Building Tomorrow's Society
Bâtir la Société de Demain

Fredericton, Canada
June 13 – June 16, 2018/ *Juin 13 – Juin 16, 2018*

INFLUENCE OF THE RELATIONSHIP WITH THE BOSS IN PROJECT-BASED INDUSTRIES

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Abstract: The research question addressed in this paper is: "How much does an individual's relationship with the boss influence his/her relationships with peers, subordinates, and others that contribute to the individual's success?" Current literature focuses exclusively on the boss (direct supervisor), but overlooks other contributors that add to the success of the individual. In this research, other contributors - referred to as stakeholders - are also studied. It examines the correlation between quality and importance of the relationship, as well as the time an individual spends with each stakeholder. Data for this research was collected from 327 project personnel at a level commensurate with Project Manager (PM) or assistant PM. Participants were from 16 companies that are members of the Construction Industry Institute (CII). The data for the research was collected using a unique data-collection method embedded in leadership seminars offered by the CII. Results show that contrary to expectations set up in the literature, the boss-employee relationship is not a driving factor in other employee relationships. Additional variables and findings are also seen to influence overall quality of relationships of an employee in the workplace.

1 Introduction

The performance of "knowledge workers" has been a subject of considerable research over the past few decades (Drucker et al. 1959, Davenport 2005, Dekas et al. 2013). Studies have shown that tasks, procedures, and technologies do not often necessarily determine the success or failure of projects; rather it is the people (Cooke-Davies 2002). This is particularly true in project-based industries, such as construction, software development, and research & development (Cooke-Davies 2002) where interactions or exchanges among project people can tend to be either formal or informal. While the relationships between team members are initially contractual (formal), a few reach an informal (social) level of relationship (Dienesch and Linden 1986, Graen and Uhl-Bien 1995). From a social exchange theory (SET) perspective, exchanges can be categorized as: 1) employee-organization exchanges, referred to as perceived organizational support (POS), or 2) leader-member exchanges (LMX) (Wayne et al. 1997, Cropanzano and Mitchell 2005).

This research analyzes the influence of the boss-employee relationship (BER) by using a self-diagnostic exercise called "Who's on Your Molecule" (WOYM). In this work, we collected WOYM data through leadership seminars offered by the Construction Industry Institute, which is a consortium of owner, engineer-contractor, and supplier firms from the public and private sectors (CII n.d.). The data collection approach that we used is unique because it allows researchers to obtain revealed data during the exercise, as opposed to declared data (such as in surveys, in which participants provide responses that they think researchers expect).

In WOYM, participants analyze their workplace relationships with their stakeholders (Wiezel et al. 2011). Here, “stakeholders” is defined as other people on whose activity the individual’s success depends on. This can include bosses, peers, subordinates, clients, contractors, mentors, and others. In the WOYM exercise, participants are asked to quantify the quality and the importance of the relationships, as well as the time they spend with their stakeholders.

To date, the literature on organizational relationships has shown that the quality of the relationship between bosses and employees is eventually influenced by the individual's performance (Liden et al. 1997, Hassan and Hatmaker 2015). The research question addressed in this paper, however, is: How much does one's relationship with the boss influence the relationship with other stakeholders. In other words, how important is one's relationship with his/her boss to the rest of the team? Given that the boss is only one among many people that a person builds a relationship with in the workplace, it is surprising that current literature focuses exclusively on the boss, and neglects the influence of other contributors to the success of the individual.

2 Different Factors in Boss-Employee Relationship

Studies show that there are many factors that affect one’s relationship with the boss. They include length of relationship (Duarte et al. 1994, Mitchell and James 2001, Nahrgang et al. 2009, Gooty and Yammarino 2011), effect of an employee’s confidence and trust in the boss (Scandura 2008), relationship between LMX and POS (Eisenberger et al. 2014), to name a few. A few other studies have viewed BER from SET perspective, wherein researchers investigated in detail the impression-management tactic used by the employee, as well as the effects of favor-doing (Konovsky and Pugh 1994, Settoon and Mossholder 2002, Cropanzano and Mitchell 2005, Shanock and Eisenberger 2006). As with other leadership-related literature, the focus of the social exchange theory is on the boss (Liden et al. 1993, Bauer et al. 1996, Wayne et al. 1997) rather than acknowledging that project success often depends on a whole team.

