

California State University, Northridge

Leadership and Job Satisfaction in the Public Sector

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By

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Abstract

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Leaders in the public sector face challenges when it comes to increasing job performance and satisfaction of employees. Many studies indicate leadership behavior impacts public employee job performance and satisfaction. Some scholars imply that the best leadership styles in the public sectors are transformational leadership and relations-oriented leadership. There are many leadership styles in the public sector that have been researched and discussed extensively in various studies. However, there is not enough empirical evidence to prove which and when each specific leadership works best. This study suggests a survey design to collect data from Department of Public Social Services (DPSS) Customer Service Centers. The finding can contribute to our understanding which leadership style is conducive for managing street-level bureaucrats such as the call center employee.

Introduction

The function of government agencies is to provide service to the public, which includes senior citizens, children and the most vulnerable population. Thus, public sector leaders have great responsibility to achieve organizational goal, improve performance and provide good customer service. Although these leaders strive to carry out change in the risk-averse public environment, they are facing challenges increasing public employee commitment, motivation, and job satisfaction.

Based on federal employee survey, leadership has been persistently revealed as the most important driver of public employee satisfaction. Several researchers (Howell, Avolio, Schmitt & Neal, 1993; Vermeeren, Kuipers & Steijn, 2014; Fernandez, 2008; Braun, Peus, Weisweiler & Frey, 2013) have found significant relationships between certain leadership styles and job satisfaction in the public sector. Some suggested transformational leadership and relation-oriented leadership impact satisfaction. Transformational leadership requires followers to have a certain degree of flexibility to perform. Can transformational leadership still affect job satisfaction if the work structure does not allow flexibility? Further studying this issue can help leaders better understand employee needs that can motivate and improve performance in the public sector.

Literature Review

Job Satisfaction

In today's society, people spend most of their time in the workplaces. Thus, it is very important for leaders to understand and increase job satisfaction since there has been research implicating it to organizational productivity. The benefits received from their employer influence their effort, skill and creativity that employees are willing to provide. Two work-related behaviors have often been linked to job satisfaction. One is the motivation to join and stay in the organization. The other is the motivation to work hard and well in the organization (Wright & Davis, 2003).

Job satisfaction is a worker's sense of achievement and success on the job. It means doing a job one enjoys, doing it well and being rewarded for one's efforts. Job satisfaction is highly linked to efficiency and effectiveness. Leaders should treat employees as human beings who have their own wants, needs, and personal desires (Aziri, B. 2011). Many studies indicate there is a strong relationship between job satisfaction and performance. One source by Ostroff & Schmitt (1992) investigated relationships between job satisfaction, employee attitudes, and performance at the organizational level (Ostroff & Schmitt, 1992). The data collected from 13,808 US and Canada teachers supported links between job satisfaction and organizational performance. Furthermore, employee attitude is highly related to their job performance. Satisfied employees are more likely to cooperate in group efforts and work toward organizational goals, and enhance performance. Employee satisfaction also leads to lower turnover intentions in the public sector.

Many factors can influence job satisfaction such as the nature of work, salary, promotion opportunities, management, and work conditions. Among the numerous factors, leadership is viewed as an important indicator that plays a central role in job satisfaction. This study focuses on the role of leadership style impacting employee job satisfaction in the public sector.

Leadership

Leadership can be defined as the process of influencing the activities of a group toward goal setting and goal achievement. It can also be defined as an individual's behavior of directing the activities of a group toward a shared goal. Behavioral leadership theories focus on leaders' behavior rather than their traits. This theory indicates leaders are made not born. People can become leaders through the process of learning, teaching, and observation. Modern leadership theories define a three-dimension model: task-oriented leadership, relations-oriented leadership and change oriented leadership (Yukl, G., Gordon, A., & Taber, T. 2002). Task-oriented leader is externally and extrinsically directed, which can be defined as correcting leadership style. They concentrate on task details and spend their efforts on activities such as setting goals, planning and making arrangements, closely supervising subordinates, and obtaining the resources necessary for achieving the task. Relations-oriented leadership is internally and intrinsically directed, which is also called stimulation leadership style. Relations-oriented leaders show concern for the well-being of followers, acting in supportive and friendly ways, involve followers in the decision-making process, keeping followers informed, and providing followers with choices. Development-oriented leaders encourage innovation, experiment, risk-taking, foreseeing, and creativity (Howell & Avolio, 1993).

