

Assessing the Relationships Between Person-Organization Fit, Moral Philosophy, and the Motivation to Lead

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ABSTRACT

A “fit” filter may be creating ethical homogeneity in organizational leadership. A first step in exploring this phenomenon is to determine if P-O fit is related to the will to pursue (or avoid) leading. This paper summarizes the rationale for a dissertation study that is currently being conducted to explore this question. As low P-O fit decreases commitment, and a new motivation to lead construct is based on a model of commitment, it is possible that low P-O fit also decreases motivation to lead. It is also proposed that high ethical relativism may decrease the effect of low P-O fit on the motivation to lead. Finally, idealists are more committed to their professions. As taking a leadership position requires leaving a profession, idealism may decrease the motivation to lead. This also suggests a possible negative relationship between person-job fit and motivation to lead for professionals and others.

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Rationale for Proposed Study

We need to motivate leaders who will create healthy and productive workplaces. If those with a values mismatch (and especially those who are not willing to compromise their values) are not motivated to lead, the leadership pool may become homogenous enough to create a negative effect. A first step to determining if a “fit” filter is creating ethical homogeneity is to determine if P-O fit is any way related to the will to pursue (or avoid) leading. This paper summarizes the rationale for a dissertation study that is currently being conducted to explore this question.

P-O Fit and Motivation to Lead

Much leadership research focuses on leader effectiveness. However, the question of what motivates a person to lead remains largely unanswered. This is an important question, as the person who desires to move into a leadership position may not necessarily be an effective leader. A link between motivation to lead and performance has not been found, and it cannot be assumed that those who have the will to lead are those who have the ability to lead. It is also not safe to assume that low motivation to lead indicates low ability to lead.

One factor that may minimize motivation to lead is person-organization fit (P-O fit). Low P-O fit¹ has been shown to decrease commitment (Cable & Judge, 1996;

¹ For brevity, the term P-O fit will be used to identify subjective supplementary P-O fit (values fit measured by asking the individual to assess).

Chatman, 1991; McConnell, 2003; O'Reilly, Chatman, & Caldwell, 1991; Silverthorne 2004; Van Vianen, 2000; Westerman & Cyr, 2004). As Chan and Drasgow (2001) developed a motivation to lead construct based on a model of commitment, it seems plausible that low P-O fit could reduce motivation to lead.

P-O Fit, Relativism and Motivation to Lead

Individual characteristics may moderate the relationship between P-O fit and motivation to lead. For example, when P-O fit is low, individuals who believe in universal moral rules (Forsyth, 1980) may be less motivated to lead than those who have a relative moral philosophy. This suggestion parallels a previous study where ethical conflict was related to lower organizational commitment when relativism was low (Peterson, 2003). However, ethical conflict was not related to commitment when relativism was high.

Idealism and Motivation to Lead

Shaub, Finn and Munter (1993) found that idealists, or people who believe a solution can always be found where no one is harmed (Forsyth, 1980), were more committed to their professions. Because taking a leadership position may require leaving a profession, idealism may decrease the motivation to lead. This also suggests a possible negative relationship between person-job fit and motivation to lead for professionals. A person with high person-job fit may be reluctant to move into a leadership position.

Summary

This phenomenon, if present, may be creating a situation where the values of leaders are less diverse than is desirable. In a study of women and leadership, Billing and Avesson (as cited in Ivarsson & Ekehammar, 2001) point out that "organizational selection and socialization processes seem to lead to a mainstreaming of candidates where proposed beneficial women-specific attributes are lost" (p. 16). Whether systematically excluded or self-excluded, those with low P-O fit may be able to contribute to the ethical diversity and success of the organization.

Related Theory

Motivation to Lead

Chan's (1999) motivation to lead construct, which is based on Meyer and Allen's model of organizational commitment, has three dimensions: (a) affective-identity (liking to lead), (b) social-normative (feeling a duty to lead), and (c) noncalculative (making a rational decision to lead). A person low in noncalculative motivation to lead would lead only if they see a net benefit. They consider all types of costs, including non-economic ones. Someone high the noncalculative dimension would lead even if there were no net benefit, and they disregard the costs (although it should be noted that they may not be aware of the costs). Noncalculative motivation to lead will be looked at closely in the dissertation study, as Chan suggests that the choice to lead is a social dilemma, where, because benefits or costs are inordinately high, an imbalance is created in the leadership pool.