3 Outcomes of Boss-Employee Relationship

Employee performance is a significant contributor to the quality of relationship between an employee and boss (Dansereau et al. 1975). The exchange between an employee and boss is considered a significant factor in the employee’s behavior towards the boss (Wayne et al. 1997). The boss-employee relationship is seen to impact individual, team, and organizational outcomes in the following ways:

- overall effect on performance ratings (Kacmar et al. 2003)
- effect of leaders’ differentiation among their members (Shropshire and Kadlec 2012)
- correlation with employee job satisfaction (Loke 2001)
- influence on relationships with coworkers (team-member exchange - TMX) (Seers 1989)
- effect of the relationship length on performance ratings compared to actual performance (Avery et al. 2012)

4 Problem Statement

We first begin with the assumption that if the theories developed so far are true, then the quality of the relationship with one’s boss will lead to the overall quality of the relationships with other stakeholders. This generates the first hypothesis of the research:

> H1: Among all the people one has a relationship with in the workplace, it is the relationship with the boss that has the most influence on the overall quality of the individual’s relationships (i.e., relationships with others).

Researchers in social psychology (Raven 2008) refer to six sources of influence. They are the powers of Reward, Coercion, Legitimate, Expertise, Informational and Referent. Leadership courses frequently group

these powers into three categories: power of authority (reward, coercion, and legitimate), power of expertise (expertise and information), and power of relationship (referent). One would expect that the boss' power of authority would drive the quality of the relationship as well, i.e., the more important the boss is, the more the employee will try to develop a better relationship with the boss. Hence, the second hypothesis of this research is:

H2: The importance of the boss drives the quality of relationship of the employee with the individual.

5 Research Method

5.1 Sample and Procedure

The WOYM exercise was administered by facilitators trained in collecting the data during the one-day leadership seminars held at the training facilities of 16 participating companies—all member of the CII. A total of 327 responses were received from project personnel, who were at a level commensurate with Project Manager (PM) or assistant PM. All participants were randomly assigned aliases to ensure anonymity. The use of randomly assigned aliases (rather than complete anonymity) was necessary to connect the results of the other exercises with one-another (see Wiezel et. Al. 2011), but not a requirement to prove validity of the analysis in this paper. The participants were placed in a learning environment of a one-day leadership seminar consisting of lectures and different activities, of which one was the WOYM exercise. In contrast to a survey, where participants are encouraged or get rewarded to spend time and energy on something that benefits the researchers, WOYM allows the participants to do a self analysis and reflection on their relationships. By doing that, the participant will understand how to manage their relationships and how to manage the time allocated to stakeholder. This individual analysis is valuable to the participant, but not to the research team. The research team is interested in analyzing the trends present in the responses of the whole pool of participants (Wiezel et al. 2011). The 327 participants yielded 282 (86%) completed data vectors, representing individuals who reported having at least one boss.

5.2 Measures

Relationships in the workplace were measured in the WOYM datasheet. Participants were requested to follow a six-step process: (1) List everyone with whom they spend time with individually (in person, on the phone, e-mail, etc.) and that the success of their job depends on, (2) Identify stakeholder functions, such as Boss, Mentor, Peer, Direct Report, Other Employee (e.g., HR, Accounts), External Customer, Vendor, etc. (3) Estimate the time they spend one on one (in hours) with each stakeholder in a typical week (**T**), (4) Assess the importance of each stakeholder to their job (career) success (**W**), (5) Evaluate the quality of relationship with each stakeholder (**R**), and (6) Calculate the average scores for Relationship Quality (all their stakeholders) (**R_Avg**).

The scoring for R was scaled from 1-10 with 10 equaling a very good relationship and 1 a very bad relationship. For someone to score R = 10, it was expected this person would know much personal information about the stakeholder such as where they are from, names of family members, family events, pets, and hobbies, and so on.

The importance (or weight – W) of the relationship was scaled from 1-10, with 10 equaling a very important stakeholder and 1 equaling a stakeholder of negligible importance.

Stakeholders were categorized based on their position into eight groups: Bosses, Mentors, Peers, Direct Reports, External Customers, Subcontractors, Vendors, and Others (HR, Accounts, etc.). A large spreadsheet of collected data was generated. R, W, and T were captured for each member of each group. Table 1 presents the median and standard deviations (S.D.) of all variables of the collected samples for each group. The total number of stakeholders ranged from 4 to 30, with a median of 11.99. The number of internal stakeholders ranged from 2 to 30, with a median of 9.40. The number of external stakeholders ranged from 0 to 15, with a median of 2.54. Although R_Avg is an aggregated variable, we decided to include it in the spreadsheet and to further evaluate which variable would predict average quality of the relationship for employees.

