

The motivating work situation

*From literature review to action research
in public organizations*

André Verbeek

Based on the 2018 doctoral research



About this book

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From literature review to action research in public organizations

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Based on the 2018 doctoral dissertation *Motiverende Arbeidssituatie bij gemeenten en waterschappen* (The motivating work situation in municipalities and water boards), International American University / ODIBS.

This book follows the development from a theoretical exploration to research and application in practice. The original survey results are included in condensed form. The practice cases concern the municipality of Utrecht and the Delfland Water Board in 2017.

Chapters 1 to 5 deal with the research question and the literature phase. Chapters 6 and 7 describe the research phase and the meaning of the results. Chapters 8 to 11 cover the action research, the practice cases, the application and follow-up research.

All chapters can be read independently. The full line becomes visible in the sequence of theory, measurement, dialogue, action and evaluation. The source notes at the back connect the book text to the original dissertation.

Website and information about Work Motivation: www.workmotivation.nl

Contents

Preface	4
1 The work situation as a starting point	5
2 The literature phase	7
3 Understanding why people want to work	10
4 Public motivation and craftsmanship	13
5 Work design and leadership	15
6 The research phase	17
7 The results and their meaning	20
8 Action research as a way of learning	22
9 Practice in Utrecht and Delfland	24
10 From insight to change	26
11 Advancing the science	29
Afterword	33
Source notes	34

Preface

An employee can be proud of his profession, feel committed to society and still get stuck in his daily work. The willingness to make an effort therefore tells only part of the story. The design of the work, the cooperation with colleagues and the room to act professionally also deserve attention. That is the starting point of this book.

In my doctoral research from 2018, I studied the motivating work situation in the supporting staff departments of municipalities and water boards. The reason lay in a practical question: how can employees and managers jointly develop conditions in which people are willing and able to do their work with conviction? Public Service Motivation, the motivation to contribute to the public cause, offered an important theoretical perspective for this. The research also called for attention to craftsmanship, development, autonomy and the daily organization of work.

This book follows the movement from that practical question to a literature review, from theory to a survey, and from research outcomes to action research. At its core is the development of an approach in which employees examine their work situation and formulate improvements. Statistics have a supporting place. They make visible which conclusions the data can carry and where restraint is needed.

The reader will not find a recipe here with which every organization achieves the same outcome. What the research does offer is a well-founded way to ask questions, compare experiences and work together on change. The practice-based studies described took place in 2017 at the municipality of Utrecht and the Delfland Water Board. They show how a questionnaire can open a conversation, how individual motives differ from shared priorities, and why formulating an action can be harder than naming a wish.

The book is written for managers, HR professionals, organizational consultants and researchers who want to connect work motivation with improving work. The first chapters provide the theoretical basis. The research approach follows, with a concise discussion of the results. The final part deals with the action research and develops the lessons into a practical cycle of research and improvement.

The central idea is simple: a motivating work situation becomes easier to understand when people do not merely receive a score, but also have influence on the meaning and the follow-up of the research. Whether improvements then last must be examined anew. It is precisely this connection between understanding, acting and looking back that forms the common thread.

André Verbeek

1 The work situation as a starting point

The work behind public services

Much public work remains out of sight for citizens. A payroll office supports the continuity of the organization. An IT department ensures that colleagues have access to reliable information. Financial, legal and HR advisors help prepare and implement decisions. Their contribution to the public task often runs through the work of others. That does not make the contribution less important, but it sometimes makes it harder to recognize.

For employees of such departments, the attractiveness of the work can have various sources. One person loves a complicated legal issue, another a carefully organized administration. Yet another finds it important that the organization serves a societal purpose. These motives can coexist. They only acquire concrete meaning in a work situation in which someone experiences sufficient opportunities to deliver good work.

The original study arose against the background of changes in municipalities and water boards. Budget cuts, cooperation between organizations and the design of support services raised questions about the position of employees. That context belongs to the research period. The more general question remains recognizable: how does daily work change when the organization adjusts its way of working, and what does that mean for employees' willingness to commit themselves?

A reorganization can be efficient on paper and at the same time weaken the connection between an employee and the result of his work. A new division of tasks can promote specialization but also reduce variety. A shared service can pool knowledge while the distance to internal clients grows. Such possibilities are not inevitable consequences. They show why motivation cannot be studied exclusively as a characteristic of a person.

What a motivating work situation means

The dissertation centers on the experienced work situation: the conditions under which employees, from their values, interests and motives, are willing to carry out activities that contribute to the goals of their organization. It concerns the relationship between the employee and the work. The same job description can be experienced differently by two people. Conversely, the same person can experience more or less room to commit under different circumstances.

The word 'experienced' is essential here. Formally, an employee may have considerable decision-making latitude while in practice hardly daring to deviate from existing habits. An organization can offer training opportunities while workload makes attending a course impossible. Research must therefore take both the intended design and the lived reality seriously.

Moreover, motivation is not the same as satisfaction. Satisfaction concerns the appreciation of the work or the work situation. Motivation concerns the reasons and the willingness to act. An employee can be satisfied with the atmosphere yet experience little challenge. Someone else

can commit strongly to an important task and at the same time be dissatisfied with the way the organization supports him. Whoever confuses the two concepts loses sight of the real issue.

Performance, too, requires its own assessment. A motivated employee does not automatically have the necessary time, knowledge or resources. A favorable judgment of one's own performance is not the same as an independently established achievement either. In research, motivation, satisfaction, working conditions and performance must therefore remain clearly distinguished from one another.

From motivating people to examining work

The question 'how do we motivate our employees?' easily places the initiative with the manager and the problem with the employee. The question of a motivating work situation opens a broader conversation. Which tasks call for craftsmanship? Where do employees receive useful feedback? Which decisions can they take? Where does a procedure hinder the work, and where does it actually protect quality?

This shift does not mean that personal responsibility disappears. Employees have their own expectations, act in different ways and can help shape their development. But their room for action is partly determined by the organization. A request for more initiative remains incomplete when decisions are repeatedly reversed or when the available time is already fully committed.

The dissertation therefore focused on developing an intervention method for supporting staff departments. The intention was to build knowledge and to design a way of working with which those involved could discuss and improve their work situation. That dual aim determines the research route. First, a theoretical language is needed to recognize relevant aspects of the work. Then it must be examined how those aspects come together in this professional practice.

For practice, this means that a motivation scan need not be the end product. An outcome only becomes usable when employees understand what it refers to and when it is clear who can do something with the finding. A team can organize its meetings differently. A manager can clarify priorities. Other bottlenecks require decisions at the organizational level. The research must help make those responsibilities visible.

2 The literature phase

A practical question calls for multiple perspectives

The literature review began with work motivation but could not stop there. The employees in the study performed supporting work in public organizations. Their motivation might be related to general characteristics of work, to their professional interest and to the public task. Leadership and the design of the organization could also play a role. A usable theoretical framework had to connect these different angles without merging them into a single concept.

