

Attributes of Immediate Supervisor in Promoting Trust with Employees in a Public Sector Organisation

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Abstract

In the web of human relationships, trust is one of the interconnecting links that sustains ongoing interactions between individuals. In a public sector organisation where the organisational structure is multi-layered, it is a *sine qua non* that immediate supervisors promote trust with employees. In this study, attributes of leaders with the closest proximity to employees are investigated. Eleven items from a previous survey and one from Lines, Selart, Espendal, and Johansen (2005) were included. Parallel analysis indicated that only one component should be extracted by principal component analysis. Internal consistency estimated by Cronbach alpha indicated that two of the items could be deleted. The removal of one other item as it qualitatively describes an interpersonal dynamic between the immediate supervisor and the employee rather than an attribute of the immediate supervisor did not reduce the alpha. The final scale comprised of nine attributes. Results from a posthoc discrimination analysis with "My supervisor and I trust each other" as the criterion item suggested that four attributes would contribute to promoting trust with employees. They were: "provides truthful and honest information"; "provides clear and constructive feedback"; "treats employees with care and respect"; and "asks for my opinion before making decisions that affect my work".

Introduction

Hosmer (1995) and Kramer (1999) reported extensive reviews of the progress towards understanding the concept of 'trust' within organisations. Thus far, it appears that attempts to achieve a commonly accepted definition of 'trust' have not been successful.

Nevertheless, there is ample anecdotal evidence supporting the significance of trust between individuals in all contexts, i.e., family, social or workplace. Trust is an essential thread that is weaved into family systems, social relationships, and leader/s and staff relationships. In the later case, this is true, regardless of the leadership theory (e.g., transformational leadership, leader-member exchange) that characterises the leaders' style. In addition, Rousseau, Sitkin, Burt, and Camerer (1998) reported that, in the cross-discipline view of trust, there exists a shared understanding, and paradoxically, a divergent use of language and meanings. At a fundamental level, the meaning of trust was proposed by Mayer, Davis, and Schoorman (1995) as the willingness of a party to be vulnerable to the actions of another party based on the expectations that the other will perform a particular action important to the trustor, irrespective of the ability to monitor or control that other party (p. 712).

Lines, Selart, Espendal, and Johansen (2005) characterised this concept more succinctly as the willingness to "risk, independence, and the willingness to accept vulnerability" (p. 225). What follows from this definition of trust is the question of how does one measure willingness to accept vulnerability? Lines et al. utilized the 4-item instrument that was originally developed by Roberts and O'Reilly (1974) on the basis that the factors of honesty, integrity, competence/ability, fairness, and openness would capture the variance observed in leadership trust. These factors are part of a list of 10 conditions, namely availability, competence, consistency, discretion, fairness, integrity, loyalty, openness, promise

fulfillment, and receptivity, that were identified by Butler (1991). These 10 factors were themselves a refinement of Jennings' (1971) and Gabarro's (1978) earlier work. However, Butler did not hold the view that these conditions conceptualised or defined trust. He also did not believe that a definitive list of conditions existed, nor was there any agreement about what these factors should be. On the other hand, Butler did believe that trust in a specific person was more relevant than generalized others. Dirks and Ferrin (2002) differentiated between two leadership referents in whom we place trust, direct leaders (e.g., supervisors) and organisational leadership (e.g., senior leadership). They found that trust in one's direct leader was a greater moderator on workplace outcomes such as job satisfaction, intention to quit, and performance than trust in one's organisational leadership. These findings have implications especially in organisations with multi-layered and multi-disciplined structures, such as public sector health organisations.

Aims

This study aims to identify the attributes of the immediate supervisor that promote trust with their employees in a public sector organisation.

Method

Participants

A sample of 3883 participants from a staff opinion survey of a public health organisation in Australia was utilised. The female to male ratio in the returns reflected the proportion evident in health service (female = 80%; male = 20%). Less than 1% of respondents were under 21 years of age; 13% were between 21-30; 25% were between 31-40; 35% were between 41-50; 22% were between 51-60; and 4% were over 60. Non-clinical and clinical practitioners comprised 38% and 62% respectively.

Measures

Twelve items that described the attributes of immediate supervisors were formulated from comments from a previous survey. A 5-point Likert scale ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree" was utilized.

Procedure

The data was obtained through a project conducted by a consultancy team from the Community and

Organisational Research Unit at the University of Southern Queensland (USQ).

