

# Exploring Work Motivation Phenomena Among Field Workers to Improve Performance: A Qualitative Study at PTPN IV Gunung Bayu Plantation

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## Abstract

This study explores the dynamics of work motivation among field workers in PTPN IV Kebun Gunung Bayu, a major palm oil plantation in Simalungun Regency, North Sumatra, Indonesia. Motivation in plantation environments is shaped not only by individual capability but also by relational, structural, and contextual conditions embedded in daily field operations. Using a qualitative exploratory design, data were collected through in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and field observations involving 20 workers and supervisory personnel. Analysis using open, axial, and selective coding identified five dominant themes: worker capability and contextual self-efficacy, clarity of communication and role certainty, supervisory leadership and emotional climate, motivational drivers and barriers, and the connection between motivation and performance. The findings show that motivation is highly dynamic and strongly influenced by communication consistency, supervisory fairness, environmental challenges, and perceptions of justice in workload allocation. Leadership emerged as the most significant factor affecting emotional readiness and daily enthusiasm, while communication clarity played a central role in strengthening confidence and task orientation. The results align with Sustainable Human Resource Management (S-HRM) principles, emphasizing fairness, ethical supervision, worker well-being, and capability development. This study contributes theoretical insights into motivation in labor-intensive sectors and provides practical recommendations for improving HR strategies and supervisory practices within PTPN IV.

**Keyword:** Motivation, Ability, Communication, Leadership, Performance

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Employee motivation has long been conceptualized as a central determinant of organizational performance, particularly in labor-intensive industries where human effort, physical endurance, and operational coordination form the backbone of productivity. Motivation drives employees to initiate action, sustain effort, overcome obstacles, and maintain productivity over time. Classical theories such as Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (Maslow, 1943) and Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory (Herzberg, 1966) have provided enduring frameworks for understanding human motivation by differentiating between intrinsic drivers, such as recognition and achievement, and extrinsic factors, such as working conditions or managerial practices. These foundational theories continue to inform contemporary discussions by emphasizing that motivation is shaped by the interplay between individual needs and organizational environments.

The importance of motivation becomes even more pronounced in plantation-based industries such as palm oil production, where job demands are physically taxing, operational routines are highly structured, and performance outputs are directly tied to organizational revenue streams. Field workers in palm oil plantations operate in environments characterized by unpredictable weather, terrain challenges, and tight performance targets. They are responsible for harvesting, pruning, collecting Fresh Fruit Bunches (FFB), and maintaining plantation blocks - tasks that require physical stamina, technical competence, and strict adherence to operational standards. In such contexts, insufficient motivation may manifest in absenteeism, reduced productivity, lower-quality harvests, or lapses in safety compliance. Conversely, motivated workers tend to demonstrate greater resilience, attention to detail, cooperative behavior, and sustained performance levels even under demanding conditions.

PTPN IV Kebun Gunung Bayu, located in Bosar Maligas, Simalungun Regency, North Sumatra, Indonesia, is one of the strategic operational units under PTPN IV Regional 2. With approximately 480 permanent employees, it constitutes a critical production base in supplying high-quality FFB to the corporation's downstream processing facilities. Observations from preliminary assessments suggest that variations in supervisory behavior (mandor/asisten), communication clarity, skill mastery, and organizational support structures significantly shape workers' motivational states. These dynamics underscore the need for a deeper, more context-specific exploration of motivational mechanisms within plantation environments.

Although previous studies in human resource management have examined motivation from various conceptual angles, research specifically focusing on field workers in palm oil plantations remains limited. Much of the existing empirical work is quantitative, emphasizing statistical relationships between motivation and productivity, satisfaction, or organizational commitment. While these findings offer valuable insights, they risk oversimplifying motivational processes that are inherently dynamic, relational, and deeply embedded in daily

work interactions. Quantitative methods often fail to capture workers' subjective perceptions, the complexities of hierarchical field settings, and informal communication patterns that critically influence motivation on the ground. The lack of contextual depth and experiential perspectives in these studies highlights an important methodological blind spot.

