Understanding Workplace Relationships - With Special Reference to
Superior-Subordinate Relationship – An Important Dimension
Having Impact On The Success, Growth And Performance of the
Employees And Organization

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Abstract - Workplace relationship is a very vital phenomenon at the workplace. The relationship between a leader & his subordinates can have a major impact on the performance of the employees. Positive relationships can take the shape of varied types of exchanges between a leader & his subordinates. A positive exchange, which may include behaviors like, discussing work related problems, involvement in the decision making process, availability of the leader at any time when required etc.—can have a positive impact on the performance of the employees.

Good managers recognize that a relationship with a boss involves mutual dependence and that, if it is not managed well, they cannot be effective in their jobs. They also recognize that the boss-subordinate relationship is not like the one between a parent and a child, in that the burden for managing the relationship should not and cannot fall entirely on the boss. Bosses are only human, their wisdom and maturity are not always greater than their subordinates. Effective managers see managing the relationship with the boss as part of their job. As a result, they take time and energy to develop a relationship that is consonant with both persons' styles and assets and that meets the most critical needs of each.

Keywords: Workplace; Workplace relationship; Conscientious leader; Blended friendship.

I. INTRODUCTION

Workplace relationships are unique interpersonal relationships with important implications for the individuals in those relationships and the organizations in which the relationships exist and develop. Various Studies conducted in this respect have indicated that workplace relationships directly affect a worker's ability to work & produce. As workers are spending on an average around 50 hours a week in the workplace, these long work hours are said to result in the formation of workplace friendships. These relationships can have positive outcomes as regards the performance of the employees.

According to Gordon and Hartman, spending so much time at work, leads to development of friendships among people at the workplace. They observe further, individuals are likely to have more workplace friendships than any other kind of relationship in the workplace. Friendship has been defined as, a voluntary interdependence between two persons over time, that is intended to facilitate social-emotional goals of the participants, and may involve varying types and degrees of companionship, intimacy, affection and mutual assistance.

II. LITERATURE SURVEY

Numerous explanations for understanding the nature of superior-subordinate relationships are available in the leadership literature. Although these arguments differ, a common feature is that each view is based implicitly on particular levels of analysis. A study was carried out to conceptualize alternative perspectives of superior-subordinate relationships by explicitly incorporating multiple levels of analysis in hypothesis generation and testing. Data from matched reports of superiors and subordinates were analyzed using within and Between Analysis (WABA). Results from a sample of retail sales associates and their supervisors indicated that on the dimensions of attention, job latitude, satisfaction with performance, and job congruence, superior-subordinate relationships differed from one interpersonal relationship to another. In a sample of insurance agents and their managers, however, findings indicated that there were individual differences on these
dimensions for superiors and subordinates. Implications of these different views of superior-subordinate relationships for future leadership has motivated author to further work on the topic.

Data gathered from employees in a variety of organizations during several studies indicate that differential treatment from a supervisor to his or her subordinates influences coworker communication by (a) leading coworkers to talk about the differential treatment itself, and (b) influencing the nature of the communication relationships among the coworkers. Data also provide insight into issues of perceived organizational fairness, indicating that fairness perceptions are open socially constructed by work group members through discourse.

Few studies have examined the phenomenon of jealousy in the workplace, studies by Miner (1989,1990) exploring the consequences of workplace jealousy support the notion that a supervisor’s differential treatment of subordinates may affect communication among those subordinates. Miner surveyed 278 people and asked them to report the extent to which workers either observed a “jealous event” (an event eliciting the feeling of jealousy from an individual) at their workplace or were directly involved in such an event, and the manner in which the jealous person responded behaviorally to these events. Of special interest to the present research is Miner’s finding that situations eliciting jealousy were seen to arise from “the distribution of tangible and intangible benefits provided in the workplace” and were primarily caused by managerial actions. Thus Miner’s (1989,1990) research suggests that differential treatment from a superior to his or her subordinates may lead some group members to feel jealous of the target peer or peers, leading them to talk to their coworkers about the situation. This research does not provide information, however, regarding the nature of such communication or why coworkers discuss differential treatment with one another. Such information is necessary to gain a fuller understanding of the relationship between differential treatment and coworker communication. Differential treatment may also affect coworker communication in more general ways. Education literature regarding the teacher’s pet phenomenon in the classroom suggests that differential treatment from a teacher to particular students has a strong influence on the relationships among the members of the class? Research suggests that differential superior-subordinate treatment may influence coworker communication in two basic ways. First, it may lead coworkers to talk about the differential treatment itself. Second, it may affect the general nature of coworker communication relationships.

