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The Relationship Between Superiors' Self-Disclosure, Offers of Help, Offers of Cooperation, Frequency of Contact, Trust, and Subordinates' Job Satisfaction

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Editor's Note: The following research was based on a master's thesis at NCSU. In March of 1998, the staff of the Wake County Public Library System were surveyed as part of a graduate thesis study at North Carolina State University. The goal of the study was to determine what influence, if any, five communication behaviors that may be received from immediate superiors have on subordinate job satisfaction. The five communication behaviors tested were: self-disclosure, offers of help, offers of cooperation, frequency of contact, and trust. With the exception of self-disclosure, the communication behaviors were shown to be related to subordinates' job satisfaction levels.

Literature Review

The past 10 to 20 years have dramatically changed the "psychological contract" between workers and their employers. After two decades of employee layoffs, workers' trust and loyalty have fallen to record low levels. Studies show today's employees are much more inclined to change jobs in the future,[1] but population changes demand that organizations must increasingly compete for their services.

The high costs of turnover, absenteeism, and lack of loyalty have led companies to experiment with signing bonuses, 401k matches, on-site daycare, and other equally high-priced programs to secure their employee assets. These programs have successfully increased satisfaction, but today's volatile market almost guarantees these programs will be cut when profits decline. The search for an alternative solution that both increases subordinate satisfaction without incurring long-term overhead costs led this researcher to the job satisfaction antecedents uncovered in 1969 by Smith, Kendall & Hulin. The antecedents are: the work itself, pay, promotions, co-workers, and supervision.[2]

Many jobs can not be significantly changed, and economic imperatives eliminate significant pay and promotion changes. Changing co-workers, while possible, presents a logistical nightmare. Supervisors, then, with their heavy impact

on employee's perceptions and their position as subordinates' preferred information source,[3] present the greatest possibility for change. Further, supervisors' communication strongly influences employee satisfaction.[4]

This study examines five superiors' communication behaviors to examine their impact on subordinates' job satisfaction. Offers of help and offers of cooperation were chosen for their role in team structures; trust was examined because of its precipitous drop in recent years.[5] Self-disclosure influences trust-building,[6] and reflects Generation X communication styles. Contact frequency touches on the changes technology and telecommuting have brought to workplace communication. At the Wake County Public Library System (WCPL), contact frequency relates to shift work, which inhibits workers' contact with immediate superiors.

Methodology

The survey was pretested with 25 employees of the Forsyth County Library System in 1997. The response rate was 76 %, and the results showed reliable internal consistency levels.

The survey questions addressed the five communication behaviors with a five-point scale of responses: strongly agree, agree, undecided, disagree, and strongly disagree. Job satisfac-

tion antecedents were used to establish the dependent variable. The return rate was 53.6 with an average satisfaction score of 7.7021 on a scale ranging from five to fifteen. This finding indicates WCPL employees enjoy an overall high level of satisfaction.

Findings

Four of this study's five hypotheses were proven. The fifth, self-disclosure, yielded an interesting response pattern. Self-disclosure has been described as being two-dimensional when defined by content.[7] Task-focused self-disclosure is limited to work and co-worker topics, but personal self-disclosure covers a wider range.[8] Task-focused self-disclosure was found to be substantially related to subordinates' job satisfaction.

The trust questions recalled the most commonly cited aspects of trustworthy behavior: reliability, keeping promises, and truth-telling. Every trust question was found to be substantially related to subordinate job satisfaction.

Helping behavior is defined as actions that have no benefit for the aid-giver.[9] The survey questions reflect subordinates' tension when requesting help.[10] Some fear perceptions of incompetence or laziness; the inherent power imbalance between superior and subordinate creates a reluctance to ask — despite requests to do so.[11] Offers of help were substantially related to employee satisfaction, except where immediate superiors offered frequently. Possibly, subordinates perceived these offers as implications of incompetence.

Unlike helping behavior, cooperative behavior benefits both parties.[12] Survey questions addressed superiors' past behavior, willingness, and availability to cooperate. Every aspect tested was substantially related to subordinates' job satisfaction levels.

One contact frequency question asked whether subordinates saw their immediate superiors daily; the other measured employees' comfort level when contacting their immediate superiors. Both questions were found to be substantially related to subordinates' job satisfaction levels.

One additional statistical measure explored supervisors' general influence on subordinates' job satisfaction levels. As a multi-unit organization, WCPL offers standard work, pay and promotion. Branch hired co-workers vie for promotions system-wide, creating a similar co-worker pool. The only satisfaction antecedent that varies from branch to branch is the supervision.

Satisfaction level variations were noted in the branch-by-branch analysis. Assigning all causality solely to supervisors' is simplistic; job satisfaction does not operate in a vacuum. But given the literature, it would be negligent to dismiss the findings. They are most useful for pointing out intervention opportunities for administration.

Discussion

Organization-wide measures for satisfaction show that the WCPL staff enjoy a high satisfaction level. Recently, WCPL's hierarchical boundaries have been flattened. Reduced staff levels and upper management training in team management skills have empowered lower staff levels to make decisions formerly reserved for supervisors. Characterized by democratic problem solving and idea generation, team management structures are most effective when accompanied by cross-hierarchy efforts at helping and cooperating.

These efforts must initially come from immediate superiors. The literature is quite clear: the inherent power imbalance demands that the party with the least risk makes the first move. Reciprocity may not occur until several efforts are

made, but research shows these supervisors are subsequently held in more positive regard by their subordinates.[13]

Like cooperation and helping, trust is reciprocal in nature; the behavior must be initiated by the party taking the least risk. Keeping promises and speaking the truth are contagious — but the epidemic must begin at the top. Employees who feel trusted have higher satisfaction levels than those who do not.[14] Beyond layoffs, trust also operates on the levels of performance appraisals, task assignments, and promotions. Subordinates who do not feel trusted may be more inclined to leave. All organizations experience turnover costs; boosting trust levels may positively impact turnover levels.

Self-disclosure may still have a role to play. Its division by content into task and personal matters appears significant. At WCPL, employees receiving task-related information from their immediate superiors reported higher satisfaction levels. Self-disclosure's role in trust-building should not be dismissed; superiors risking task-related self-disclosure may be investing in higher trust levels.

Frequent contact is a relatively new topic. The few telecommuter studies available show that contact frequency does impact job satisfaction, but no quantitative measures have been established to date. Anecdotal evidence points to a minimum once-weekly interval.[15] Additionally, studies on exclusive e-mail contact have shown it to be insufficient and frustrating. Face-to-face contact has repeatedly been shown to be the preferred medium for most subordinates.[16]

In general, WCPL's satisfaction level appear enviable. Additional work may be undertaken to increase cross-shift contact, and to continue team management training. Interventions may be taken on a branch-by-branch basis, but administrators should be aware that once satisfaction programs are begun, employees are highly aware of whether or not the promised changes occur. When promised but not delivered, satisfaction levels have dropped to lower than baseline measures. Any changes considered should be planned with the full knowledge and participation of all involved. This decreases organizations' chances of moving in well-intentioned but misguided directions. It also increases the level of buy-in employees experience before, during, and after any organizational development program.

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