The original literature orientation distinguished three search directions. The targeted theory concerned work motivation itself. Searching within the immediate research context concerned supporting staff departments in municipalities and water boards. In addition, related knowledge about work and organizations was sought outside this context. That broadening was necessary because specific literature on precisely this combination of target group and issue proved to be scarce within the search route followed.

The final ordering comprised general motivation theories, Public Service Motivation, the characteristics of supporting departments and leadership. This did not create a contest between theories, but a collection of targeted questions. What do people find important? How do they assess the return on their effort? Which characteristics make work attractive? And how can the environment support or hinder the willingness to contribute?

Figure 2.2 shows how these substantive areas were connected in the literature orientation. The route runs from the definition, via general motivation theory and PSM, to the supporting staff and the motivating work situation.



Figure 2.2 The literature orientation process. Redesigned after Verbeek (2018), Figure 2.2, p. 49. The feedback loop makes the iterative character of the literature orientation visible.

The return line is substantively essential. A finding about public motivation could give reason to sharpen the definition of work motivation; knowledge about supporting functions could change the selection of general theories. The figure thus describes a repeated alignment between concepts, theory and research context. It should not be read as a fixed sequence of steps that is completed after a single pass.

The value of a literature review here lies in sharpening the research question. A theory need not explain every phenomenon to be useful. It must, however, make clear to which part of the

issue it relates. A theory about the societal content of a motive, for example, answers a different question than a theory about the experienced freedom with which someone acts.

From collecting to comparing

Including an article because it is about motivation is insufficient. The concepts, the research population and the outcome measures used must be compared. A relationship with satisfaction may not be treated, without explanation, as a relationship with performance. Research among employees with direct citizen contact cannot automatically be transferred to a staff department. And a theoretical expectation is something other than a repeatedly observed pattern.

The literature phase therefore calls for ordering. For each source, at least the concept studied, the context, the method and the relevance to one's own question matter. Then follows the more difficult step: determining which similarities are substantive and which mainly arise because authors use the same word. 'Autonomy', for example, can refer to formal decision-making latitude, to the design of a task, or to the experience of volition. Those meanings touch each other but are not identical.

Negative or absent findings also deserve attention. If an expected relationship is not found, that may have to do with the theory, but also with the measurement, the research group or the circumstances. For designing practice-based research, such uncertainty is useful. It forces more precise formulation: for whom, under which circumstances and for which outcome is a relationship expected?

The literature orientation of the dissertation was aimed at developing an applicable model. It should be read as a theoretically grounded selection for a specific practical question. The absence of an encountered theory for this target group does not prove that such knowledge existed nowhere. The strength of the orientation lay in connecting the perspectives that were relevant to the research.

The model as a working hypothesis

From the literature emerged a conceptual model that included public motivation, work design, development, goals, leadership and organizational conditions. Satisfaction, experienced motivation and the judgment of one's own performance offered different ways to describe the work situation. The model thus made clear which topics deserved attention in the empirical research.

A conceptual model is a simplification. It helps in choosing questions and ordering data, but never contains the full reality of a department. An employee can be affected by a conflict, a change at home or a concrete experience with a client. Such factors need not all be in a questionnaire to be relevant. The later group conversation therefore remains a necessary complement.

The transition from theory to research also requires a choice between completeness and feasibility. A long questionnaire can cover many topics, but takes more time and can reduce the quality of answers. A very short list can be practical but conceal important differences. The dissertation sought a form that enabled both analysis and application in a workshop. That design choice must be weighed when the outcomes are assessed.

For a new application, the literature phase is again important. The original model can serve as a starting point, but need not be adopted unchanged. The researcher must indicate which concepts are retained, which are refined and why. In this way, the connection between scientific knowledge and practical use remains verifiable.

3 Understanding why people want to work

Needs, expectations and goals

General motivation theories illuminate different sides of working. Need-based approaches draw attention to what people find important. Expectancy approaches ask whether someone believes that his effort can achieve a desired outcome. Goal-based approaches focus on the way direction and challenge organize action. The dissertation uses these perspectives to view the work situation from multiple questions.

Classic need-based approaches, including the work of Maslow, have provided a recognizable language for security, appreciation and development. For research into a concrete work situation, however, it is not necessary to assume that every person passes through the same fixed sequence of needs. The useful question is which needs are supported in this situation and which are under pressure.

Vroom's expectancy theory helps to keep effort, result and reward apart. Can I perform the task? Does my effort make a difference? Do I find the possible outcome worthwhile? In a supporting department, an employee can master his work substantively and still experience little influence, for instance when advice is set aside without explanation. More training then does not automatically solve the actual bottleneck.

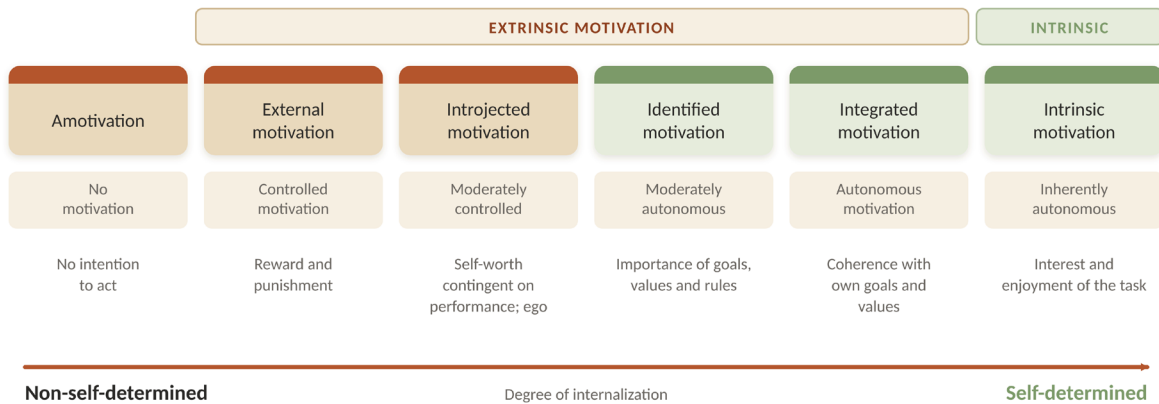
Goal-setting theory draws attention to clear and challenging goals, in conjunction with commitment, feedback and the ability to carry out the work (Locke & Latham, 2002). A goal gives direction when an employee understands what is asked and how progress becomes visible. A higher target figure alone does not yet make a work situation motivating. The goal must fit the task and the available opportunities to learn from it.

The quality of motivation

Self-determination theory makes clear why the amount of motivation alone is not enough. People can act out of interest, out of personally endorsed importance or under pressure. The theory distinguishes, among other things, autonomy, competence and relatedness as basic psychological needs. Autonomy here concerns experienced volition and endorsement of one's own actions; it does not mean that someone must always work independently (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Intrinsic motivation concerns performing an activity because the activity itself is interesting or enjoyable. In addition, someone can find a task important because of its value, even when the task is not attractive in itself. That personally endorsed importance can likewise be an autonomous reason to act. External reward or pressure, and internal pressure, such as having to prove one's own worth, indicate other forms of motivation.