Since the 1980s, the most researched leadership concept is transformational leadership. Transformational leadership is characterized by four behavioral factors: idealized influence

(being role models and building high trust among followers), inspirational motivation (improving, developing and motivating followers), intellectual stimulation (inspiring followers to solve the problems), and individualized consideration (supporting and listening to subordinates). Similar to three-dimension model, these four leadership behaviors are relationship-based management approach to motivate and inspire followers. Transformational leaders raise follower's levels of consciousness about cooperate goals, transcend their own self-interest to the organization, and move them to address higher-level needs.

Continuum of leadership ranges from laissez-faire leadership, transactional leadership to transformational leadership. Laissez-faire leaders keep away from decision making, provide limited or no support to problem-solving, and are mostly absent in the organization. The effects of laissez-faire leadership are conflict, increase stress, and low job satisfaction.

Transactional leadership is a task-oriented style. Leaders assign goals and tasks for followers to complete. Followers gain rewards for a job well done and get punishment for bad results. Transactional leadership is like a business transaction, which focuses on management than leadership. Since it emphasizes on results, transactional leaders are less competent when it comes to designing innovative solutions and solving problems. Transactional leadership is often referred as lower performance and barrier of change because they will experience failure when they cannot deliver anticipated rewards such as promotion, pay increases, or other recognition that are meaningful to followers (Bass, 1999).

After studying leadership literatures published on Public Administration Review, Wart (2003) suggested examining four different dimensions on leadership for further research. The first one is to answer the question of what leaders should focus on. The perspective is that followers, not leaders, are the ones who do the work. Organizational productivity and

effectiveness depend on follower motivation, training, development, and overall satisfaction. Therefore, the main job of leaders is to develop followers. Second question is to what degree leadership makes a difference. To answer this question, researchers need to examine the effect leadership behaviors have on traits and their skills. In general, most transformational and transitional leadership theories assert that leaders can make big differences in the public sector. Some critics state that the effect of leaders can be only modest because of the environmental constraints and employee mentality. Third dimension is to examine whether leaders are born or made (Yukl, G., Gordon, A., & Taber, T. 2002). After decades of debate, modern mainstream literature agrees that leaders are not born but made. Today, the frame work for this question is to what degree leaders can be made and how. Lastly, the debate comes to the question “what is the best leadership style to use?” Leadership style is defined as the collective effect of leaders traits, skills, and behaviors. It also can be defined by different characteristics. Follower participation, change style and personality style are three examples which have been studied by many scholars. Other leadership styles include communication, individual or group approaches, and value orientations. Another approach is to look at a leaders function. Leaders have to get work done and work through people. Their functional style has to do with the situation. It is advised to figure out the situation first and find the best leadership style second.

Through decades of research, many elements of leadership were better understood. However, a more sophisticated model that can fit in different organizational structures is still needed. Transformational leadership theory was often explained in a simplified fashion. Leadership for street-level environment is different than the leadership in a director office. The best leadership theory should embrace differences and consider organizational structures and environmental contexts.

Leadership and Job Satisfaction

The impact of leadership behavior in the public sectors has been studied often. The most common research methodology is to conduct survey with a behavior description questionnaire. In the past two decades, many survey studies examined the correlation between leadership behavior and leadership effectiveness such as productivity and job satisfaction.