Motivation to Lead and Situation

Kabacoff (2002) found that leadership requirements are driven by context, and that emotional drivers must be matched to these requirements. For example, someone who thrives on affiliative experiences would not be a good match for a position requiring dominant, controlling behaviors.

Richter (2001) found strong links in teachers between financial interests and the motivation to move to leadership positions. She questioned the financial motive, and the structure that compels it, by positing that it may not attract people who are motivated for reasons that will make them effective. Jacobson (2002) found that academics believed their quality of life would be impacted adversely, and that the higher pay of moving up was not worth this sacrifice. Many said they were happy with research and teaching, and they were not interested in the administrative aspects of higher-level jobs. They preferred to move up in their fields.

Whetstone (2001) found that police officers who did not pursue promotion cited a discrepancy between the effort required and the pay. They feared a loss of schedule and assignment flexibility and did not want to “lose touch with the streets” (p. 155). They also distrusted their managers and the selection process itself.

Howard and Wilson (1982) contrasted leadership studies from the 1950s and 1970s. In the 1970s sample, the motivation to lead was significantly reduced, there was much less interest in dominating others, and expectations regarding work life were much lower. Howard and Wilson did not find a desire to follow in the 1970s sample, but rather, a rejection of the leadership role and the organizational hierarchy. They attributed these differences to a problem with fit between organizational and personal values.

Papavero (1999) found that software engineers considered the costs associated with leading to be too high. These included increased emotional and time demands, and pressure to violate principles (lay people off, lie to their people, make unreasonable and unfair demands of their people). This may indicate that the engineers had a low level of noncalculative motivation to lead. It may also indicate that idealism caused them to avoid affecting individuals negatively. The engineers also valued people first, but summed up the organization’s values as “success at all cost,” indicating a possible low level of P-O fit and a less relative moral philosophy.

Several of the parallels between software engineers, educators, academics, and police officers are striking. All of these professionals would forfeit their chosen profession if they accepted a promotion. Idealism might explain their reluctance to do so. They would also lose a large investment in their profession and this cost may have affected their decision. These studies reveal that employees are self-selecting away from leadership positions. This may be occurring for a variety of reasons, but central themes appear to be values incongruence and idealism.

Conclusion

Several theories propose that fit increases over time (for example, Schneider’s [1987] attraction-selection-attrition or ASA, and Ponemon’s [1992] studies of the effect of

selection-socialization on the ethics of auditors). However, it is possible that employees with low P-O fit remain with their organization for a variety of reasons related to embeddedness (Harman, Lee, Mitchell, Felps, & Owens, 2007). Further, they may remain with the organization and function in informal (and less influential) leadership roles, such as internal networkers (Senge, 1995) or tempered radicals (Meyerson, 1995). In practice, identifying these employees and encouraging their participation would make a contribution to the organization that includes increased diversity of values. For theory extension, identifying some situational factors that relate to motivation to lead is a first step in building a situational model of the motivation to lead.

This study may make other contributions to leadership theory. Another researcher has proposed that those with poor P-O fit may self-select away from leadership (Nicholson, 2005). If the present study finds that low P-O fit is related to low motivation to lead, some support would be given to this theory. Ashforth and Anand (2003) proposed that those with low P-O fit might be systematically excluded from leadership positions. If this proposition were to be tested, the present study could suggest a way to determine if self-exclusion is occurring, rather than, or in addition to, systemic exclusion.

The identification of those who avoid leadership (or are excluded) in their current organization, but possess leadership ability, could bring rich information that could be used to make positive changes in the organization. Also, those outside the dominant culture may be better able to question and extend the organization's values to make positive change. It may be beneficial to find ways to encourage their contributions. With a diversity of values in leadership, we may be better able to work together to balance ethical strengths and weaknesses in each other and create more ethically resilient organizations.

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