The self-determination continuum



After Gagné & Deci (2005), Deci & Ryan (2000)

Figure 2.3 The quality of motivation. Redrawn from Verbeek (2018), Figure 2.3, p. 55. Theoretical sources: Gagné and Deci (2005, Figure 1, p. 336) and Deci and Ryan (2000).

In amotivation, a clear intention to act is lacking. External regulation rests on reward, punishment or pressure from outside; introjected regulation on internal pressure, such as guilt or dependence on approval. In identified regulation, the employee endorses the importance of the activity. In integrated regulation, it moreover fits his own identity and values. Both belong to autonomous forms of extrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation concerns interest in or enjoyment of the activity itself.

The horizontal ordering describes differences in the quality of motivation, not a mandatory developmental route. Necessary, less attractive tasks can also be carried out from personally endorsed meaning. The theory links autonomous motivation to the support of autonomy, competence and relatedness. Whether a concrete organizational intervention contributes to this must be examined separately (Gagné & Deci, 2005; Deci & Ryan, 2000).

For a staff member, this distinction is recognizable. Solving a complicated problem can be captivating because of its content. Carefully recording a decision can be important mainly because others must be able to rely on it. Both reasons can be convincing. The question is how the work situation makes room for these reasons and prevents the work from being experienced solely as meeting the expectations of others.

Competence becomes visible in daily practice when an employee experiences progress, learns to master a complicated task or receives targeted feedback. Relatedness takes shape in contact with colleagues and in the feeling of being taken seriously. A team can talk about this concretely: when did we help each other forward, when was a question left unanswered, and which reactions make it easier to discuss an uncertainty?

The relationship between person and work

The literature on the fit between person and environment adds another perspective. That fit can relate to the task, the organization, the team or the manager. Someone can feel connected to the public mission of an organization and at the same time notice that the daily job does not sufficiently match his skills or preferences.

The concept of 'fit' requires careful use. A poor fit need not mean that an employee must leave or adapt completely. Work can be divided differently, expectations can be clarified and development opportunities can be expanded. The relationship is changeable. Precisely for that reason it is relevant to action research.

Together, these perspectives lead to more precise conversations. An employee who asks for more challenge may need different support than someone who experiences unclear priorities. A colleague who values cooperation highly can get stuck in a job that is largely designed in isolation. A general call for enthusiasm does not do justice to those differences.

In the follow-up research, the theoretical concepts therefore serve as a language for examining the work situation. They need not classify employees. The aim is not to establish which 'type' someone is forever, but to understand which circumstances support action at this moment and which changes could be meaningful.

4 Public motivation and craftsmanship

The public cause as a motive

Public Service Motivation, abbreviated PSM, focuses attention on motives connected with serving public interests. Perry and Wise (1990) gave this field of research an important theoretical starting point. The perspective helps to understand why people can want to commit themselves to a contribution that reaches beyond their own advantage.

PSM is thus relevant to public organizations, but the concept does not coincide with working for the government. A job title does not yet tell what meaning someone gives to his work. Within the same department, employees can differ strongly in their societal commitment and in the way they experience that commitment. People outside government organizations, too, can commit themselves to public goals.

For supporting staff departments, the distance between task and societal return is an important point of attention. An employee's contribution often runs via an internal client, a decision or a facility used by others. When this connection remains unclear, a general message about the public mission may be too abstract to help make sense of the daily work.

A hypothetical example clarifies this. An IT employee may be mainly interested in a reliable system. Its public significance becomes visible when it is clear which services depend on that system. His professional interest and his contribution to society need not compete with each other. They can give each other meaning. This example illustrates a possible connection; it is not a separate finding from the organizations studied.

No opposition between profession and society

The dissertation deliberately examined a group for whom professional motives could be important. A financial specialist may choose an organization because the work is challenging. An HR advisor may be attracted to guiding people. A lawyer may derive satisfaction from careful argumentation. Such reasons do not make societal commitment impossible.

When a survey asks someone for the main reason for choosing a job, a ranking between answer options arises. That is informative but limited. The most important reason does not exclude other reasons. Moreover, the reason for starting to work somewhere may differ from the reason for committing to a specific task years later. The conversation about motivation must leave room for this development.

The distinction between PSM and autonomous motivation is also important. PSM concerns the public content of a motive. Autonomous motivation concerns the extent to which someone endorses his own actions. A strong appeal to the public task can be experienced by an employee as meaningful, but also as pressure. The two concepts therefore answer different questions.

For managers, a practical task follows from this: examine how the public mission becomes recognizable in the work. That requires more than repeating organizational values. Which results of the department help others do their work? When do employees see the

consequence of good advice? What information do they receive in return? The conversation becomes more concrete when it connects to recognizable activities.

The public mission must not become an unlimited mission

Commitment to a societal goal can be a powerful reason to make an effort. Yet an organization must not assume that committed employees are available without limit or will absorb every shortfall. Designing a motivating work situation also involves feasible expectations and the possibility to discuss boundaries. This is a principle of responsible organizing, not a separately tested result of the dissertation.

The relationship between craftsmanship and public meaning can moreover contain tensions. An employee may value thoroughness while the organization demands speed. An advisor may need substantive quality while the available time is limited. It is then insufficient to establish that someone is 'motivated'. What must be examined is which trade-off he has to make and who bears responsibility for it.

In the research, PSM thus offered an important entry point, but not a complete explanation of the work situation. The work itself, the room to do it well and the relationship with colleagues also deserved attention. The next step in the literature review was therefore to examine characteristics that organizations can actually influence.

5 Work design and leadership

What someone's task demands

Work design concerns the way tasks, responsibilities and mutual relationships are arranged. In the literature discussed in the dissertation, variety, identifiability of the result, significance of the task, autonomy and feedback recur. These characteristics offer concrete starting points for examining a job without immediately passing judgment on the person who performs it.

An employee can perform many different actions and still experience little coherence. Conversely, a clearly delineated task can be meaningful when it is clear why it is needed and what performing it well involves. Therefore, not only the amount of variety deserves attention, but also the way activities together form a recognizable contribution.

The Work Design Questionnaire of Morgeson and Humphrey (2006) broadens the attention for work characteristics to knowledge, social relationships and context. This makes visible that the design of work encompasses more than a task list. The knowledge required, the dependence on others and the physical conditions are also part of daily functioning.

For a supporting department, mutual dependence is often directly noticeable. Advice depends on information supplied. A payment can only be processed after someone else has checked it. Such dependencies are not a problem in themselves, but can become one when expectations are unclear or when feedback is lacking. Research into motivation must be able to reach this daily organization of work.

Development as part of the work

Development opportunities are broader than promotion. An employee can grow through a more complex assignment, deepening in a specialism or cooperation with an experienced colleague. An organization can offer training and still give little room to apply what has been learned. Examining development therefore requires attention to supply, access and use.