Turkish scholar Sahin G, M. (2016) studied the effect of leadership behavior on organizational commitment and job satisfaction in the public sector. First, he emphasized the importance of job satisfaction in today's dynamic socio-economic world. Then, he explored his research on organizational commitment and job satisfaction levels as a result of leadership behaviors. He collected 234 valid questionnaires from different public institutions in Turkey. After regression analysis, he found leadership was shaded by emotional and conscientious commitment. In another words, leadership qualities lost their importance on an entity where organizational commitment is intense. His study provided evidence that leadership positively affects organizational commitment and job satisfaction but the effect was lower than expected in the public sector. He explained the reason could be that managers in public sector do not regard leadership as much as their private counterparts. Wart's paper points out the insignificant effect in public leadership research. One of the reasons he explained is that bureaucracies might be guided by powerful forces that are beyond the control of public sector leaders. Therefore, leaders effort would not be appreciable. To reinforce leader impact, Sahin (2016) suggested public sector leaders should encourage followers to work through a broader vision and provide them to reveal all their whole abilities. Leaders who do not treat public employees as mechanical factors will not only increase the organizational commitment but also provide positive impact on organizational performance increase.

Fernandez (2008) examined three-dimension model of leadership behaviors. He analyzed the impact leader behavior has on employee perception of performance and job satisfaction by using data from 2002 Federal Human Capital Survey. Fernandez (2008) did his research based on the three-dimension model because he believed it offered a better fit to analyze the effect on employee job satisfaction (Yuki, Gordon, & Taber, 2002). After analyzing 100,571 surveys, he discovered evidence that task-oriented behavior is generally not related to job satisfaction. The measure of relations-oriented and development-oriented behavior are positive and statistically correlated with job satisfaction. Fernandez's study suggests the public sector, especially in the federal bureaucracy, should dedicate leadership training on relations-oriented and development-oriented styles.

The biggest challenge for leaders in the public sector is to implement effective human capital strategies to motivate employees and enhance performance. Researches are needed to recognize the factors such as empowerment, participative management, quality of work life, and the role of managers that affect job satisfaction in the public sector. Focusing on human motivation and its impact on job satisfaction, Kim, S. (2002) studied the relationship between participative management and job satisfaction. In his study, using Clark County employee survey data, he found evidence that participative management can improve employee job satisfaction. In addition, his findings demonstrate both participative strategic planning and effective communication positively affect employee job satisfaction. Since participatory managers involve their followers in decision-making and problem-solving process, it shares the same traits as transformational leadership.

Both Fernandez and Kim do not specify participant work environment or context. The desire to make decisions is different between typing clerks and machine operators. The effect of

participative management might not be effective in a risk-averse work environment. For the same reason, evidence is weak from Fernandez's research stating that task-oriented leadership has no impact on job satisfaction.

Vermeeren, Kuipers & Steijn (2014) used a secondary analysis of survey data to examine the relationship between leadership and human resource management (HRM). Specifically, they focused on job satisfaction as a possible mediating variable on the influence of a supervisor leadership style. Two leadership behaviors have been examined: transformational leadership and transactional leadership. In line with theory of Yukl et al (2002), they define transformational leadership as a stimulation style which emphasizes employee participation. Transactional leadership is a correcting style which emphasizes authorization.

Survey data was collected from 6,253 employees from Dutch municipalities. By using structural equation modeling, they analyzed the leadership effect on job satisfaction. Their research question examines one of Wart's four debates: Does leadership style make a difference on job satisfaction? What is a supervisor's leadership style impact on the implementation of HR practices? The Dutch study adopted a micro approach on HRM to analyze on the effect of multiple HR practice on individuals and measure through job satisfaction. The study focused on employee perception on HR practices and revealed the relationships between their job satisfaction and organizational performance. They found that organizational performance relies on employee perception of how much the organization cares about their well-being and values their contributions. Thus, the degree of job satisfaction depends on the fulfillment of employee needs and values. A good organization must not only meet the need of customers, but also meet those of employees. Their finding indicates that job satisfaction partly mediates the relationship between HRM and organizational performance. Stimulating leadership style, or transformational

leadership, has an important effect on job satisfaction. In the contrast, correcting leadership style, or transactional leadership, has no significant effect on the amount of HR practices used. Their study suggests that the stimulating leadership style is very important to employee satisfaction, while the correcting leadership style negatively influences job satisfaction. In line with previous studies, their results indicate leadership and employee satisfaction with HR practices have a strong and independent impact on employee attitudes as job satisfaction and commitment (Purcell & Hutchinson, 2007).

