

Effects of Frustration

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During my dissertation project I discovered that I was not the only one struggling with effects of frustration. People that had participated in my survey also seemed to show effects that could be explained by levels of frustration. This led to a journey into the topic which I would like to share with you here.

Motivation is the general term for all the psychological processes that start behaviour, maintain it, and stop it [Zimbardo, 1990]. Learning in individuals can be enhanced or inhibited. Recent findings [Unknown, 2004] suggest that emotional involvement can affect learning considerably in positive and negative ways. One such way is attitudinal motivation, or in its negative form: demotivation. Attitudinal demotivation is equivalent to frustration. Frustration negatively impacts job performance including learning.

Argyris [1985, p.180] discusses the fit of the individual and the job as a preliminary requirements for greater effectiveness and efficiency in organisations. The theory of 'best fit' is based on the theory of motivation, which holds that an individual will expend energy in favour of pleasant experiences while trying to escape unpleasant ones. The best fit, according to the theory, will place the worker in the best possible work environment for which he or she has the best skills and abilities, to avoid frustration and enhance motivation, and ultimately to boost performance.

This common belief is not undisputed in literature, and Argyris cites authors [Pfeffer, Landy, Lewin, in Argyris, 1985, p.180] who have alternative theories. Some explain additional motivation as a result of moderate levels of frustration, or 'optimal frustration', that will drive the individual to invest additional energy in solving a problem, provided that the problem is not too difficult. This makes frustration a possible tool for increased performance.

Frustration-aggression theory [Zimbardo, 2000, p.429] describes how the source of frustration will be the target of aggressive action. If, as in an organisational context, aggression must be suppressed, frustration can lead to apathy and reduced performance, which includes reduced learning in an individual. Frustration, it seems, is a two-sided sword, that can produce heightened creativity in problem solving, or demotivation, aggression, and inner withdrawal, when frustration levels are too high, or no solution is offered.

References:

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