The question of development must moreover connect to different career wishes. Not everyone wants to manage or move to a higher job level. Whoever wants to deepen further in his profession needs other opportunities. The conversation becomes more productive when the organization does not impose a single desired form of growth in advance.

In a workshop, this can be translated into recognizable situations. Which knowledge did employees want to acquire? When was there time for it? What happened to a new idea? Which task would someone have liked to try? Such questions connect a general survey score to events on which those involved can act.

Leadership through the work situation

The dissertation examined, among other things, transformational leadership. The underlying expectation was that managers can support meaning, development and commitment. At the same time, the relationship with motivation need not be direct. Managers also influence the

distribution of work, the room for initiative, the quality of feedback and the availability of resources.

An explanation via these conditions is substantively attractive but must be examined empirically. A questionnaire at a single moment can show association; it cannot establish which change occurred first. When a statistical relationship becomes smaller after adding work characteristics, that does not yet prove that those characteristics transmit the effect of leadership. The book therefore keeps this possible explanation separate from the established outcomes.

For practice, it remains useful to discuss leadership as visible action. What does a manager do when priorities clash? How does he respond to a mistake? Which decisions does he leave to the team? How is time for development protected? These questions are more concrete than whether someone is, in general terms, an inspiring leader.

Rules and professional room

Public organizations work with rules that support quality, predictability and accountability. At the same time, procedures can be experienced by employees as unnecessarily obstructive. A low rating of bureaucracy does not automatically justify scrapping a rule. It must first become clear what purpose the rule serves, where the problem arises and whether a different way of working can protect the same purpose.

The motivating work situation thus calls for examining the relationship between room and boundaries. Employees do not necessarily need unlimited freedom. Clear frameworks can actually help when professional judgment is possible within those frameworks. Unclear responsibility can be burdensome, even when it is presented as autonomy.

Work design and leadership meet at this point. The organization determines formal possibilities, but daily interaction partly determines whether employees experience and use those possibilities. A questionnaire can signal where that relationship needs attention. To understand what really happens, a conversation about the work is then needed.

6 The research phase

Research with a design goal

The study had a dual aim. It sought to provide more insight into relevant motivation factors in supporting staff departments and to develop an intervention method with which the work situation could be discussed and influenced. That required different forms of research. The literature offered concepts and expectations. The survey brought patterns in experiences into view. The practice cases showed how the approach could be used and adapted in an organization.

These components answer different questions. The survey can, for example, show whether employees who rate their work design more favorably are also more satisfied. A workshop can show how participants recognize that outcome and which improvement they find conceivable. An evaluation can describe how the meeting was experienced and whether the process was usable. None of these components automatically replaces the others.

The research was thus built up step by step. First, a questionnaire was developed on the basis of the selected theories. Then a broader survey was conducted. Next, the method was applied in two organizations, with a local questionnaire, a workshop and evaluation. The experiences in the first case were used to improve the execution of the second.

Book Figure 3 brings this route together in three phases. The upper connection concerns the development of practice; the return connection shows how implementation can also yield new questions and knowledge.



Iterative three-phase model: findings from phase 3 sharpen theory and method

Figure 3 The cycle of action research. Book adaptation of Verbeek (2018), Figure 3.1, p. 82. Practice development and theory development are connected through implementation, evaluation and reflection.

In the research phase, concepts, experiences and data are brought together. The design translates that knowledge into a workable workshop. In the third phase, it is examined what happens during application and which adjustments are needed. A positive meeting does not complete this cycle: the implementation of agreed actions and their consequences require

follow-up. It is precisely the feedback that makes a next application better founded, both practically and scientifically.

From concept to question

Translating a theoretical concept into questions is called operationalization. A concept such as autonomy is too broad to measure without explanation. Is it about planning activities, choosing an approach or experiencing that one stands behind one's tasks? The chosen questions determine what a score can ultimately mean.

In the original study, questions and scales from different theoretical traditions were brought together. The list covered topics such as PSM, work design, development, goals, leadership and working conditions. Satisfaction, motivation and personal performance were also given a place. The administration predominantly used response scales with which respondents could indicate their degree of agreement.

A pilot administration with 28 participants and feedback from experts helped to assess and adjust the instrument. Such a pilot is useful for recognizing unclear formulations and practical problems. Its size, however, is limited for firm statements about the structure of a questionnaire. An instrument that works comprehensibly in a small pilot is not thereby fully validated.

This distinction remains relevant when instruments are reused. An existing scale derives its justification from a particular content, wording and application. When questions are shortened, combined or adapted, what is measured may change. The new composition then requires renewed examination. Known origin and good internal consistency are valuable, but do not license every new interpretation.

The survey and its reach

The broader survey yielded 151 respondents. Recruitment took place via professional networks, LinkedIn and contacts with organizations and representatives of the field, among other channels. The group consisted mainly of employees of municipalities and water boards, with a small group from central government and some missing organizational data. Highly educated employees were strongly represented.

This way of recruiting made it possible to reach a relevant professional group, but did not yield a random, representative sample of all supporting employees. Participation may be related to interest in the topic, available time or involvement in the network. The outcomes must therefore be read as findings within the group studied.

The data were collected at a single moment and rest largely on self-report. That suits research into experiences but entails limitations. Someone's general appreciation of the work can color several answers at once. Nor can it be established whether a favorable work situation preceded motivation, or whether motivated employees rated their situation more favorably. Both directions and additional explanations remain possible.

The results thus give direction to further questions. They do not determine which individual employee has a problem and do not provide an objective ranking of departments. This

delineation is important when a research instrument is later used as an organizational intervention. A conversation about improvement requires a different handling of data than individual assessment or selection.

What quality requires in this research

The quality of the research is linked to the fit between question, method and conclusion. Reliability concerns, among other things, the consistency of measurements. Validity concerns whether the chosen interpretation really fits what was examined. High coherence between questions can be helpful, but does not guarantee that all relevant sides of a concept have been included.

In the practice cases, transparency about the process is added to this. Why was a component adjusted? Who participated? How were remarks recorded? Which observations supported a conclusion and which contradicted it? Such information makes it possible to assess what the approach has yielded and under which circumstances it can be usable.

For the researcher, the task consists of continuously guarding these boundaries. A practically attractive outcome deserves the same critical assessment as a disappointing one. Precisely when an approach is received enthusiastically, it remains necessary to examine what participants have actually started doing differently and what of that is noticeable later.

7 The results and their meaning

What the survey made visible

The survey showed that the employees studied had different reasons for working at a public organization. Their own professional field was named as the main reason by 37.7 percent; the public task by 32.5 percent. That difference points to the importance of professional interest in this group. It does not show that societal motivation is absent or that the two motives exclude each other.

A direct comparative statement about the professional field and the public task received a neutral score on average. That, too, argues against the over-simple conclusion that one motive is decisive for all employees. The significance of this finding lies mainly in the need to involve both topics in the conversation about work.

