Shifting the Lens: On Considering Others' Perceptions of an Employee's (Mis)fit

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"I just don't think this is the best fit for you."

By the look on his face, it was apparent that he did not feel the same way; in fact, I think he was in shock. From his perspective, this was a match made in heaven. The flexible job schedule we provided allowed him to be involved in weekend activities, which was important enough for him to mention during the interview process. He was proud of his lone-wolf reputation and enjoyed that his teammates generally left him alone. And his earnings over the first six months of employment were nearly double what he had made in the previous nine months at his former job. Yet from my perspective, the indicators of poor fit were too numerous to ignore. The way he interacted with customers resulted in too many lost sales, even after extensive mentoring and coaching. Increasingly, he spent his breaks alone, particularly after blowing up at his teammates about having to work several evenings a few months back. And his insistence on pushing certain brands over others was contrary to our company's philosophy that educating consumers provided the most long-term value. In this case, it didn't matter what he thought of his own fit. As managing partner, it was my perception of his (mis)fit that counted and ultimately resulted in his search for a new job.

As a community of scholars, we know a lot about different ways that employees achieve fit with their work environments, specific factors upon which employees' perceptions of fit are based, important attitudinal and behavioral outcomes associated with fit and fit perceptions, and the mechanisms underlying those relationships (see Kristof-Brown & Guay, 2011 for an excellent review). In short, we know quite a lot about how employees view their own fit and why this matters. This research is important and I am happy that we are meeting in this online forum to continue this work. In contrast, however, we know relatively little about what others think about an employee's fit and whether those perceptions matter. The story above provides just one example of why, sometimes, others' perceptions of an employee's fit might be better predictors of certain outcomes than the employee's own perceptions. Further, previous research suggests that 'others' – broadly defined as managers, coworkers, hiring personnel, and others in an employee's work environment – do, indeed, make assessments of an employee's fit with various aspects of the work environment (e.g., Bretz, Rynes, & Gerhart, 1993) and that those assessments can have important implications for work outcomes experienced by the focal employee. For example, recruiters' perceptions of job candidates' fit is one of the strongest predictors of eventual hiring decisions (Cable & Judge, 1997). After hiring, upward mobility is as much a function of managers' perceptions of employees' fit with the organization as it is a function of employees' performance on the job (e.g., Hoobler, Wayne, & Lemmon, 2009). Aside from a few notable studies, though, we have yet to fully consider the factors implicated in others' assessments of an employee's fit, the implications of these perceptions for both the focal employee and the perceiver, and how these effects occur. I think that this topic could provide a novel and complementary perspective to the fit literature and help

move our field forward. Although I have more questions than answers, I would like to share just a few ideas about potential fruitful next steps in this area.

On What are Others' Fit Perceptions Based?

Similar to how various "levels" (e.g., organization, group, job, supervisor, vocation; Jansen & Kristof-Brown, 2006) and "content dimensions" (e.g., goals, needs, abilities, values, personality) of the person and environment are implicated in self-assessments of fit, it is likely that others also assess an employee's fit on these different levels and content dimensions. Some of these may be more regularly evoked than others; how one meshes with members of the group or whether abilities are sufficient to perform job duties are probably more often considered than whether an employee has interests commensurate with the supplies of a vocation or similar goals to those of the organization. Regardless of what type of fit is assessed, though, there are likely at least three factors that are somewhat unique to other-assessments of fit relative to those involved in self-assessments.

Although psychological needs and personal values are critical to understanding the experience of fit (Edwards & Shipp, 2007), observers do not have access to these structures commensurate to that of a focal employee (Fiske & Taylor, 1991). Instead, these characteristics can only be inferred through things employees say and do. In this way, then, others' perceptions may be influenced by a number of biases known to affect perceptions of others. For example, any single behavior can have multiple motivations and so errors regarding causal attributions can be made by observers. Consider the example of a coworker who volunteers at a local homeless shelter. Although this could provide evidence that the employee fits well with the organization in terms of altruistic values, a somewhat different assessment might result if it was known that the volunteer hours were court-mandated. Even when fit is assessed on more concrete dimensions such as individual abilities, others' perceptions might be unduly influenced by external factors (e.g., Green & Mitchell, 1979). Moreover, the influence of an employee's behavior on others' fit perceptions introduces the possibility that fit can be feigned (Hewlin, Dumas, & Burnett, in press) or even that misfit is incorrectly inferred because of a misinterpreted flippant remark.

Furthermore, fit perceptions may also be a function of others' preconceptions of what constitutes good or poor fit. For example, Hoobler et al. (2009) found that women were judged by their managers to be poorer fits with organizational values than were men, largely because managers subscribed to the stereotype that women experienced greater distractions and conflict associated with their home lives. Thus, it may be important to consider the role of other stereotypes and biases in shaping others' fit perceptions. Are extraverts prematurely written off for the accounting profession? Are foreigners less likely to be judged as top performers in an organization characterized by nationalistic values? Does the new Mormon employee with a young family really not want to join the happy hour crowd?

Finally, here, it is likely that others also use their own characteristics in assessing employee's fit. When categorizing others, there is a tendency toward using standards that frame the self in a positive light (Beauregard & Dunning, 1998). Thus, if an individual believes that s/he is a (mis)fit and the target employee shares similar characteristics to those used in the self-assessment of fit, it stands to reason that a similar judgment will be

made in assessing the fit of the other. Similarly, it may be that those content dimensions that are used in the self-assessment of fit are the ones that are used to judge the fit of others – to the exclusion of other content dimensions. For example, an observer might feel like a great fit with the organization due to sharing its important values, while colleagues who are perceived to not share those values may be judged to be poor fits. At the same time, those colleagues may also feel like great fits due to the job providing for belongingness needs, a factor that is not as critical in the observer's self-assessment of fit. Understanding how observers' self-assessments of fit are made is, consequently, an important consideration in this line of inquiry.