Qualitative inquiry, in contrast, provides an avenue for capturing rich, nuanced accounts of workers' lived experiences, particularly their interactions with supervisors, communication challenges, skill-related constraints, and the socio-cultural factors shaping their work realities. This approach aligns with scholarly calls for more grounded, context-sensitive explorations of HRM phenomena, especially in sectors characterized by high labor dependency and operational volatility. Plantation work is embedded in unique socio-cultural and environmental contexts that differ substantially from typical industrial workspaces, making qualitative methods particularly suitable for uncovering motivational dynamics that cannot be readily quantified.

In this study, employee motivation is examined through three primary antecedent constructs: ability, communication, and leadership. Ability encompasses field workers' technical knowledge, skill mastery, and confidence in task execution. Workers who possess adequate skills are more likely to experience self-efficacy, a key predictor of intrinsic motivation (Bandura, 1977). Communication refers to the clarity, openness, and timeliness of instructions provided by supervisors. Effective communication reduces uncertainty, fosters trust, and enhances perceived organizational support. Leadership represents the behavioral patterns of supervisors that influence employee morale and engagement. Transformational and supportive leadership practices have been shown to stimulate intrinsic motivation by fostering meaning, recognition, and a sense of belonging (Bass, 1985). These three constructs collectively shape the motivational ecosystem of plantation operations.

To further strengthen the theoretical foundation of this study, motivation is situated within the broader framework of Sustainable Human Resource Management (S-HRM). S-HRM emphasizes long-term workforce well-being, fair treatment, capability building, and ethical managerial practices as essential components of sustainable organizational performance (Ehnert, 2009, Jackson et al., 2014). Unlike traditional HRM models that prioritize short-term efficiency, S-HRM integrates economic, social, and ethical dimensions to ensure that human resources are managed in ways that support long-term organizational resilience. Its core principles resonate strongly with the conditions and challenges faced by field workers in palm oil plantations, where physical demands, safety risks, skill requirements, and supervisor relationships shape daily work experiences.

The integration of S-HRM into this study offers several important contributions. First, it broadens the conceptual lens for understanding motivation by situating individual-level factors (ability, communication, leadership) within systemic and ethical HRM considerations. Second, it aligns with the growing global emphasis on sustainability certification, labor rights, and responsible supply chain management in the palm oil industry. Third, it highlights the importance of designing HR policies that not only boost productivity but also prioritize long-term worker welfare, skill enhancement, and humane supervisory practices. By embedding the study within an S-HRM framework, the analysis moves beyond traditional performance-driven narratives and foregrounds the importance of sustainable workforce development.

Despite its relevance, several critical gaps exist in the literature. First, research on motivation in plantation environments remains dominated by quantitative surveys, leaving a limited understanding of the contextual and relational factors influencing motivation. Second, qualitative perspectives that capture the lived realities of field workers are scarce, resulting in a theoretical imbalance that underrepresents experiential insights. Third, the interaction between ability, communication, and leadership as an integrated set of motivational antecedents has not been adequately examined in plantation settings, despite these constructs being deeply intertwined in daily work dynamics. Fourth, the linkage between motivation and performance in physically demanding field-based settings remains underexplored, even though performance outputs are directly observable and measurable. Finally, research seldom incorporates Sustainable HRM principles when conceptualizing motivation in labor-intensive environments, leaving a gap in understanding how long-term workforce sustainability can be embedded into HRM practices.

Addressing these gaps requires a methodological approach capable of capturing holistic and context-sensitive insights. This study therefore adopts a qualitative exploratory design to examine how ability, communication, and leadership shape the motivational experiences of field workers at PTPN IV Kebun Gunung Bayu. By integrating classical motivation theories with S-HRM principles, the research aims to provide deeper theoretical grounding and practical recommendations that support both productivity and sustainable workforce management.

## 2. RESEARCH METHOD

### 2.1 Research Framework

The research framework of this study is constructed based on the theoretical interaction between ability, communication, and leadership as antecedent factors that shape employee motivation, which subsequently influences performance. The framework adopts classical motivation theories and integrates them with principles from Sustainable Human Resource Management (S-HRM) to capture both psychological and structural elements that contribute to motivation in plantation operational contexts.