PSM showed small positive associations with job satisfaction and the judgment of one's own performance. In analyses in which several factors were included simultaneously, no statistically convincing independent PSM relationship emerged. That is a more limited conclusion than stating that PSM has no influence. The outcome depends on this sample, this measurement and the other variables in the model.

Work design and development opportunities were more clearly associated with job satisfaction in the analyses. Leadership, too, was associated with various aspects of the work situation in simple analyses. When several work characteristics were included simultaneously, that picture changed. These findings support examining the concrete design of work, but do not prove which intervention will cause an improvement.

The statistical processing in plain language

The data were processed with descriptive statistics, reliability analyses, correlations and regression analyses. Descriptive statistics give an overview of answers and differences within the group. A mean summarizes answers; the dispersion shows to what extent employees experience the same thing or something different. For an organizational conversation, both matter.

Reliability analysis examined to what extent questions within a scale are related to each other. The short PSM scale used comprised four questions. The reported internal consistency offered an indication of consistency, but did not constitute a full test of the concept of PSM. A short scale can distinguish relevant differences less well and remains dependent on the chosen wording.

Correlation describes the association between two variables. Regression examines how an outcome is related to several variables at once. That second perspective can show that an earlier relationship becomes smaller when other characteristics are included. It does not, however, provide experimental evidence. Moreover, a statistically significant relationship is not automatically large or practically decisive; a non-significant relationship does not prove the absence of meaning.

For this book edition, the full tables and coefficients are not needed to follow the substantive line. They remain available in the dissertation. The most important lesson is that the data provide starting points for work design, development and joint reflection. Their value lies in examining the work situation more purposefully, not in predicting the behavior of every employee.

What the outcomes leave open

The study provides no basis for establishing a general ranking of motivation factors for all municipalities and water boards. Nor can it be concluded that a particular type of leadership is always more or less motivating. In interpreting leadership, it also matters whether questions concern actual behavior or the assumed ability of a manager to exert influence. Those two are not the same.

The practice cases added experiences that do not fit into a single statistical outcome. Employees attached importance to relatedness with colleagues, professional room and the content of the work. The workshops helped to put that into words. At the same time, the transition from a desired characteristic to an action of one's own proved difficult. That became an important starting point for the further development of the method.

The research yield thus consists of a substantive direction and a tested way of working for dialogue. Lasting improvement of motivation has not been convincingly established with the available data. That requires repeated observations, with attention to the implementation of actions and to other changes in the organization. The action research shows how such a follow-up can begin.

8 Action research as a way of learning

Acting is part of the research

Action research connects examining a situation with working on change. Participants are not merely suppliers of data. Their interpretations and actions are part of the learning process. The tradition, with an important starting point in Lewin (1946), focuses on cycles in which a situation is examined, an action is developed, its implementation is followed and reflection takes place again.

For the motivating work situation, this approach fits the design goal. Whoever wants to know how employees can jointly improve their work must examine more than their opinion beforehand. The way they discuss findings, set priorities and distribute responsibility is also relevant. The process can show why a proposal becomes usable or, on the contrary, does not get any further.

Action research therefore requires two kinds of attention. Something meaningful must happen in practice, and what can be learned from it must be carefully recorded. Merely organizing a successful meeting is insufficient to speak of a strong research contribution. Merely observing without room for joint action does not do justice to the chosen approach either.

The role of the researcher

In the dissertation, the researcher also had a facilitating role. That offered access to conversations and made adjustment of the method possible. At the same time, this position brings tension. Whoever develops an approach wants it to work. The manner of explaining, probing and summarizing can thereby influence the outcomes.

Reflexivity here means that the researcher examines his own contribution. Which topics received extra attention? When was an interpretation proposed? Which reaction fitted less well with the expected outcome? An observer, interviews afterwards and an explicit evaluation structure can help to supplement one's own perspective. They do not remove the researcher's involvement, but make it more visible.

The relationship with the commissioning party also requires attention. A manager may hope for more ownership, while employees mainly need clearer decisions or more support. Both expectations must be discussable in advance. Otherwise there is a risk that a workshop is formally open while the desired outcome has in fact already been fixed.

See, share and do

The workshop developed was given the main movement of seeing, sharing and doing. Seeing begins with recognizing one's own experiences and understanding the information provided. Theory and survey results offer words and starting points. Employees can check what they recognize and what is missing for them.

Sharing brings individual experiences into conversation with those of others. An employee can discover that a bottleneck is experienced more widely, but also that a colleague values the same way of working differently. The aim is not to remove every difference. The conversation must make clear which circumstances can be influenced jointly and where different needs call for customization.

Doing requires the step from meaning to action. What is needed? What can someone do himself? Which contribution is expected from colleagues? Which decision or support belongs to the manager? These questions prevent the conversation from ending in a general wish, although in practice it turned out that precisely this step requires extra guidance.

The three words describe the main structure of the meeting. For a complete research cycle, preparation, follow-up and evaluation are also needed. A workshop is thus an important moment in the action research, but cannot carry the whole cycle. The quality of the follow-up partly determines whether the shared insight gains influence on daily work.

The dissertation places the workshop in a broader research cycle, in line with the learning history as discussed there. The workshop supplies material in the form of theory, survey results, conversations, response cards and prioritizations. That material is ordered into themes and conclusions and recorded in group and individual reports. Evaluation and reflection on those reports help to improve the workshop method for a next application. Collecting data, writing, validating and sharing the findings also make the practical experience available as research knowledge (Verbeek, 2018, pp. 93–96).

What counts as knowledge

In action research, what counts is not only whether a mean changes. Insight into the process is also relevant. Which formulation helped participants to connect an abstract concept with their work? Which form of conversation made differences visible? Why was an intended action left undone? Such observations can improve the design of a next application.

That does not yet make every experience evidence. Statements must be connected to the circumstances in which they were made and to the way they were recorded. An enthusiastic closing conversation may indicate appreciation for the meeting, but does not prove a lasting change in the work situation. A concretely implemented measure is a different yield than an expressed intention.

The strength of action research lies in the possibility of continuing to examine these differences. A disappointing follow-up need not be glossed over. It can actually reveal that the chosen action lay outside the team's sphere of influence, that the person responsible was missing or that a condition was not met. That makes the design more precise and the knowledge more usable.

9 Practice in Utrecht and Delfland

Utrecht as the first application

The first practice case took place at the HR expertise center of the municipality of Utrecht. There, alongside the general research question, a development question around self-management also played a role. The approach therefore had to fit an organization that wanted to examine how employees could take more influence on their work situation. That gave direction to the preparation and to the language of the questionnaire.

A number of questions about influence by the manager were adapted to influence from the environment. This choice made the list fit the local conversation better, but limited direct comparability with other applications. Context sensitivity and comparability of measurements do not always go hand in hand. Recording such an adjustment is therefore part of the research accountability.

Prior to the workshop, a local survey was conducted. The meeting in July 2017 connected these outcomes with the experiences of participants. They began with the question of what motivated them in their work. The factors named were collected visibly. This was followed by an explanation of motivation and a discussion of relevant outcomes from the survey.

