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Leader/Follower Relationship of Academic Administrators at a Southern Comprehensive

University Undergoing Consolidation: A Mixed-Methods Investigation

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Abstract

This explanatory sequential mixed-methods study examines the social unit of the
leader/follower relationships of superior and subordinate higher education administrators at a
southern comprehensive university undergoing consolidation (merger). The problem
presented in this study is that a large percentage of higher education administrators lack the
knowledge or fail to implement leadership strategies to engage their employees during times
of organizational change (Johnson, 2015). Utilizing the theories and factors of
transformational leadership (Burns 1978, Bass 1985) and employee engagement (Kahn 1990,
Schaufeli & Bakker 2006), this research project analyzes perceived leader behavior during
organizational change. The quantitative findings produced positive significant correlations
between supervisor use of transformational leadership behaviors and employee engagement
during consolidation. Qualitative data during this study described an environment where
employee turnover was higher than normal, morale was low, and organizational trust was low.
This study points to opportunities for leaders to employ transformational leadership and its
factors of inspirational motivation and idealized influence during change. This study indicates
that these tactics predict an increase in the employee engagement factors of employee work
absorption (loss of time/absorbed in work) and work dedication levels during a change event.

Problem

Higher education is currently facing complex challenges from internal and external
forces at every level of the system (Drew, 2010; Reynolds, Lundry, Ladd, Greenberg, Selingo,
Lytle, & Gould, 2016). Due to high frequencies of change facing the academy, Senge (2012)
states it is essential for higher educational adminsitrators to lead to establish nimble, flexible,
and responsive organizations to address emerging challenges such as mergers, changes in

government policy, and technology advancements. Johnson (2015) states that many higher education administrators and directors either do not lead with or do not know how to lead with strategies that generate flexible organizations that are responsive to change. Therefore, this research investigated the leader/follower dyad during organizational change at a regional university.

The central focus of the study was to develop an in-depth understanding of the relationship between superior/subordinate during a merger of regional public universities.

Research Questions:

1. What is the relationship between perceived superior transformational leadership factors, and subordinate employee engagement factors at a comprehensive regional southern university?

2. How do the supervisor's leadership behaviors affect the employee engagement of "their" followers?

Definition of Terms

Absorption: A factor of employee engagement where an employee becomes engrossed in one's work, and work can be accompanied with a feeling of time-flies (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2003).

Dedication: A factor of employee engagement that can be described as an employee who experiences inspiration, pride, enthusiasm, and a sense of significance from the work he/she/they perform (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2003).

Employee (Work) Engagement: Employee engagement is a multi-tiered variable to measure an employee's absorption, dedication, and vigor (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2003).

Idealized Influence: Idealized influence is a factor of transformational leadership that engages participants in a collective interests, collective purpose, and sense of sacrificing for the group (Zdaniuk & Bobocel, 2015).

Individual Consideration: A factor of transformational leadership that characterizes the leader's developmental orientation towards the follower (Bass, 1985).

Inspirational Motivation: A transformational leadership factor that is communicated by continually communicating elevated expectations utilizing emotional appeals to motivate employees to become committed to a shared vision (Alahmad, 2016).

Intellectual Stimulation: A factor of transformational leadership that is characterized by the leader arousing the creativity and imagination to stimulate solutions that face the employee (Bass, 1985).

Transformational Leadership: A multi-factor leadership process where a superior engages with subordinates and creates a connection that raises the motivation and morality in both the leader and the follower (Burns, 1978).

Aim

The purpose of this explanatory sequential mixed-methods study was to examine the leader/follower relationships of higher education administrators and their staff during a university merger. Utilizing Burns' (1978) and Bass' (1985) theory of transformational leadership and the theory of employee engagement conceptualized by Kahn (1990) and operationalized by Schaufeli and Bakker (2006), this study investigates the correlation between leader behaviors and follower engagement during an organizational change period.