- a) Ability reflects workers' technical skills, knowledge, physical readiness, and confidence to perform field-based tasks.
- b) Communication represents the clarity, openness, and timeliness of interactions between workers and supervisors, which determine role clarity and reduce operational ambiguity.
- c) Leadership refers to supervisory behavior, fairness, support, and direction provided by frontline managerial personnel such as mandors and assistant estate managers.
- d) Motivation is conceptualized as the internal and external drive that influences workers' willingness to perform tasks effectively under demanding conditions.
- e) Performance encompasses the observable behavioral outcomes of workers, including productivity, accuracy, discipline, and adherence to safety standards.

The framework guides all methodological decisions including sampling, data collection, and coding procedures.

## 2.2 Research Design

This research employs a qualitative exploratory design aimed at understanding context-bound motivational processes among field workers. A qualitative design is appropriate because:

- a) Motivational phenomena are contextual and experiential, requiring exploration of subjective worker narratives.
- b) Plantation work consists of complex social interactions that cannot be captured through quantitative indicators alone.
- c) A qualitative approach enables the identification of emerging patterns that may inform future quantitative model testing.

The design prioritizes depth over breadth, enabling the researcher to derive rich, descriptive insights and interpretive understanding relevant to plantation settings.

## 2.3 Research Setting

The study is situated at PTPN IV Kebun Gunung Bayu, located in Bosar Maligas, Simalungun Regency, North Sumatra, Indonesia. This plantation employs approximately 480 permanent workers across several divisions responsible for harvesting, pruning, upkeep, and logistical operations. The location was selected due to:

- a) Its role as a strategic production unit within PTPN IV Regional 2.
- b) Its labor-intensive operational structure, which provides fertile ground for studying motivation.
- c) Its hierarchical supervisory system, creating a strong influence of leadership and communication processes on motivational outcomes.

## 2.4 Research Focus

This study focuses on understanding the interplay among ability, communication, leadership, and motivation, with particular emphasis on how these factors shape behavioral performance in the field. The focus areas include: (1) Workers' perceptions of their skill readiness and training adequacy; (2) Communication patterns between mandors and workers; (3) Supervisory behavior and its perceived fairness and supportiveness; (3) Daily motivations and demotivators influencing productivity; (4) Field-level challenges that shape performance consistency.

## 2.5 Informants and Sampling Technique

The study employs purposive sampling to ensure the inclusion of participants who have direct knowledge of daily operational dynamics. The informant criteria include: (1) Workers with at least one year of tenure; (2) Individuals directly involved in field operational tasks (harvesting, collection, maintenance); (3) Workers who interact regularly with supervisors; (4) Willingness to participate voluntarily; (5) A total of 20–25 participants were targeted, including: 12–15 field workers from different divisions, 4–5 supervisors (mandors and assistant managers), 2 administrative staff familiar with HR and operational communication.

Sampling continued until data saturation was achieved when no new information emerged from additional interviews.

## 2.6 Data Collection Techniques

To ensure comprehensive capture of field-level motivational dynamics, multiple data collection methods were employed:

- a) In-depth Interviews, Semi-structured interviews were conducted to obtain detailed narratives about workers' experiences. The interviews explored: Perceived competency and skills; Quality and clarity of instruction received; Leadership behaviors; Motivational triggers and barriers; Daily performance challenges; Each interview lasted between 45 to 60 minutes, allowing ample space for elaboration.
- b) Participant Observation. Observation sessions were conducted during daily routines, including morning briefings and field operations. The observation focused on: Real-time communication patterns; Supervisory presence and behavior; Peer collaboration; Work tempo and task coordination; Compliance with operational procedures.

- c) Focus Group Discussions (FGD). FGDs with 6–8 workers were held to validate emerging themes and understand shared experiences. Discussion topics included: Fairness in workload distribution; Collective motivational challenges; Group perspectives on leadership; Communication norms within the field.
- d) Documentation Review. Document analysis was conducted on organizational files such as SOPs, performance reports, communication logs, and HR documents. This helped contextualize primary data sources.