Instead of digital tools, personal cards, posters and stickers were used. This form made it possible to focus attention on the conversation and on a visible shared overview. Participants first talked in small groups about their own experiences and then about factors that were important for the group. In this way, a movement arose from personal meaning to shared priorities.

Where the conversation became more difficult

Naming motivating conditions proved more accessible than formulating a concrete action. Employees could indicate that they found autonomy, cooperation or development important. The follow-up question of what they themselves needed for that and would go on to do required more explanation and guidance. A recognizable insight thus turned out not yet to be a feasible intention.

That finding is substantively relevant. A concept such as autonomy can quickly gain agreement in a conversation, but its practical meaning differs. Is it about the planning of work, a substantive choice or the possibility of refusing an assignment? Only when a desired change is connected to a concrete work situation does it become clear who can do something.

In Utrecht, a follow-up was envisaged in which a working group would process the results further. The evaluation used observations, conversations and reflection with those involved. The experiences yielded points for improving the facilitation, including keeping track of time and helping to translate insights into action. An announced follow-up is something other than evidence that changes were later actually implemented and maintained.

Delfland as an adapted application

The second case took place in December 2017 at the Business Operations sector of the Delfland Water Board. There was no separate development question there, such as the one around self-management in Utrecht. The organization joined the general research method. The preparation consisted of coordination with management and a proposal for implementation, followed by a local survey and a workshop.

The lessons from Utrecht were taken on board. Attention was paid to clearer communication in advance, time management and direction over the various components. At the same time, the researcher had to give participants more room to express themselves. The latter shows that good facilitation requires both structure and restraint. A facilitator must support the process without taking over the content too quickly.

In the meeting, a variety of motivating factors emerged, such as autonomy, appreciation, trust, challenge and interesting work. Relatedness with colleagues had an important place. It also became visible that what an individual finds important is not automatically the same as what a group chooses as a shared priority. The discussion about team factors therefore formed an essential part of the yield.

In the doing component, participants distinguished between what they needed from themselves, from colleagues and from their manager. The answers ranged from time for development and a better overview to trust, feedback and help with priorities. That distribution showed that responsibility lies in different places. Not every need can be solved by more personal effort.

What both cases teach

Participants appreciated the opportunity to talk with colleagues about motivation. In Delfland, the limited presence of management was also mentioned as a point of attention. That is understandable when part of the desired changes requires decisions or support from managers. A conversation can give a lot of energy, but loses meaning when no one can carry the follow-up.

In both cases, relatedness with colleagues was experienced as important. The content of the work, autonomy and development also recurred. The precise priorities differed and depended partly on the level at which the conversation took place: the individual employee or the team. This argues for an approach that leaves room for personal differences while helping to arrive at shared choices.

The two cases do not constitute an experiment in which organizations were compared under equal conditions. Context, participants and local adjustments differed. The available evaluations were also mainly aimed at the process and the experienced yield. The findings therefore support the usability of the approach for conversation and joint orientation. They do not prove that the workshop by itself increases motivation in the long term.

The lesson from both cases is that every translation requires guidance: from theory to work experience, from figures to conversation and from priority to feasible action.

10 From insight to change

Start with a question on which influence is possible

The experiences from the dissertation offer starting points for a next application. The way of working in this chapter is a practical elaboration of those lessons. It describes how an organization can continue the research; the individual steps and time frames have not been tested for effect as a complete protocol in the two original cases.

A usable starting question concerns the work. Which circumstances help or hinder employees in carrying out their tasks well and with conviction? The question is then narrowed down to a team, a process or a recognizable group of jobs. An assignment that is too broad, such as raising all motivation in the organization, makes it difficult to determine where research and action should begin.

It must be clear in advance which decisions are within reach. A team may be able to change its own work meetings, but not independently adjust the staffing. A manager can set priorities, but may depend on other departments. The conversation about influence prevents employees from being given responsibility for problems they cannot solve.

The use of data is also part of the preparation. Employees must understand what their answers are used for, who receives the outcomes and at which level results are discussed. In small groups, recognizable examples or combinations of characteristics can make individuals identifiable. The reporting must therefore fit the goal of joint learning and handle individual experiences with care.

A questionnaire that opens a conversation

The questionnaire must recognizably connect to the research question. A limited set of well-defined concepts can be more helpful than a broad collection of loose questions. For each component, it must be clear what the score means and which follow-up question can be examined with it. The administration is a starting point for conversation, not a diagnosis of an employee's personality.

When reporting back outcomes, the dispersion deserves attention alongside the mean. An average neutral score can mean that everyone is in doubt, but also that two groups judge very differently. The conversation must explore those possibilities without forcing participants to disclose their individual answers.

The facilitator can ask what participants recognize, which concrete situations fit an outcome and what is missing. An unexpected or favorable outcome also deserves examination. A team learns not only from bottlenecks, but also from conditions it wants to keep. The question is which ways of working ensure those conditions and whether they are vulnerable to change.

Translating the workshop into action

Book Figure 4 translates the way of working described in Chapter 8 into a practical route for action. In seeing, the facilitator connects the outcomes with recognizable work situations. In sharing, participants examine which experiences they have in common and where differences remain. In doing, they name the support that is needed and formulate a concrete action. The scheme helps to guard the transition from a discussion to a working agreement.

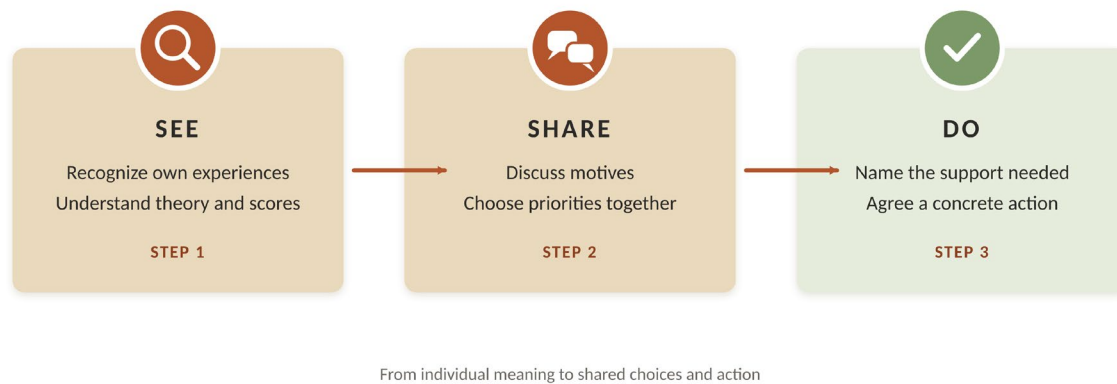


Figure 4 From insight to joint action. Book adaptation based on Verbeek (2018), Figure 3.5, p. 96. The scheme connects insight and conversation with concrete working agreements.