Analysis

A principal component analysis was conducted. The number of components to extract was determined by parallel analysis. Internal consistency estimated from Cronbach alpha was performed to determine the optimal number of items to retain.

Results

Parallel analysis indicated only one component above random chance. Therefore only one component was extracted in principal component analysis. The component matrix loadings of the items from the solution are presented in Table 1. Internal consistency estimated by Cronbach's alpha for the 12 items was .950. Analysis also revealed that deleting two items, "My supervisor shows favouritism towards some staff" and "My supervisor is unapproachable" did not reduce the internal consistency of the component. In addition, it was determined from scrutiny of the descriptions that one of the items, "My supervisor and I trust each other", described the interpersonal dynamic between two individuals rather than the attribute of the immediate supervisor. These three items were therefore excluded, leaving nine items in the measure. The three items removed from the measure are shown in italics in Table 1. Cronbach's alpha of the remaining items was .946. The sample was subsequently divided into two groups, using responses to the item asking whether the supervisor and the respondent trusted each other. Posthoc analysis in the form of a two-group discriminant analysis (DA) revealed that the nine items differentiated between the two groups [$A = .489$, $\chi^2(9, N = 3738) = 2669.328$, $p < .001$] with an R^2 -canonical = .511 and 86% correct re-classification. Table 2 presents the correlation coefficients and standardized canonical coefficients. These results indicate that "My supervisor provides clear and constructive feedback" discriminated most whilst "My supervisor makes work expectations clear" discriminated least. "My supervisor provides me with truthful and honest information", "My supervisor asks for my opinion before making decisions that affect my work", and "My supervisor treats people with care and respect" were the other attributes that showed relative importance and relevance to the issue of whether the respondent and their supervisor trusted one another.

Table 1: Component matrix coefficients from PCA.

	Description of Items	Coefficients
9	My supervisor provides me with truthful and honest information	.875
7	My supervisor treats people with care and respect	.871
5	My supervisor provides clear and constructive feedback	.863
6	My supervisor welcomes feedback from staff	.856
4	<i>My supervisor and I trust each other</i>	.852
8	My supervisor asks for my opinion before making decisions that affect my work	.827
2	My supervisor supports me to improve my skills and performance	.815
12	My supervisor encourages me to raise new ideas and find improved ways of doing my job	.807
11	My supervisor manages conflict fairly and promptly	.795
1	My supervisor makes work expectations clear	.763
10rev	<i>My supervisor shows favouritism towards some staff</i>	.695
3rev	<i>My supervisor is unapproachable</i>	.653

Table 2: Correlation coefficients and standardized canonical coefficients from DA.

Predictors	Correlation Coefficients	Standardised Coefficients
My supervisor provides clear and constructive feedback	.842	.324
My supervisor provides me with truthful and honest information	.847	.280
My supervisor asks for my opinion before making decisions that affect my work	.759	.197
My supervisor treats people with care and respect	.796	.187
My supervisor encourages me to raise new ideas and find improved ways of doing my job	.690	.100
My supervisor manages conflict fairly and promptly	.673	.075
My supervisor supports me to improve my skills and performance	.684	.059
My supervisor welcomes feedback from staff	.744	.025
My supervisor makes work expectations clear	.621	.022

Discussion

The results revealed nine attributes that reliably measure one dimension that describes the trust component of leadership in an immediate supervisor. It has to be emphasized that this was not a target person, but a range of persons whose commonality was their direct contact between them (as trustee) and their staff (as trustor). The nine attributes were consistent with some of the conditions in Butler (1991)'s trust inventory, namely integrity that includes honesty, openness, fairness, and receptivity. Additionally, the item that described honesty that was adopted from Lines et al. (2005) was found to carry the highest weight. The supervisor's support to improve skills and clarity of work expectations were not listed as conditions by Butler. One aspect that was not tapped in this measure was the ability or competence of the immediate supervisor. Although the discriminant

analysis was posthoc and thus exploratory in nature, it suggested that the nine attributes were in useful in understanding trust at least in this context. These items differentiate two groups of staff (those who agreed and those who disagreed with the statement "My supervisor and I trust each other"). These results suggest that attributes of the immediate supervisor were contributing to a mutual trust, not just trust that was unidirectional.

Conclusion

Leaders, especially immediate supervisors, have an important role to play in maintaining relationship with employees and retaining them. This study has delineated the attributes of immediate supervisors that would promote trust with employees and support the leaders in undertaking that role. The focus of this study was not to investigate the outcome or consequences of that trust, which would be a worthy topic for future studies.

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