Braun, Peus, Weisweiler & Frey (2013) analyzed data from 360 employees from a large German university. Their study aimed to understand the effect of transformational leadership on both individual and team levels. In the study, they investigated the relationship between the individual and team perception of supervisor transformational leadership and outcomes of the individual such as job satisfaction and performance. They also investigated trust in one's supervisor and in the team as multilevel mediators. Many studies indicate that individual perception of supervisors who uses transformational leadership is associated to job satisfaction. Transformational leaders show individualized consideration. They are able to recognize and respond to each individual's abilities, aspirations, and needs (Judge & Piccolo, 2004; Podsakoff, MacKenzie, & Bommer, 1996; Walumbwa, Orwa, Wang, & Lawler, 2005). By analyzing survey data, Braun et al (2013) found a positive relationship between individual perception of supervisor transformational leadership and follows job satisfaction. They also proved that trust in the supervisor mediated the relationship between individual perceptions of supervisor transformational leadership and job satisfaction. Their result pointed trust has an impact on a successful leader. They suggest leaders should focus on building trust with each team member.

Park & Rainey (2008) dedicated their study to the challenge of human resource management in government. They aimed to find out what are the best leadership behaviors to increase public employee motivation, commitment, and job satisfaction, as well as to decrease turnover intentions. Based on the theories of transformational and transactional leadership, transformational leaders are encouraging, supportive, informative, and expressed higher levels of public service-oriented motivation and higher levels of job satisfaction. Merit Principle Survey 2000 analyzed 6,900 federal employee responses were able to test the impact on both transformational leadership and transactional leadership behaviors. The test indicated transformational leadership has a positive relationship to job satisfaction, whereas transactional leadership shows weaker relations.

Through the above discussion, transformational leadership seems to be the dominant theme in this study. However, more empirical evidences is needed to prove transformational leadership can work in every situation. Above studies did not provide a uniform leadership pattern to increase employee job satisfaction.

Although there has been much research on leadership in the public sectors, studies on leader psychological discipline, such as meaningful work, are very rare to see. Public leaders make work more meaningful for their employees, which have a positive influence on employee job satisfaction. Tummers & Knies (2013) analyzed the mediating role of work meaningfulness in the relations between leader-member exchange(LMX) and organizational commitment, work effort, and work-to-family enrichment. Theoretical model LMX represents the quality of the relationship between leaders and followers. Low LMX means economic exchange between employers and employee. For example, employees trade their time in exchange for money. High LMX leads to high trust between leader and employee. Employees feel valued by their

supervisor, and a successful working relationship can be developed. In general, high LMX has higher job satisfaction, higher performance, and lower turnover rate (Dulebohn, Bommer, Liden, Brouer & Ferris, 2012). The meaningfulness of work concept can be found in the organizational psychological field. It requires the job to fit his or her beliefs, values, and behaviors. Meaning of work has strong relationship with job satisfaction. In particular, many people choose to work in the public sector because they want to do meaningful work and contribute to the community. It can be quite important to study work meaningfulness in the public sector. Tummers & Knies (2013) analyzed survey data from three different types of group: education, health care, and local government. Their study indicated that the meaningfulness of work is an important mediator between leadership and outcomes. To bring meaning to the work, leaders provide greater insight to employees on how the organization work and provide them with more responsibility.

The concept of meaningfulness comes from the sociology of work and organization field. Tummers & Knies (2013) did not provide enough clarification on the definition of meaningfulness in their research. It can be very subjective depending on participant's personality and work environment. Further study is needed to define meaningfulness in the public sector. This knowledge can help leaders to enhance employee psychological needs.