### 2.7 Data Analysis Procedure

Data were analyzed using a rigorous multi-step qualitative coding process:

- a) Open Coding. Interview transcripts, FGD notes, and observation records were reviewed line by line. Initial codes emerged such as: Unclear instruction; Supportive *mandor*; Skill readiness; Task overload; Fair treatment; Recognition.
- b) Axial Coding. Codes were grouped into categories by identifying patterns, relationships, and causal conditions. Major axial categories included: Communication clarity and breakdown; Supervisory fairness and presence; Technical ability and task confidence; Perceived workload balance; Motivation triggers and barriers.
- c) Selective Coding. A central core category, Dynamics of Field Worker Motivation, was identified. Other categories were linked to this core to form a coherent explanatory model of how ability, communication, and leadership affect motivation and performance in plantation operations.

### 2.8 Trustworthiness Criteria

To ensure methodological rigor, four trustworthiness criteria were applied:

- a) Credibility Data triangulation (interviews, FGDs, observations, documents), Member checking to validate interpretations, Peer discussion to reduce researcher bias.
- b) Transferability Thick descriptions of the plantation setting, Detailed reporting of participant criteria and context.
- c) Dependability Structured coding procedure and audit trail, Codebook development and revision transparency.
- d) Confirmability Researcher reflexive notes, Transparency in analytical decisions and theme development.

### 2.9 Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to ethical standards that ensure participant safety and data integrity: Informed consent was obtained before participation; Confidentiality was assured by anonymizing informant identities; Participation was voluntary, with no coercion or potential negative workplace consequences; Data were stored securely and used solely for research purposes.

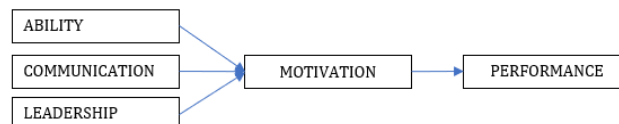


Figure 1 Conceptual Framework

## 3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### 3.1 Overview of The Analytical Process

This study employed a systematic qualitative analysis involving open, axial, and selective coding following Strauss and Corbin’s grounded theory methodology. A total of 20 in-depth interviews, two focus group discussions, and field observations generated more than 150 initial codes. These codes were consolidated into 23 subcategories, and eventually merged into five major themes representing the central motivational dynamics experienced by field workers at PTPN IV Kebun Gunung Bayu.

The analysis revealed that worker motivation in plantation operations is shaped by a multi-layered system involving personal capability, communication clarity, supervisory behavior, environmental constraints, and perceptions of fairness. The themes indicate that motivation is dynamic, context-dependent, and highly influenced by day-to-day interactions between workers and supervisors. Below, each theme is presented in detail and integrated with relevant theoretical perspectives to provide a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon.

#### Theme 1: Worker Capability and Contextual Self-Efficacy

A dominant theme emerging from the data concerns workers’ technical capability and the contextual nature of their perceived self-efficacy. Most field workers expressed confidence in their skills, especially in tasks such as harvesting, pruning, collecting Fresh Fruit Bunches (FFB), and maintaining blocks. Many had more than five years of experience and considered themselves technically competent. However, capability was not the only determinant of motivation. Environmental conditions strongly influenced worker confidence. Sloped terrain, uneven fruit distribution, weather conditions, and tool limitations often moderated workers’ perceived ability. During interviews, several workers described feeling uncertain when assigned to distant or difficult blocks.

**Example narrative (Informant C4):** *“We know our job very well because we have done it for years. Skill is not the issue. But sometimes the block conditions are different. Some blocks are heavy, some are far, and some have fewer fruits. In those situations, we feel unsure whether we can reach the target.”*

This quote illustrates that ability is not static; it is highly contingent upon environmental factors. According to Bandura’s (1977) self-efficacy theory, perceived capability fluctuates based on situational demands. High physical fatigue, difficult block conditions, and unclear target distribution all contributed to variations in worker confidence and willingness to exert effort. Workers also highlighted the importance of physical readiness. Fatigue accumulated from consecutive days of heavy block assignments reduced their motivation, indicating that capability must be understood holistically—both technical and physiological. These findings reinforce that ability influences motivation only when contextual conditions support the worker’s sense of mastery and control.