What Do Others Think (Mis)fits Will Do?

In addition to the preconceptions that people have about what constitutes good/poor fit, it might also be important to consider what people believe good/poor fits think and do. Similar to the idea that people have implicit theories of leadership (e.g., Lord, 1985), it might be interesting to investigate the implicit assumptions people hold about the behavior of those who fit. One of the likely candidates for such an assumption is already widely understood by fit researchers: people who fit are likely to stay; misfits are likely to leave (Schneider, 1987). People have this expectation of themselves so it is reasonable to believe that they expect it of others. Indeed, in a series of interviews I conducted about hypothetical responses associated with incongruence on organizational values, the most frequently cited behavioral response was that employees would quit. Consequently, if it is anticipated that somebody will soon leave, then what should we expect in the interim? Will s/he maintain work effort to avoid involuntary termination or receiving a poor recommendation? Or will greater withdrawal behavior result due to psychological detachment from the organization (e.g., Burris, Detert, & Chiaburu, 2008)? The answers to these questions might help us understand how others' perceptions of an employee's fit contribute to others' behavior toward the focal employee. Indeed, I have previously found, somewhat counterintuitively, that managers are more likely to provide instrumental support to employees who they perceive to be good fits rather than to employees who do not fit and who may be in greater need of this important resource (Vogel, 2011).

An alternative perspective might suggest that people tie some value to being perceived as a misfit. Steve Jobs (Apple, Inc., 1997) heralded misfits as those who are able to change the status quo in organizations because of their unique skills and viewpoints. If misfits are important drivers of creativity (e.g., Jones, Svejenova, Pedersen, & Townley, 2016), then are those with this label more likely to be listened to in some situations? Are they afforded special status within groups and organizations? This, of course, is likely to depend on the specific factor underlying the assessment of misfit; a unique set of skills is apt to bring more value to the team than is an eccentric personality. Ultimately, though, in uncovering the assumptions underlying others' perceptions of fit, we may discover consequences associated with fit perceptions that have yet to be considered.

Do Others' Fit Perceptions Matter?

As discussed above, others' fit perceptions are a critical consideration in important personnel decisions, such as hiring and promotions (e.g., Cable & Judge, 2007; Hoobler et

al., 2009). These types of decisions occur infrequently and, thus, it could be argued that the fit of a focal employee is not regularly salient to others. Yet, even recurrent decisions made by managers may be a function of their perceptions of employee fit. For example, managers' perceptions of employees' demand-abilities fit are likely to impact the allocation of project and work assignments among the members of a unit. When project success and performance is of paramount importance, managers may attempt to ensure an optimal match between employees' abilities and job demands. However, for managers whose objective is to cultivate employees' capabilities, determining where there is comfortable level of misfit may be more appropriate.

The dynamics of personal and working relationships in the workplace may also be a function of fit perceptions. To the extent that one's own performance is dependent on the success of collaboration with others, coworkers' willingness to work with a focal employee may be influenced by the extent to which that employee is perceived to fit. Great personal risk could be incurred in working with somebody whose abilities are perceived to be insufficient to perform the job at hand or whose continued employment is not certain. Relatedly, others' perceptions of an employee's fit may also be important in predicting how an employee is treated by others. If, indeed, there is an implicit assumption that misfits are not likely to be around for the long-term, there may be less enthusiasm toward including that individual in team functions and activities, either formal or informal. Groups often ostracize individuals to protect the long-term viability and cohesiveness of the collective (Robinson, O'Reilly, & Wang, 2013).

Various areas of the management literature are also likely to benefit by considering others' perceptions of an employee's fit. For example, the literature on the socialization process considers employees to be well-adjusted when they are clear about their roles, confident about their ability to do the job, and accepted by others (Bauer, Bodner, Erdogan, Truxillo, & Tucker, 2007). It is interesting that this literature has relied almost exclusively on employees' self-assessments of social acceptance when it might be more appropriate — or at least instrumental — to ask one's coworkers whether s/he is socially integrated. Although self-assessments tell us how employees *feel* at work, other-assessments might be a more valid predictor of the likelihood of employees continuing with the organization in the long term.

Concluding Thoughts

These represent just a few of the thoughts I have had on this topic. Not only could others' assessments of an employee's fit represent a novel area of research, developments in this area may also contribute to a richer understanding of more traditional fit topics. For example, understanding the factors underlying perceptions of another's fit may also shed light on how people assess their own fit with the environment. Feeling like a misfit is quite uncomfortable and has negative consequences for the sense of self (e.g., Leary & Downs, 1995); thus, there is likely an upward bias on self-perceptions of fit, particularly when alternative employment options are limited (Festinger, 1957). Because information about the standing of others is used in self-categorization (Stapel, 2007), insights into the characteristics judged to contribute to others' good versus poor fit might help us triangulate on self-perceptions.

It is also likely that self-perceptions of fit are indirectly influenced by the fit perceptions of others vis-à-vis others' behavior. Being accepted or included by others, the quality of assignments received, or even casual remarks made by a colleague may be cues that carry important meaning for an employee when assessing fit. Indeed, in some cultures, an important prerequisite to feeling like a good fit is perceiving that others share the sentiment (e.g., Chuang, Hsu, Wang, & Judge, 2015). Thus, in pursuing a line of inquiry about others' fit assessments, we may also open new opportunities for a better understanding of how employees experience fit and misfit in organizations today.

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