Significance

This study is significant because it sought to discover if higher education leaders were leading in a manner that created nimble organizations that were quick to respond to emerging challenges during a period of organizational change. The theories of transformational leadership (and its sub-factors) and employee engagement (and its sub-factors) were selected to analyze the leader/follower relationships during university consolidation.

Incorporating Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1954), transformational leadership is a leadership style that utilizes organizational purpose, leadership vision, and employee growth as a foundation to engage employees and raise the maturity of their needs and wants (as cited in Bass, 1985). Transformational leaders utilize the four factors to lead followers; inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, individual consideration, idealized influence. When understanding the leader/follower dynamic during organizational change, it is essential to understand how leader behaviors correlate with follower behaviors.

To understand how followers responded to leadership during a university consolidation, employee engagement and its factors were selected. The most commonly used definition of employee (work) engagement was proposed by Schaufeli and Bakker (2003) as

"an active, positive work-related state that is characterized by vigor, work dedication, and work absorption" (as cited in Bakker, 2011 p. 265). Therefore, quantitative and qualitative data were collected to further understand the leader/follower dyad during a university consolidation (merger).

Research Findings

Mid-level academic administrators (Deans, Associate Vice Presidents, Directors and Managers) of a university undergoing consolidation with another university were invited to participate in the study. Participants were selected by utilizing human resource data to find all supervisors at the university with a FLSA status of exempt. Individuals such as coaches, and executive cabinent members were removed. First the quantitative survey took place. Survey results and analysis were used to guide the qualitative data analysis. Overall, the study captured six formal interviews, eight informal interviews, 73 surveys, and existing documents including employee recomendations from a change workshop and internal consolidation communications.

Quantitative data was collected from a survey consisting of a combination of the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (Bass 1985) and the UTRECHT work engagement scale (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2003). Quantitative data was analyzed using the Pearson Correlation Coefficient, T-Test, ANOVAs, simple linear regression.

Table 1: Pearson Correlation Coefficient Results of Variables

Variables	1 TL	2 IM	3 IC	4 II	5 IS	6 EE	7 D	8 V	9 A	10 TAL	11 CR	12 ME
1.Transformational Leadership	1											
2. Inspirational Motivation	.92**	1										
3. Individual Consideration	.85**	.83**	1									
4. Idealized Influence	.97**	.91**	.80**	1								
5. Intellectual Stimulation	.88**	.78**	.69**	.82**	1							
6. Employee Engagement	.39**	.37**	.27*	.34**	.30*	1						
7. Dedication Range	.28*	.29*	.18	.26*	.19	.91**	1					
8. Vigor Range	.21	.21	.09	.20	.13	.85**	.85**	1				
9. Absorption Range	.30**	.23*	.18	.28*	.29*	.73**	.62**	.62**	1			
10. Transactional Leadership	.48**	.40**	.48**	.42**	.50**	.03	.03	.02	.04	1		
11. Contingent Reward	.73**	.68**	.74**	.66**	.71**	.13	.13	.05	.01	.76**	1	
12. Mgmt. by Exception	-.15	-.18	-.06	-.20	-.11	-.03	-.03	-.01	-.05	.48**	.06	1

Quantitative Findings:

- Transformational leadership was significantly correlated with employee engagement (r = .39, p<.01).;
- Transformational leadership was significantly correlated with both work absorption (r =.30, p<.01) and work dedication (r =.28, p<.05) individually;
- Transformational leadership was not significantly correlated with vigor;
- Transactional leadership was not correlated with employee engagement;
- Employee engagement was significantly correlated with all of four factors of transformational leadership (idealized influence (r =.35, p<.01), inspirational motivation (r =.37, p<.01), intellectual stimulation (r =.30, p<.05), and individual consideration (r =.27, p<.05)).