## **Theme 2: Communication Clarity and Role Confidence**

Communication emerged as one of the most powerful factors affecting motivation. Plantation operations require clear instructions due to the variability of daily work conditions. However, the data revealed inconsistent communication between supervisors and workers. Morning briefings often varied depending on the mandor in charge. Some mandors explained the targets comprehensively, whereas others delivered brief or unclear instructions.

**Example narrative (Informant A2):** *“We understand our tasks, that is not the problem. The issue is when instructions suddenly change, and not all supervisors explain the details. Sometimes we start work guessing what the priority is for the day. This makes us feel less confident and not always motivated.”*

Communication breakdowns created uncertainty, hesitation, and a sense of vulnerability among workers. Ambiguous instructions or last-minute changes made workers feel they lacked direction and proper guidance. Several workers stated that they were more motivated when supervisors provided clear expectations, detailed steps, and consistent follow-up throughout the day. This theme aligns with role theory, which posits that role clarity is essential for effective performance and motivation. It also reinforces expectancy theory: workers must understand the link between effort, performance, and outcomes. Without communication clarity, that link becomes blurred. Furthermore, workers stated that communication was not only about instructions, but also about being heard. Several workers expressed that when supervisors actively listened to their concerns—such as tool issues or block challenges, they felt more valued and motivated.

## **Theme 3: Supervisory Leadership and Emotional Climate**

Leadership was the most influential theme affecting worker motivation. Supervisors (*mandor* and assistant managers) serve as the primary interface between management and field workers. Workers repeatedly emphasized that how they were treated by their supervisors strongly shaped their desire to work. Supportive supervisors increased motivation, especially those who regularly visited the field, provided constructive feedback, and showed genuine concern for workers’ difficulties. Conversely, authoritarian or inconsistent supervisors reduced motivation, especially when they disciplined workers without proper explanation or displayed favoritism in block allocation.

**Example narrative (Informant F3):** *“When the supervisor comes to the field and gives clear and kind guidance, we feel more motivated. But when the supervisor shows up only to scold us and then leaves, it makes us feel unappreciated.”*

This observation echoes transformational leadership theory, which emphasizes inspiration, fairness, and individualized consideration as key motivators. Plantation supervisors hold substantial authority in daily operations; thus, their behavior sets the emotional tone for the work environment. Workers also described differences between supervisors. Some practiced transparency and fairness, while others were described as “temperamental” or “rarely in the field”. Such inconsistencies created uncertainty, making workers feel psychologically insecure. Leadership also influenced teamwork. Workers felt more united when supervisors fostered a supportive environment, but fragmented when supervisors encouraged competition or favoritism. This demonstrates that leadership shapes not only individual motivation but also collective morale.

## **Theme 4: Motivation Drivers and Barriers in Field Operations**

This theme captures the specific elements that elevate or diminish motivation. Field workers identified several motivational drivers, including: Motivational Drivers (1) Recognition and appreciation from supervisors;

(2) Fair workload distribution across blocks; (3) Good teamwork and peer support; (4) Achieving or exceeding daily targets; (5) Availability of proper equipment; (6) Support during difficult block assignments

**Example narrative (Informant G1):** *“If we receive even small recognition for good work, it makes us happy. We feel appreciated, especially when the supervisor says our work is neat and correct.”*

On the other hand, the study identified several demotivating conditions, such as: (1) Demotivating Factors; (2) Perceived unfairness in block assignment; (3) Ambiguous targets; (4) Physical exhaustion due to terrain or weather; (5) Equipment shortages; (6) Lack of supervision during difficult situations; (7) Inconsistent rules or disciplinary practices.

**Example narrative (Informant B6):** *“Sometimes we get blocks that are far and have fewer fruits while others get blocks that are close with more fruits. It feels unfair and reduces our motivation.”*

This theme strongly supports Herzberg’s Two-Factor Theory: Motivators: recognition, achievement and Hygiene factors: fairness, workload, tools. It also reflects Adams’ Equity Theory: perceived fairness directly affects motivation.