For each component, a recognizable yield is needed: a jointly understood issue, a chosen priority and a feasible agreement. Record who acts, what support is available and when the results will be reviewed. This elaboration is a practical translation of the research experiences; it has not been tested for effect as a separate protocol.

From a wish to a working agreement

A wish such as 'more appreciation' is meaningful but not yet actionable. The conversation must make clear when appreciation is missed and which behavior would make the difference. Is it about substantive feedback, attention to a completed assignment or recognition of extra effort? Those involved need not produce a theoretically perfect definition, but they must have the same change in mind.

Next, one concrete working agreement is formulated. It describes what changes, who takes on the implementation, what support is needed and when the experience will be discussed. The agreement must be small enough to be carried out and important enough to learn something about the original bottleneck.

An illustrative example is a team that experiences too little substantive feedback. It can agree to regularly discuss one completed case during a trial period: what worked, what could be better and which knowledge is usable for others? The agreement also requires time and a form of conversation in which learning is central. This example is a proposed application, not a reported intervention from Utrecht or Delfland.

Not every action has to stay within the team. Sometimes the right outcome is a well-founded request for a decision to management. Then it must be recorded which decision is needed, which information is available for it and when an answer will follow. A reasoned rejection can also provide clarity; the absence of a response makes joint research more difficult.

Organize the review in advance

A follow-up appointment must be made before the energy of the workshop fades into the background. Those involved jointly determine a suitable trial period. In the review, implementation comes first. What was actually done? Which circumstances helped? Where did it get stuck? Only then can it be discussed what the action has meant for the work.

This distinction prevents an incorrect conclusion. If an agreed change was not implemented, the absence of improvement cannot simply be attributed to the content of that change. Perhaps time, decision-making authority or support was lacking. Those are relevant research outcomes that can give reason to adjust the approach.

Unintended consequences also deserve attention. A measure that creates room for one employee can shift work to a colleague. A new meeting can be useful but also crowd out other tasks. The evaluation must therefore ask not only whether participants are satisfied, but also what has changed in the division of tasks and in cooperation.

This cycle connects a delineated question with information, a chosen change and evaluation. Each implementation thus yields knowledge for a next decision.

11 Advancing the science

A next study must look beyond the meeting

The dissertation offers a basis for follow-up research because it connects theory, measurement and participatory application. The most important next question is whether the approach leads to changes that remain visible after the meeting. That requires following the development over time and not relying exclusively on appreciation immediately afterwards.

A new study can formulate a limited number of expectations in advance. For example, that a conversation about work design leads to more concrete improvement actions, or that the implementation of those actions is related to experienced professional room. The outcomes must be defined separately. Participation in a workshop, an implemented improvement decision and a change in motivation are different phenomena.

Measurements at several moments can make the sequence more visible. A first measurement describes the initial situation. A subsequent measurement can examine implementation and first experiences. A later measurement can show what is retained. Even then, caution is needed: in organizations, several things often change at the same time. A change in scores cannot simply be attributed to a single intervention.

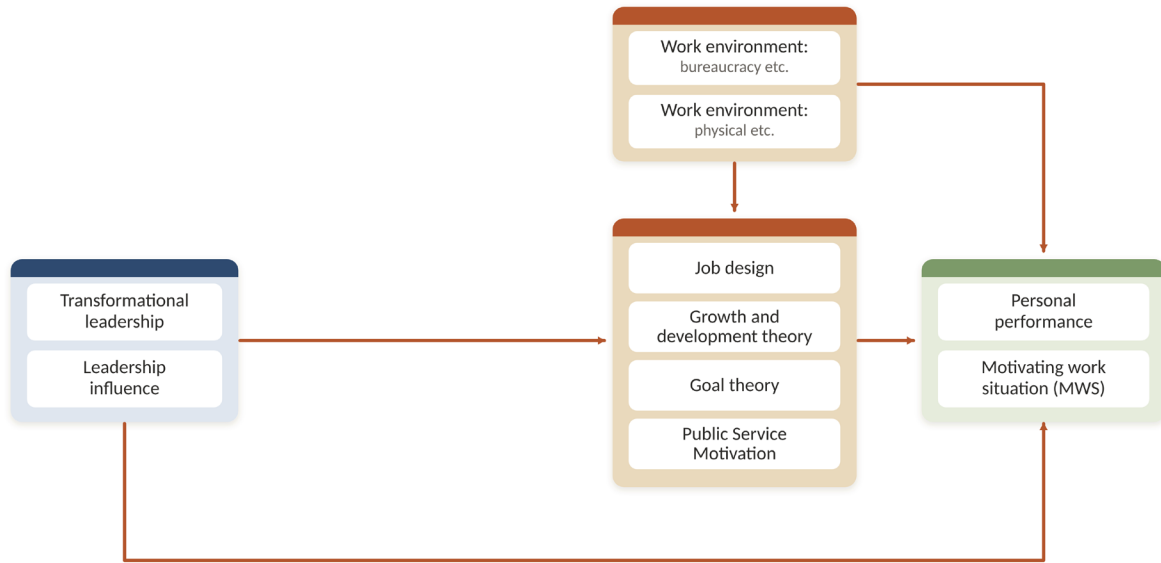
Where feasible, a comparison with other teams or a phased introduction can strengthen the assessment. A suitable design depends on the research question, the number of teams and the practical possibilities. These choices should be justified in advance, so that the analysis is not adjusted afterwards to the most attractive outcome.

An adapted model as a starting point

Figure 5.1 shows the adapted conceptual model with which the dissertation concludes. The assessment of the measurement scales and the analyses led to a reordering of the original model. Personal characteristics provided little additional explanation in these analyses. The regulation styles disappeared as a joint construct because of insufficient internal consistency. This does not mean that self-determination theory has been refuted: the individual forms of regulation remain relevant for understanding experiences and designing follow-up research (Verbeek, 2018, pp. 151–152).

The model connects leadership, work environment and motivating work characteristics with the outcomes studied. The arrows represent the structure of this interpretation. They do not mean that every connection is positive or that a causal effect has been demonstrated. After simultaneous inclusion of several work characteristics, the relationships with leadership changed. That may be a reason to examine indirect relationships, but it does not prove a working mechanism. The survey measured associations at a single moment; the direction of changes must be examined with follow-up measurements.

The adapted conceptual model



Arrows show the structure of the adapted conceptual model
No effect sizes or proven causal relationships; after Verbeek (2018), Figure 5.1, p. 152

Figure 5.1 The adapted conceptual model. Redesigned after Verbeek (2018), Figure 5.1, p. 152. The connections follow the original scheme. The arrows show model relationships, not proven causal effects.

Measuring what is really meant

Follow-up research also requires further development of the measurement instrument. Public motivation, professional interest, autonomous motivation and characteristics of the work must remain substantively distinct. When different concepts disappear into a single total score, it becomes harder to understand what a change means.

A new questionnaire can begin with substantive assessment and conversations about the comprehensibility of questions. Then a pilot administration and examination of the measurement structure are needed. The aim is not only to produce a sufficiently reliable number, but to establish whether the interpretations attached to that number are tenable for this target group and application.