The literature described above also draws attention to an issue that has received little attention from LMX researchers—fairness in the workplace. Miner (1990), for example, suggests that one response to differential treatment is talk among coworkers regarding the unfairness of the situation. Fairness in organizations has typically been investigated from equity theory and social exchange perspectives. Similarly, LMX theory views the superior-subordinate relationship as a type of social exchange relationship. Through the exchange of resources, the nature of the superior-subordinate relationship evolves. According to equity theory, a social exchange relationship is deemed to be equitable when the ratio of one’s inputs to outcomes is equal to the comparison other’s ratio of inputs to outcomes (Adams, 1965). Research on equity theory typically considers the extent to which members of an exchange relationship evaluate the equity of that relationship by comparing one’s own ratio of inputs to outcomes with the ratio of the relationship partner.

Vecchio, Griffeth, and Hom (1986) examined the relationship between LMX theory and subordinate evaluations of equity within the work group. They identified significant negative correlations between members’ perceptions regarding the quality of their relationships with their supervisor and their ratings of inequity with respect to the administration of pay, rules, and workspace; those informants who perceived themselves as being in the supervisor’s in-group perceived less inequity with respect to pay, work rules, and workspace than those subordinates who perceived themselves as being members of the supervisor’s out-group. Thus these researchers identified a link between differential superior-subordinate relations and subordinates’ perceptions of equity. Some theorists have suggested that the social context may affect one’s perceptions of fairness and equity in the organization (e.g., Ambrose, Harland, & Kulick, 1991; Ambrose & Kulick, 1988). Ambrose, Harland, and Kulick (1991) further argue that information regarding the outcomes of other individuals is an important attribute of the social context.

III. IMPACT OF WORKPLACE RELATIONSHIP

According to Lee and Park, friendships that develop in the workplace may be called blended friendships which can have a positive impact on an employee’s work performance & productivity. According to them, workplace friendships can lead to:

1) More cohesive work groups;
2) More satisfied and committed employees;
3) Greater productivity;
4) Greater goal attainment;
5) Increased positive feelings about the organization;
6) Better job performance;
7) Prevention of employee turnover and employee desire to leave the company.

However, it has been observed that, although workplace friendships tend to have a positive impact on the employee’s overall productivity and attitude toward the job, they can also lead to unhealthy competition, envy, gossiping and distraction from work related activities as they may result in more closely woven, emotional, and occasionally physical relationship, that goes beyond a typical co-worker relationship.

IV. SUPERIOR-SUBORDINATE RELATIONSHIP

However, as regards working relationships at the workplace, one of the most important relationships is, the relationship between the Superior & his subordinates. Maintaining the relationship between superior and subordinate will differ greatly, depending on the expectations of the individual parties. Some will settle for nothing less than a close friendship with their superior, others may be just focused on maintaining a professional relationship, while those may not get along with their superiors may be focused on just maintaining a civil relationship.

The relationship between a leader & his subordinates is thought to have a major impact on the performance of the employees. Positive relationships can take the shape of varied types of exchanges between a leader & his subordinates. A positive exchange, which may include behaviors, like, discussing work related problems, involvement in the decision making process, availability of the leader at any time when required etc.—can have a positive impact on the performance of the employees. An effective leader recognizes each person as an individual with different values & beliefs. He recognizes that influences, such as, childhood experiences, ethnic background & religious heritage determine an individual’s personality, values & beliefs. He realises that because of these differences, action taken by him may affect one member differently than the other. Thus, while the action taken may have a positive effect on one person, it may have a negative effect on the other. As a conscientious leader, a manager therefore has to strive to identify & consider these differences before deciding upon a course of action.