Researches from Healthcare Industry

High turnover for nursing staff remains a major issue in healthcare industry. Many reports indicate hospital managers tend to perform transactional leadership styles that may push nurses away from the healthcare system. There is some empirical research on healthcare industry leadership and its effects, which might provide some insight in understanding job satisfaction issues. For example, Mohammad and Hossein (2006) conducted a descriptive and cross-sectional study to examine the relationships between leadership style and employee job

satisfaction in Isfahan University Hospitals, Iran. By analyzing data collected from 814 employees, ranging from line staff to senior managers, the study provided evidence that employee job satisfaction was significantly correlated and was affected by manager leadership style. This study pointed out leadership is one of the factors influence job satisfaction. Other factors included in their research are salaries, fringe benefits, promotion, communications, work conditions, nature of the job and co-workers. The two leadership behaviors that were examined are employee-oriented leadership and task-oriented leadership. Results show the most efficient style was between supervision and employee-oriented leadership. Although task-oriented leadership is most common in the hospital, it has a negative impact on job satisfaction.

Mohammad and Hossein's study encourages leaders in the hospital to focus on employee needs to reduce turnover rate. Can it apply to a call center where staff turnover rate is also very high? More researches are needed to build the link between different industries.

Thyer (2003) proposed a major change in healthcare management to transformational leadership. In contrast to transactional leadership, transformational leadership has a positive effect on communication and team building in the hospitals. In his research, he found nurses to be creative and involved in decision making. Transformational leadership style can ignite nurse creativity and problem-solving skill which may be the ideal leadership style to resolve the high turnover problem.

Malaysia scholars Choi, Goh, Adam, and Tan (2016) conducted a survey and collected data from 200 nursing staff in two hospitals. Their research goal was to find out if transformational leadership can improve job satisfaction among nurses in Malaysia hospitals. After using partial least squares-structural equation model technique, they found that transformational leadership positively affected job satisfaction. In their study, transformational

leaders are those who inspire and intellectually stimulate employees. They influence not only individuals but also the whole team. Transformational leaders help nurses build a stronger sense of self-determination and competency, which impacts their work and job satisfaction. However, this can only represent the empirical evidence to the impact of transformational leadership on job satisfaction among nurses in Malaysia hospitals.

Thyer (2003) and Choi et al (2016) promoted transformational leadership for hospital managers through their research. They did not divide survey data by different nursing groups. Their evidence was weak and cannot prove transformational leadership works well in every nursing department. More specific studies are needed.

Empirical Evidence from Call Center Studies

The nature of call center management is based on the concept of control and surveillance of employee performance. Similar to healthcare industry, managers tend to perform transactional leadership behaviors. The effect of control and surveillance create a stressful and hazardous working environment which create high labor turnover, sickness absence, lack of motivation and commitment (Bain & Taylor, 2000; Bramming & Johnsen, 2010).

In order to understand the impact of different leadership styles on call center employees, Malaysia scholars Muthuveloo, Kathamuthu, and Ping (2014) have conducted an exploratory research. They used statistical inference to test the relationship between leadership styles and employee adaptability. By analyzing 104 call center employee response through a questionnaire, they provided strong evidence that leadership styles have influences on call center employee performance, turnover, and participation in the organization. They predesigned three different leadership behaviors into the questionnaire which are transactional leadership, transformational leadership, and situational leadership. Transactional and transformational leadership have been

discussed in the previous section. Situational leaders coach their employees to set goals and do the planning. They diagnose the need of the employee and respond accordingly. Muthuveloo et al (2014) found that the transactional leaders influence most employee performance, turnover and participation. It can be explained that most call center employees are motivated by rewards. Transformational leadership highly influences employee job performance. Finally, situational leadership has positive effects on job performance, participation and the relationship with their supervisors. Since their research is limited to employee adaptability, further study is needed to clarify the effect on employee job satisfaction in a call center.