When comparing over time, it must also be checked whether the same questions retain the same meaning. A workshop can, for example, make participants more aware of what autonomy entails. A changed score may then be partly related to a changed frame of reference. Additional conversations help to understand such shifts.

The sample also requires attention. More organizations and a greater variety of jobs can increase the reach of the conclusions. Non-response and voluntary participation remain relevant topics. The number of responses alone does not determine how representative a study is. It must also be known who could participate and which groups were reached less well.

The process deserves its own data

To understand why an approach works or gets stuck, the implementation must be followed. Which components took place? Who participated? Which actions were chosen? What support was promised? What was ultimately implemented? A concise logbook can organize this information, supplemented by conversations about events that do not fit into a score.

The role of the facilitator deserves its own place in this. An approach that only works well with the original developer is transferable in a different way than a method that can also be carried out carefully by others. Follow-up research can therefore record which instructions, skills and decisions of the facilitator are necessary.

Deviating experiences are also informative. A team that starts enthusiastically and later stops can show which conditions are missing. An employee who attaches little value to the chosen action can reveal an important difference in interests. Such data need not be regarded as a disturbance of a desired result. They can actually improve the theory about how the approach works.

Practical value and scientific modesty

The original contribution lies in developing and testing a way of working for supporting employees in public organizations. The study shows how general motivation theories and PSM can provide a language for practice-based research. It also shows where the design becomes difficult: in connecting individual experiences with shared priorities and in converting them into action.

That contribution becomes stronger by remaining precise about what has been demonstrated. A usable intervention under development need not be presented as a proven total solution. Clear delineation actually makes it easier for others to repeat, improve or apply the research under other circumstances.

The follow-up can thus pursue two yields at once. Organizations gain a more careful way to work on their work situation. Science gains better insight into the conditions and processes under which motivation-oriented interventions acquire meaning. That requires cooperation between participants, managers and researchers, with room for outcomes that were not foreseen in advance.

Afterword

The motivating work situation arises in the relationship between what people find important and what their work makes possible. For supporting employees of public organizations, that relationship can encompass both craftsmanship and societal commitment. The public mission gives meaning, but only takes shape in tasks, decisions, cooperation and the room to act carefully.

The 2018 research began with a theoretical exploration and developed into an approach in which employees could examine their own work situation. The survey brought patterns into view. The workshops added experiences, differences and possibilities for action. The transition to concrete action in particular proved to be an important lesson.

The value of the research thus lies in the connection between knowledge and daily work. Theory helps to look more closely. Data help to examine assumptions. Conversations help to give meaning to outcomes. Only in implementation and the later review does it become clear what a chosen change really yields.

For an organization, this begins with the willingness to ask an open question and to take the answer seriously. For a researcher, it begins with the willingness to make the limits of one's own approach visible as well. Where the two come together, research into work motivation can contribute to better work and to knowledge that reaches beyond a single meeting.

More information about Work Motivation: www.workmotivation.nl

Source notes

Origin of the book text

This book is an independent adaptation of the 2018 doctoral dissertation of A.J.F. André Verbeek, *Motiverende Arbeidssituatie bij gemeenten en waterschappen* (The motivating work situation in municipalities and water boards). The empirical data and the descriptions of the practice cases are drawn from that dissertation. The practice cases took place in 2017. The chapters on application and follow-up research develop lessons from the study further; they do not describe a newly conducted effect study.

The theoretical exposition follows the main lines of the original literature orientation. This book thus presents the scientific basis of the doctoral research, not an exhaustive update of all literature up to 2026. The selected key sources below support the recognizability and further study of that basis.

Chapters 1 to 5 build mainly on the introduction and theoretical orientation of the dissertation, in particular the printed pages 31 to 75. Chapter 6 uses the research strategy on pages 79 to 101. Chapter 7 summarizes the survey results on pages 105 to 122. Chapters 8 and 9 connect the description of the intervention method with the practice cases on pages 123 to 139 and the evaluations in the appendices. The discussion on pages 143 to 153 also forms part of the basis for Chapters 10 and 11.

In the rewording, associations have been consistently distinguished from causal effects. Positive workshop experiences are described as process and experience yields. Intended follow-up activities are not treated as proven implemented changes. Illustrative examples in the application part have been made recognizable as such.

For the detailed measurement instruments, analysis models and original tables, reference is made to the dissertation. The book text contains no new calculations on the raw research data. In this way, the concise discussion of statistics remains connected to the original accountability without interrupting the reading line of the book.

This edition contains five redesigned figures based on the dissertation: 2.2, 2.3, 3, 4 and 5.1. Figures 3 and 4 belong to the book adaptation; the other numbers refer to the dissertation. Figure 5.1 follows the connections of the original model on p. 152; the arrows represent model relationships and not proven causal effects. The cover image is inspired by the brown visual style with human figures and the carrot from the dissertation.

Selection of key sources

Verbeek, A. J. F. (2018). Motiverende Arbeidssituatie bij gemeenten en waterschappen. Een studie naar het ontwikkelen van een actieonderzoeksinstrument voor het creëren van een motiverende arbeidssituatie bij ondersteunende stafafdelingen van gemeenten en waterschappen [The motivating work situation in municipalities and water boards: A study on developing an action research instrument for creating a motivating work situation in the supporting staff departments of municipalities and water boards]. Doctoral dissertation, International American University / ODIBS.

Perry, J. L., & Wise, L. R. (1990). The motivational bases of public service. *Public Administration Review*, 50(3), 367–373. <https://doi.org/10.2307/976618>

Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2000). Self-determination theory and the facilitation of intrinsic motivation, social development, and well-being. *American Psychologist*, 55(1), 68–78. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.55.1.68>

Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M. (2000). The “what” and “why” of goal pursuits: Human needs and the self-determination of behavior. *Psychological Inquiry*, 11(4), 227–268. https://doi.org/10.1207/S15327965PLI1104_01

Gagné, M., & Deci, E. L. (2005). Self-determination theory and work motivation. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 26(4), 331–362. <https://doi.org/10.1002/job.322>

Locke, E. A., & Latham, G. P. (2002). Building a practically useful theory of goal setting and task motivation: A 35-year odyssey. *American Psychologist*, 57(9), 705–717. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.57.9.705>

Morgeson, F. P., & Humphrey, S. E. (2006). The Work Design Questionnaire (WDQ): Developing and validating a comprehensive measure for assessing job design and the nature of work. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 91(6), 1321–1339. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0021-9010.91.6.1321>

Lewin, K. (1946). Action research and minority problems. *Journal of Social Issues*, 2(4), 34–46. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4560.1946.tb02295.x>

The classic need and expectancy theories and the literature on person and environment are treated in this book via the theoretical orientation of Verbeek (2018). For the precise selection and elaboration, reference is made to Chapter 2 of the dissertation. The book text uses these perspectives to explain the development of its own research model.