the bond. If the underlying leadership is still cold, dismissive, or quick to take credit and slow to give it, the resignation is only delayed, not prevented.

Exit interviews are famous for hiding this. People rarely write "my manager made me feel small" on the form. They write "pursuing new opportunities" or "better compensation" which are typical hygiene language, even when the real reason was a motivator failure: a leader who never made them feel seen. That reason feels too personal to say out loud on the way out.

WHAT LEADERS CONTROL ON THE MOTIVATOR'S SIDE

Strip Herzberg's motivators down to what a leader actually does day to day, and three things stand out.

They notice people, not just output. Recognition is a motivator, and recognition only works if someone is actually paying attention. A good leader notices when someone's energy has dropped, when someone's quietly carrying too much, when someone's ready for a harder challenge.

They hand over real responsibility. Herzberg was specific that responsibility only motivates when it's genuine. Leaders who delegate real decisions, and then back the person's judgment, are directly supplying one of the strongest motivators on the list.

They connect the work to something that matters. Achievement as a motivator isn't just hitting a target, it's understanding why the target mattered. Leaders who explain the why, not just the what, turn routine tasks into something people can feel proud of finishing.

THE PRACTICAL GATEAWAY

If you're leading people, Herzberg's split gives you a useful diagnostic question: is this a hygiene problem or a motivator problem? If your team is angry about pay, about unfair policy, about being overworked, that's hygiene, and it needs fixing before anything else will land. But if your team is merely quiet, coasting, doing fine work without any spark, that's a motivator gap, and no policy memo will close it. Only you can, through attention, real delegation, and making the purpose behind the work visible.

None of this requires charisma. It requires consistency referring to showing up the same way on a good day and a bad one, noticing people whether they're useful to you that week or not. That kind of steadiness is what actually builds loyalty, far more than any motivational speech, and far more reliably than another round of hygiene fixes.