Peruvian scholars León & Morales (2018) contributed their study to address the effects of people-oriented leadership on call center withdrawal behaviors because call center employees are subjected to high levels of stress. In addition, the intensity of automated performance monitoring increases emotional labor and its perceived purpose affects job satisfaction. They analyzed 728 online surveys from Org's Foreign Mobiles call center employees in Peru. The result indicates people-oriented leadership was associated with reduced turnover intention of subordinates regardless of their perceived level of employability. This can be explained by, people-oriented supervisors consider the needs of their employees, encourage participation and decision-making enforcing development of skills that make the job more attractive (León & Morales, 2018).

The environment of a public call center is different than the private sector. Unlike their private sector counterparts, public employees who work in call centers enjoy job security and good benefit. Therefore, research is needed to be conducted within the public sector in order to better understand call center employee perspectives on leadership styles.

Effect of Work Environment

Work environment in the organization is one of the factors affecting employee job satisfaction. It is made up of two components: job characteristics and work context. Job characteristics refer to the aspects of an employee job responsibility contributes to his or her psychological state, such as the meaningfulness of work, influence on the employee spirit, growth, and development. Work context includes the characteristics of the organizational setting. It can be the reward systems of goals or degree of formalization, in which the employee is expected to accomplish his or her job. Many studies indicate a direct link between job characteristics and job satisfaction. Job characteristics can be defined as the nature of the job or the collection of tasks that comprise the job. It includes routineness, job specificity, human resource development and feedback. For work context, there are three aspects to consider: organizational goal conflict, organizational goal specificity, and procedural constraints. Wright & Davis (2003) conducted a survey study consisted of 385 New York State employees. By analyzing data collected from them, they found both job characteristics and work contexts commonly associated significantly with the public employees. Their model suggested public sector managers to consider how work environment may influence employee perception and experience on the job. They suggested public sector leaders to increase communication between employees about responsibilities and reduce procedural constraints. The authors of the study believed this may lead to greater job satisfaction by increasing employee perception of the job. Employee job satisfaction can be improved if leaders in the public sector explain the rationale of policies and procedures so that employees can understand and support it. Degree of routine has a negative impact on job satisfaction. The more routine a task the less job satisfaction there will be.

The major theme observed in the literature was leadership can have positive impact. Although a sizable amount of research has investigated the effect of leadership styles on

employee job satisfaction, very little is known about the organizational work environment has on employee perception. This study will offer new evidence to understand leadership effect on the specific job characteristics and work context in the public call center environment. It will fill the gap known to be missing for public sector managers through survey data.

Methodology

In order to provide more empirical evidence of the relationship between leadership style and public employee job satisfaction, this study suggests conducting a survey among three call center employees in Department of Public Social Services (DPSS). DPSS has undergone changes to its organization due to the increasing Los Angeles population. DPSS addition of the Customer Service Center Call Center was created to address the overflow of Los Angeles County customers as well as addressing the issue of processing and servicing applicants timely. This research will be of quantitative nature conducted by a cross-sectional survey approach. The data obtained will involve a confidential procedure to remove any individual information that may involve any unethical process.

The research will survey a sample of population of three DPSS Customer Service Center Call Centers. Survey design will be based on the Merit Principles Survey 2000 by the U.S. Merit System Protection Board (MSPB). The survey will consist of questions correlating to the three leadership style behavior based on full range leadership model. Leadership behaviors questions will be divided into transformational leadership, transaction leadership and laissez-faire leadership clusters (Bass & Avolio, 1994). Job satisfaction as the outcome would be measured by a few questions. Each question will ask the same population to choose an answer between a spectrum of 5 points.

There are some limitations for this research. Firstly, data collection would come from three DPSS call centers which would present only this specific population. Secondly, response bias could happen due to the nature of self-report survey. More empirical research is needed in

the public sector in order to have a thorough understanding of leadership effects on job satisfaction.

Ethical Consideration

Due to ethical consideration, a very strict guideline for personal data collection will be implemented to clear explain the purpose of the study. It will have to be declared that the survey is on a voluntary basis. Results will have to be provided in a confidential manner and shared among all participating groups in which they can interpret and act upon if necessary. It would not be ethical to see what answers are given by certain individuals as it can cause unintentional consequence between the subject and their supervisor shall the results get to the supervisor.

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