By considering these individual differences, a manager can avoid many misunderstandings & can have a more positive influence on his subordinates. They may thus respect him as a person who supports equal opportunity for all & will be inspired & motivated to contribute their maximum efforts in the interest of the organization. The unusual relationship between superior and subordinates requires specific maintenance strategies since some typical ones, like avoidance, are unacceptable. There are four common types of relationship maintenance strategies for this variation of relationship. First there are informal interactions, such as joking and non-work related conversations that emphasize creating a friendship. There are also formal interactions, such as politeness and respect for the superior’s authority, that help to create a professional superior-subordinate relationship. There are also tactics to appear impressive to the superior, such as a hesitancy to deliver bad news or being enthusiastic. The final relationship maintenance strategy includes open discussion about the relationship with the superior, including explicitly telling them how they want to be treated in the workplace.

It is worth noting in this connection the way Lao-tsu, a Chinese Philosopher describes a good leader. Lao-tsu describes a good leader as one:

“Who walks beside his followers & his existence or presence is not needed by them at every point of time to contribute their might. In other words, the followers work willingly and contribute to the success of the organization.”

According to Lao-tsu:
The best leader is one whom, people honour & praise;
The next best is one whom, they fear;
And the next best is one, whom people hate

According to him, when the best leader’s work is done, people say:

“We did it ourselves”.

V. EXPECTATIONS OF THE SUBORDINATES FROM THEIR LEADER/SUPERIOR

A leader is expected by his followers to establish his leadership by example. They expect him to set standards for himself that he expects from his subordinates. Some of the personal qualities & traits expected of & common to all successful leaders include:

1) They believe that, anything worth doing is worth only, when done in the right manner. They know, a lack of high performance standards results
in sloppy work & sloppy work costs additional time, money & materials.

2) They have the moral courage to stand up for what is right, even in the face of popular disagreement.

3) They have the courage to accept blame when at fault.

4) They are dedicated towards their work & the organization.

5) They set an example that is above reproof. In the areas of conduct, appearance etc. they show qualities, which subordinates may wish to adopt for themselves.

6) They have an inward desire that motivates them to excel. They are also willing to act without orders & to offer well considered recommendations for improvement.

7) They remain faithful to the chain of command. They know that they cannot expect loyalty from their subordinates without being loyal to both their subordinates & their superiors.

8) They feel accountable for their actions which forms the corner stone of leadership. They take responsibility for their decisions, whether good or bad & are prepared to face the consequences for those decisions.

To lead, it is said, one must be a good follower. This is so, because, without followers, there can be no leadership. It must also be understood that, followership & leadership are not opposites. This is because; leaders perform both roles at the same time. A leadership role & a followership role thus can be, & usually are performed simultaneously. Thus, while providing guidance to the worker, a supervisor is functioning as a leader, at the same time, while dealing with higher level supervisor, a leader must assume the role of a follower. Followership & leadership skills are similar in many ways, as, whether one is a leader or a follower, he has to strive hard to create harmony, togetherness & a sense of belonging within his particular work group.

VI. IMPORTANT DIMENSIONS FOR EFFECTIVE SUPERIOR-SUBORDINATE RELATIONSHIP

1) TRUST--Trust is the foundation of all successful interpersonal relationships, both personal & business. Trust is the confidence or belief a person feels toward a particular person or a group. Trust is thus an essential leadership ingredient that binds the human relationship into an effective working partnership.

2) COMMUNICATION--Effective communication in the workplace, whether in the spoken or written form is essential for accomplishment of various tasks. Without work place communication, nothing can be accomplished. Instructions could not be given; equipment & supplies could not be ordered; progress could not be measured or services could not be delivered to public. The five functions of management—planning, organizing, staffing, leading & controlling are all dependent on communication. In fact, in surveys of highly successful managers, the ability to communicate effectively has been identified as the most important skill a manager needs for success.

In a study conducted by John Anderson and Dale Level, the following were cited to be benefits of effective downward communication:

- Better coordination
- Improved individual performance through the development of intelligent participation
- Improved morale
- Improved consumer relations
- Improved industrial relations.

In order for downward communication to be effective, the superior should remain respectful and concise when giving orders, they should make sure the subordinate clearly understands instructions, and they should give recognition for admirable performance.