### **Theme 5: Motivation–Performance Link in Plantation Work**

The final theme connects motivation to performance. Workers demonstrated that when they felt confident, appreciated, and supported, they invested more effort, worked faster, maintained quality, and willingly took the initiative. Conversely, when they felt unfairly treated or unclear about expectations, their performance declined. Workers also described a form of situational readiness, where motivation surged during favorable environmental conditions or when supervisors provided positive reinforcement.

**Example narrative (Informant A7):** *“Targets are important, but when they are clear and realistic, we feel more excited to achieve them. When they are not, we feel pressured and less motivated.”*

Motivation was not simply an internal state but a mediator between structural factors and performance behaviors. The study found that: Ability affects performance only when motivation is activated; Communication supports motivation by providing clarity; Leadership directly influences emotional readiness and effort. This aligns with Vroom’s Expectancy Theory and modern HR performance models.

### **3.2 Axial Coding Summary**

Axial coding identified three dominant causal chains:

**Ability → Confidence → Motivation → Performance**

**Communication → Role Clarity → Motivation**

**Leadership → Emotional Climate → Motivation → Collective Morale**

These pathways reveal a strong relational dependency between supervisors and workers.

### **3.3 Selective Coding: Core Category**

The central category identified is: **“Motivation Dynamics in Plantation Field Work”**. This encapsulates the fluid, multi-directional motivational processes shaped by daily interactions, block conditions, supervisory behavior, clarity of tasks, and fairness.

### **3.4 Findings**

Findings strongly support S-HRM principles: (1) Worker well-being must be safeguarded; (2) Fairness is essential for sustained motivation; (3) Ethical leadership enhances emotional health; (4) Capability development must be continuous; (5) Transparent communication strengthens trust. S-HRM provides an ideal framework to understand long-term motivational sustainability in plantation settings. Theoretical Implications: (1) Strengthens integration between motivation theory and S-HRM; (2) Provides empirical depth to leadership motivation link; (3) Expands understanding of fairness in labor intensive environments. Practical Implications for PTPN IV: (1) Standardize daily communication routines; (2) Improve fairness in block assignment; (3) Enhance supervisory presence and coaching; (4) Provide recognition systems; (5) Improve equipment availability; (6) Strengthen worker well-being programs.

## **3. CONCLUSION**

This qualitative exploratory study investigated the motivational dynamics of field workers at PTPN IV Kebun Gunung Bayu by examining the roles of ability, communication, and leadership in shaping daily performance outcomes. The findings indicate that motivation among plantation workers is not static, but rather a fluid process influenced by the interaction between individual competencies, supervisory practices, communication clarity, and perceptions of fairness. The study concludes that ability, while essential for task execution, does not independently drive motivation. Workers generally demonstrated strong technical

competence, yet their confidence and enthusiasm fluctuated depending on terrain difficulty, fruit availability, and equipment conditions. This underscores the importance of contextual factors in shaping perceived capability. Communication emerged as a critical determinant of motivation, particularly in a field environment where tasks and priorities may shift rapidly. Clear, consistent instructions from supervisors enhanced workers' readiness and reduced uncertainty. In contrast, unclear or inconsistent communication often resulted in confusion, hesitation, and reduced motivation. Leadership was the most influential factor, significantly shaping emotional engagement and performance willingness. Supportive and fair supervisors fostered motivation, while authoritarian or inconsistent leadership reduced workers' sense of value and commitment. This aligns with transformational leadership theory and highlights the importance of relational dynamics in labor-intensive environments. The findings also reinforce the relevance of Sustainable HRM (S-HRM) principles, particularly fairness, worker well-being, ethical supervision, and capability development. Sustainable motivation requires HR strategies that integrate operational efficiency with long-term workforce resilience. Overall, the study concludes that improving motivation in plantation settings requires a holistic approach that strengthens ability, enhances communication systems, and elevates leadership quality. These insights contribute both theoretical value to motivation research and practical implications for HR policy development in PTPN IV and similar plantation organizations.

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