

A famous US study in the 1920s came to the conclusion that some people work harder and perform better when they are aware that they are being observed. Andrew Sharman shines a light on the Hawthorne Effect.



# BEHAVIOUR CHANGE

Could it be that those around us significantly influence our performance?

Elton Mayo, an Australian sociologist proved that they could. Back in the 1920s Mayo and his crew wanted to study the effect of physical work conditions on productivity when they arrived at the Western Electric Company factory in Hawthorne, a suburb of Chicago, in the United States.

Two groups of employees were the subjects of the study – one group was exposed to variations in lighting in their production areas, while the second (the ‘control group’) worked in an area where lighting remained unchanged for the period of the study. The expectation was that those working with enhanced lighting would be more productive.

Day after day the lighting was gradually increased and the research team observed dutifully. As anticipated, the productivity

of workers in the highly illuminated group was found to improve. Brilliant news: just by improving workplace lighting businesses around the world could maximise productivity.

But on reviewing the data for the control group – the one without the enhanced lighting – the scientists found that their performance had also improved.

Shortly after the study ended Mayo received an update from the management at the factory: the productivity of both groups had fallen back to previous levels.

Rethinking their hypotheses, the scientists concluded that productivity increased not due to the changes in the work environment, but because of the observation of the workers by the research team during the study.

The ‘Hawthorne Effect’ as it has become known, refers to the tendency of some people to work harder and perform better when they are aware that they are being observed.

Individuals appear to change their behaviours as a direct result of the attention they receive. By further exploring the beliefs and creeds which make individuals feel part of an integrated group Mayo concluded that beyond the power of observation was the importance of group dynamics.

He reported: “The desire to stand well with one’s fellows, the so-called human instinct of association, easily outweighs the merely individual interest and the logic of reasoning upon which so many spurious principles of management are based.”

Mayo’s studies revealed that it was this sense of team spirit, based on unwritten codes of conduct within the group formed themselves that determined the output of individual workers. While the work environment may be important for comfort and wellbeing, the desire for groups to be seen to be efficient and effective was a greater driver for action.

The Hawthorne studies provide two key learnings for those interested in improving safety at work:

- The act of observation in itself has the power to influence human behaviour. This is because individuals usually appear to want to be observed, quite literally, in ‘the best light’.
- Beyond ‘looking good’ as an individual, people take pride in demonstrating their efficacy and contribution in a group.

So what can we do with these study findings?

First, think about the process of observing workers in your organization. Are your workers acting so as to be seen in ‘the best light’? What happens when the light stops shining on them? Does their behaviour change like the workers at Hawthorne?

Then consider how you might encourage the formation of strong bonds, positive beliefs, creeds and unwritten codes of conduct within the work teams.

Instead of laughing from the sidelines when people make mistakes, why not more whooping with appreciation when they get things right? Very soon your workers might just be flying high thanks to your recognition. ■

**Andrew Sharman is chief executive of RyderMarshSharman – see page 4 for more details**