Upward communication is the process of transmitting information from the bottom levels of an organization to the top levels. It includes judgments, estimations, propositions, complaints, grievance, appeals, reports, etc. from subordinates to superiors. It is very important because it serves as the response on the success of downward communication. Management comes to know how well its policies, plans, strategies and objectives are adopted by those working at lower levels of the organization. Upward information flow can be very beneficial for an organization, especially when it is encouraged by the management. When a manager is open to upward communication, they help foster cooperation, gain support, and reduce frustration.

The channel of communication is a very significant variable in the upward communication process. Channel refers to the means of which messages are transported. It can be face-to-face, over the telephone, written, etc. Communication channel affects subordinate's overall satisfaction with upward communication. Certain channels are easily ignored, which can leave subordinates less satisfied with upward communication. A subordinate who is satisfied with his/her upward
communication will be less apprehensive about communicating upward than a subordinate who is unsatisfied with his/her upward communication.

Employees who have an open communication with their superiors have been found to be more satisfied with their jobs than those who do not have this. Openness in communication requires both openness in message sending and openness in message receiving between superiors and subordinates. Achieving openness in message sending requires complete honesty whether the news is good or bad. Certain types of messages facilitate open communication better. Supervisory messages are preferable for both superiors and subordinates when they are encouraging or reciprocating, rather than responses that are either neutral or negative. Openness in message receiving requires a willingness to listen to the message without jumping to conclusions even when the message is not what you wanted to hear. An open communication relationship differs from a closed by the reactions and types of feedback given, not the message itself. Subordinates in a closed communication relationship with their superior are more likely to respond negatively to the superior's feedback than those who have more open communication with their superior.

3) Workplace--A psychologically healthy workplace is one in which strong values such as integrity & respect guide workplace relations. Such organizations promote accountability across all levels of the organization for maintaining positive working relationships. The American Psychological Association has outlined five elements for creating a psychologically healthy work place, which include:

- Ensuring employee involvement;
- Supporting work/family balance;
- Recognizing employees for their contribution;
- Promoting employee growth & development; &
- Encouraging healthy, safe practices at work & at home.

4) PRECISION & CLARITY--Precision & clarity are the keys to a healthy & productive superior-subordinate relationship. Precision means, saying exactly what one intends to say, while clarity means, saying it in such a way that, it will be understood by the person receiving the message. One barrier to clarity is vocabulary as, If a person is not familiar with the meaning of the words used, the intended message is lost.

5) ETHICS--The word ethics is defined as, the body of moral principles or values governing or distinctive of a particular culture or group or a complex of moral precepts held or rules of conduct followed by an individual. Ethics is a personal choice & how workplace ethics are governed depends upon, the personal ethics of those who are in authority over that workplace & also those, who work in that environment.

6) APPROACHABILITY -- Approachability refers to a situation where the subordinate feels free to approach the superior. This creates a healthy environment at the workplace & in turn, results in successful attainment of organizational goals & objectives.

EPILOGUE

Workplace relationship is a very vital phenomenon at the workplace, particularly, the relationship between a leader/superior & his subordinates. A conscientious leader/superior can have a major impact on the performance of his subordinates. To get maximum performance out of his subordinates, he therefore has to set an example before them which they can emulate. An effective leader recognizes each person as an individual with different values & beliefs. He recognizes that influences, such as, childhood experiences, ethnic background & religious heritage determine an individual’s personality, values & beliefs. Because of these differences, action taken on the part of a manager may affect one employee differently than the other. The action taken may thus have a positive impact on one person & a negative impact on another. As a conscientious leader, a manager therefore has to strive to identify & consider these differences before deciding upon a course of action.

By considering these individual differences, a manager can avoid many misunderstandings & have a more positive influence on his subordinates. They may thus respect him as a person who supports equal opportunity for all & contribute maximum to the development of an organization. He has thus to set a standard of performance before them because the subordinates always expect the leader/superior to establish his leadership by example. Gaining the trust of the subordinates is a guarantee for the leader/superior to get their willing & whole hearted cooperation in work at the workplace. This also ensures productive work on the part of the employees, so essential in today’s fiercely competitive environment.

VII. REFERENCES:


