WORKPLACE RELATIONSHIPS: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK BASED ON KEY PROPOSITIONS

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ABSTRACT

Relationships are important for true success in one's life. Without relationships in our increasingly connected world, one may fall behind. Organizations that do not recognize the need for deep, trust-based relationships are doomed. This study collected primary data using unstructured interviews of senior executives. They were asked questions about how relationships played an important role in their professional lives. From that data, themes were generated, and secondary data was gathered to fit a framework to each of those themes. The first theme relates to the need for successful relationships to share benefits. Mutual dependence in a relationship can translate into beneficial outcomes for an organization. The next theme describes how one must invest in relationships to keep them strong. Theme three may act as a warning, since it indicates that, if no better alternatives exist, relationships may be formed even to the detriment of the suitor. Theme four and five center around trust. Trust is essential for a relationship to survive and when parties trust each other they are sure of the other's motivation. It is vitally important for organizations to consider the relationships around them. Relationships between employees can boost productivity if beneficial and decrease it if toxic. Strong relationships at an interorganizational level can yield positive benefits for all parties. Organizations and management that show employees they are cared for will find those individuals more committed. Customers that trust a business are more likely to remain loyal, hence effort must be made to show that the organization is trustworthy. Relationships are the lifeblood of individuals and organizations; it is a fatal error to neglect them in either sphere.

Keywords: Interdependent Relations, Reliable Alliance, Commitment, Trust, Intentions.

INTRODUCTION

In his book, *No Man is an Island*, Thomas Merton, American writer, poet, and theologian, indicates the importance of deep connectedness to others and one's community. It is relationships that offer a lending hand, a support system, a source of happiness, and much more. This holds true, both in everyday and organizational life.

Despite the immense competition in our society, winning is often more broadly defined than just reaping the greatest financial gain. One cannot maintain a winning streak without forging and maintaining positive, and mutually beneficial, relationships. The ever-increasing necessity for sustained and amicable relationships in this intertwined and globalized world has changed how people deal with each other. A narrow view on the word 'success' conjures imagery of a well-off miser wilting away, alone. The need to form bonds has prompted many to avoid aggressive, competitive behavior and, instead, choose to envisage building long-term relationships. Relationship building incorporates engendering of trust, reciprocity by the other party, and an expectation of future transactions of value.

Harvard professor John Kotter, after studying managers in workplaces, concluded that good working relationships are based on a combination of respect, perceived need, obligation, and friendship that are a critical source of power in helping to get things done; without these relationships, even the best ideas could be rejected or resisted (Ertel, 1999). Deep personal connections keep people engaged with their organizations and motivated to reach newer heights. However, such relationships require nurturing and maintenance.

METHODOLOGY

For the purpose of this study, firstly, primary research was conducted using the method of in-depth unstructured interviews. A convenience sample of six senior executives from several large-sized healthcare organizations was used. They were asked to reflect on the pivotal and concrete experiences of their professional lives in which relationships played a significant role. These reflections were then thematically analyzed, and based on that qualitative analysis, five themes emerged which help understand how long-term and trusting relationships are built. The next step was to conduct secondary research through limited literature search, which served as a theoretical framework for the themes generated.

RESULTS & ANALYSIS

Theme 1: *For a relationship to have a successful outcome, the rewards should be mutually beneficial for the parties.*

About half a century ago, Weiss (1974) had suggested that a major consequence of being in a relationship is the fulfillment of psychological needs related to belonging and association. Modern day research in organizations agrees with this sentiment (Zarankin & Kunkel, 2019). Relationships give people a sense of inclusion in their workplaces and help to forge reliable alliances. The term, reliable alliance, refers to the existence of a bond where one can trust that an ally will be there when needed (Thien et al., 2017). Thibaut & Kelley (1959), in their classical analysis of interdependent relations, state that high levels of mutual dependence result in a low likelihood of leaving the relationship. This is congruent with workplaces as described in management literature (Solomonson, 2011). Forging mutually beneficial relationships helps employees on a personal level and increases their performance in organizations.

Strong employee relationships result in improve performance outcomes in organizations (Yeh et al., 2020). Operational benefits are achieved for both parties by sharing information freely and incorporating systems that facilitate that process (Som et al., 2019). Were the benefits not realized or realized unevenly, the relationship would surely not prosper. By working together these companies can realize gains that would otherwise be unattainable. These rewards bolster their relationship and maintain it moving forward.

Theme 2: *The individuals in a relationship are more committed if they believe that each party has invested heavily in the relationship.*

Rusbult (1980), in his seminal study on friendship, defines investments as resources, for example: time, money, and emotional energy. They are distinguished from ordinary rewards and costs because the investments cannot easily be divorced from the relationship and will be lost, or at least decline in value, upon dissolution of the relationship. Investments increase commitment and serve to secure a relationship by increasing the cost of dissolution. When the relationship is abandoned, the parties lose their invested resources.

Recent studies, especially in public sector organizations, have shown that establishing a relationship that is mutually beneficial demands substantial investment and commitment (Jones, 2019). This empowers all parties involved as they facilitate mutual coexistence. The investments might be lost if the relationship breaks apart; and therefore, if the parties have invested a great amount of time, emotional labor, and energy, there is a better chance that effort will be exerted to make the relationship succeed. The interdependence model described in Theme 1 and the investment model are inextricably linked, as greater mutual investment leads to more interdependence, and vice versa.

Employees are more motivated when they feel the organization and management are supportive (Aydogdu & Asikgil, 2011; Malkoc & Dal, 2020). Should an organization not show support, an employee may feel there is unequal investment in their relationship. It is in the management's interest to invest in the relationship by showing employees they are cared for so that they may reciprocate through increased effort. These relationships where parties rely on each other are common and result in both parties working together to create solutions (Columbus et al., 2020). Investing in relationships will yield better results for all involved.

Theme 3: *Relationships can develop as a matter of necessity when there are no better alternatives available to the parties.*

According to Thibaut & Kelley's (1959) classical analysis of interdependent relations, relationship outcomes can be no lower than those of alternative relationships available to the individual, or participation will not occur. This is the standard by which a person determines whether to remain in a relationship. Sometimes individuals will have high expectations of a friendship, but no gratifying alternatives to choose from. In these circumstances an individual may forge a relationship that is subpar by their standards. In essence, they have no better options available for them.

Thus, in organizations, employees may perceive that to fulfill certain desires (e.g., higher levels of psychological well-being) they are dependent on their supervisors, especially in hierarchical structures where there is a great imbalance of power (such as government departments, crown corporations etc.). Put differently, such employees may feel there are no other adequate alternatives available to fulfill their needs. In this context, alternatives may include the HR department, Civil court, etc. In the marketing realm, it is well-known that customers remain loyal to suppliers when there are no better alternatives, as the choice to switch can have adverse impacts (Kruger, 2010).

An employee's performance and health can suffer tremendously if they are feeling unfulfilled socially at work (Blacker et al., 2020). Therefore, it can be vitally important for employers to consider what sort of working relationships can be formed and fostered within the organization. Employees who are excluded perform poorly, resulting in negative organizational outcomes (Yang & Treadway, 2018). More than isolation and exclusion, a toxic work environment can also result in poor performance for all those impacted (Trad & Johnson, 2014). If there are no alternatives available, employees will form relationships with anyone. It is important to manage bullying behaviors and toxic work environments to protect an organization's productivity from being affected.

Theme 4: *Relationships are sustainable when based on trust.*

Trust is generally viewed as an important, if not critical aspect of interpersonal behavior in the development of relationships (Khawaja, 2010). Some researchers have adopted a dispositional approach to understanding trust. Rotter (1980) called trust a person's generalized expectation that they can rely on the word, promise, or statement of another. Gurtmann (1992), building on Rotter's

approach, also viewed trust as a generalized expectation of another person's benevolence or sincerity. In business studies, it is claimed that there is a dire need to develop credibility, such that the parties' words correspond with their actions (Van Vuuren, 2011). This approach to trust as a generalized expectancy about others has been extended to cross-cultural comparisons as well (Johnson & Cullen, 2002). Establishment of a long-term relationship is an important contextual variable for personal and organizational success. Thus, according to Fiske & Taylor (1991) by building long-term relationship we achieve, credibility, currency, status, and influence. This involves abilities such as assessing complex decision-making processes, networking, and working in a consultative and co-operative way (Cheverton, 2004). Some, therefore, emphasize the need to build long-term relationships even if it means short-term sacrifices. Not surprisingly it has been said that successful Japanese executives view a contract only as a stepping-stone towards a long-term relationship. To the Japanese, the relationship, not the contract, is transcendent (Tobin & Hayashi, 2017).

Between organizations, Bachmann & Inkpen (2011) contend that trust is established based on reputation or adherence to norms and certification. Depending on the type of relationship and industry, an organization may rely on one aspect more than the other. These types of relationships may become difficult to manage if many parties are involved, which require the adoption of norms as a result (Lewis & Koschmann, 2010). For example, a steel supplier may be selling materials to two competing organizations, which may make building trust more difficult if there is sensitive information being shared. For the relationship to be sustainable, norms must be established that allows for trust to be built.

Theme 5: *In a relationship, trust leads to the belief that the other has good intentions.*

About three decades ago, Holmes (1991) asserted that to trust another is to reach a conclusion about the other's motivation. It is easier to maintain a close relationship if we know the other is motivated to care for us. Trust also serves to reduce complexity; the interactions of two parties presents limitless possibilities and trust helps filter out negative sentiments.

Lewicki & Bunker (1996) have presented a developmental model of trust in work relationships. According to them, in identification-based trust, firstly one person employs emotional intelligence to identify the other's desires and intentions. Each person is then able to act on behalf of the other, since they realize that they must sustain the other's trust. When the parties share identification-based trust, one acts as an agent for the other. Such identification with the other includes and requires feelings of personal attachment. Therefore, the identification-based trust rests on emotions and not cognition. Such a trusting relationship allows one to predict another's actions and to reach out and make a strong human connection. Further studies by Tan & Lim (2009) have shown that believing that the other has benevolent intentions and is emotionally trustworthy is a critical factor when forming close and enduring relationships.

Before a customer can trust a business, their intentions, and the relative trustworthiness must be assessed (Kharouf et al., 2014). A business must put some stock in displaying their intentions to the customer in order to build trust. Businesses also make considerable estimates about another when establishing trust (Laeequddin et al., 2012). To build a relationship based on trust would therefore require a good deal of qualifying one's behavior to determine the intention. When a customer trusts a business, there is a better feeling of value received and the customer is more loyal to that organization (Petzer & Van Tonder, 2019). Trust and the intentions perceived are thus inextricably linked.

CONCLUSION

A life lived without a single meaningful relationship formed is hardly considered a success by any measure. The world is shifting, and the value of relationships are being evermore realized; not just '*a relationship'*, but a '*deep, meaningful relationship'*. This was evident from the primary as well as secondary research in this study. The themes developed here encompassed the need for a relationship that is built, maintained, and invested in to build trust. In the absence of deep relationships, it is apparent that humans will form subpar ones, just for the sake of socializing with someone. These themes were common with participants reflecting on important moments in their lives pertaining to relationships. The themes were also supported by many secondary sources.

Management should consider important implications revealed here. Creating relationships that mutually benefit both parties can result in beneficial organizational outcomes. This holds true at a personnel level as well as an interorganizational level. Building upon that theme, one must invest in these relationships to strengthen them. It is important to watch for poor quality relationships that might affect organizational outcomes. However, for the desirous mutually beneficial relationships, trust must be fostered in order to continuously realize gains.

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