A sub-set of the total population was sent an email asking if they would like to participate in formal interviews. Of the responses, six individuals were selected. The interviewed population included one manager, one associate vice president, one associate dean, and three directors. Further, the population was composed of four females, two males, two African Americans, and four Caucasians. Interviewees were asked about their leader's behaviors during consolidation, their experiences during consolidation, and examples and definitions of leadership and engagement.

Qualitative data was analyzed using the constant comparative method (Creswell, 2013). The researcher was guided from both the quantitative analysis and emerging codes from the qualitative analysis to ask follow-up questions during forthcoming interviews. When

totaled, twenty-one codes emerged and were grouped into the larger themes of transformational leadership, definitions, and higher education leadership. Further, additional existing documents and informal interviews were used to triangulate the findings.

Qualitative Findings:

- Leaders, who used inspirational motivation and discussed the mission and the future vision of the college with faculty and staff were able to address issues such as employee anxiety;
- Leaders who utilized individual consideration were able to build/strengthen teams and cultures that relied on and trusted one another during consolidation;
- Setting examples and modeling behaviors allowed leaders the opportunity to lead in a consistent manner and maintain a level of trust with employees during a time of ambiguity;
- Leaders with issues such as communication inconsistencies, ambiguity, and lack of inspirational motivation (providing the mission and visions) contributed to a lack of trust among followers;
- Employees stated that during consolidation leadership miscommunicated issues and were not transparent, leading to employees to have a lack of trust, greater turn-over/intention to leave, and employee anxiety during consolidation.

Conclusion

The explanatory sequential mixed-methods investigation of leader/follower relationships of mid-level academic administrators at a university undergoing consolidation yielded significant positive relationships between transformational leadership and employee engagement factors. Seventy-three mid-level higher education staff members completed a survey combining the Multi-factor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ) and the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES). Participants who perceived their supervisors possessing idealized influence, inspirational motivation, idealized influence and individual consideration reported having higher levels of employee engagement. Moreover, the research points to leaders who used inspirational motivation, communicating the mission and vision of the organization frequently (Bass, 1985), and idealized influence, leading with enthusiasm and modeling positive behaviors (Woodcock, 2012), had a significant positive relationship with employees becoming absorbed and dedicated to their work during organizational change.

Additionally, qualitative data were used to provide depth and richness to the study. Interviewees and existing documents point to an organizational climate where reliable change

communication was lacking, vision setting was lacking, transparency of consolidation was lacking, and organizational ambiguity was high. Participants stated that employees were experiencing a lack of reward, recognition, and acknowledgement for their efforts. Further, mentions of a reduction of trust in leadership and higher employee turnover were discussed.

Recommendations

The researcher recommends that leaders utilize a transformational approach during times of high organizational ambiguity such as consolidation. This recommendation is based upon significant result indicating a positive relationship between transformational leadership and employee engagement. Further, a strong relationship between inspirational motivation and employee engagement was discovered. Therefore, it is recommended that that leaders spend ample time painting a picture of the future and providing employees with a vision during high ambiguous times when possible. Further, the results also point to leaders needing to lead by example (idealized influence) and model desired behaviors. Overall, a sense of trust was a key emerging variable that emerged. Leaders who spoke with reliable specific information and provided a vision for the future reduced uncertainty and increased trust during this change event.

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Biography

Greg Wurth, EdD, is a 2018 graduate of Drexel's educational doctorate with an emphasis in higher education. With over a decade's experience in the academy, Dr. Wurth has had the opportunity to work for many colleges and universities in a variety of roles. Currently, Greg is the Director of Workforce and Community Development at Florida State College at Jacksonville where he works with local industries and non-profits to develop educational solutions to meet the needs of the expanding First Coast economy. His research interests include higher education leadership and workforce training programs. Dr. Wurth possesses a Bachelor of Science in Public Relations and Master of Science in Organizational Communication from Murray State University, as well as a Doctorate in Education from Drexel University. Greg, and his beautiful wife, Karri, live in Saint Johns, FL with their two intelligent and kind daughters Isabella and Bailey.