6 Data Analysis and Results

To test our hypotheses, we first performed ordinary least square (OLS) regression analyses on the data set consisting of 282 individuals that had one or more bosses. The number of bosses in the data set ranged from one to five, so we took the average of the quality of relationship with all the bosses that the individual had (R_Bosses). Other variable measured in the OLS data analysis were average quality of relationships one had with all other stakeholders (R_AllOthers).

To explore whether the average quality of relationships with non-boss stakeholders is associated with R_Bosses, we conducted a linear regression analysis. The result was a slope of 0.17 and R^2 of 0.07. In terms of Pearson's correlation, this is equivalent to r = 0.26, which is deemed to be insignificant. This means that, contrary to our expectations, H1 did not prove to be true, and R_AllOthers may be predicted (if at all) by some other factor other than R_Bosses.

Table 1: Median and Standard Deviations of the Measures

Variables (n=282)	Median	S.D.
Number of stakeholders		
Total	11.99	3.96
Internal	9.40	3.91
External	2.54	2.28
Bosses	1.74	1.08
Boss		
R-Score	7.84	1.86
Importance	8.34	1.98
Time	3.22	3.79
Mentor		
R-Score	8.44	1.47
Importance	6.96	2.26
Time	2.43	3.15
Peer		
R-Score	7.63	1.79
Importance	6.01	2.02
Time	3.55	3.77
Direct Report		
R-Score	7.74	1.61
Importance	7.16	1.90
Time	5.00	5.09
External Customer		
R-Score	7.61	1.81
Importance	8.15	1.86
Time	3.39	2.88
Subcontractor		
R-Score	8.87	2.09
Importance	6.14	2.48
Time	6.20	7.92
Vendor		
R-Score	7.19	2.06
Importance	6.41	2.33
Time	2.90	2.91
Others		
R-Score	6.93	2.37
Importance	6.39	3.29
Time	3.98	4.49
R-Avg	7.54	1.02

Next, we hypothesized that the number of bosses one has is a relevant factor to consider. Can it be that H1 is not true in hierarchical organizations, where an employee has only one boss, but is true in matrix organizations, where a person reports to two or more bosses? When looking at bosses separately, and conducting the same linear regression analysis for R_AllOthers, the results were a slope of .23 and R^2 of .16 for one boss (n = 282), slope of .23 and R^2 of .19 for two bosses (n = 125), slope of .30 and R^2 of .35 for three bosses (n = 53), and slope of .52 and a R^2 .41 for four bosses (n = 28). While the slopes vary between 23% and 52% (depending on the number of bosses one had) even the largest slope (0.52 for four bosses) proved not to be statistically significant due to the small number of data points. This means that even when we split the cases by number of bosses (one, two, three or four bosses), R_AllOthers is influenced more by something other than R_Bosses. H1 did not prove to be true in this case either.

While the OLS may not have proved the validity of H1, it may be that there are other correlations that OLS is unable to identify. This shifted the research from a confirmatory approach, to an exploratory approach. The new research question then became: Is there any variable among the ones collected that has a statistically significant correlation with R_Avg? This new research question required generating a Pearson correlations table among all the variables.

7 Findings

Table 2 presents the median and standard deviations for the variables with statistically significant Pearson correlations. These variables are: Time Boss No.1, Time Boss No.2, Time Boss No.3, R-Score Boss No.2, R-Score Boss No.3, R-Score Peer No.1, R-Score Others, W Boss No.1, W Boss No.2, W Boss No.3, and R-Avg. For the sake of consistency, bosses (1, 2, 3) were ranked first by order of importance (Boss 1 most important), and then (second criterion) by the quality of their relationship.

When one has two bosses, importance of Boss No.1 (W Boss No.1) and importance of Boss No.2 (W Boss No.2) had a statistically significant positive correlation with each other (r = 0.46 - line #9 in Table 2). When one has three bosses, importance of Boss No.1 (W Boss No.1) and importance of Boss No.2 (W Boss No.2) had a statistically significant positive correlation with each other (r = 0.55 - line #8 in Table 2). Importance of Boss No.1 (W Boss No.1) and importance of Boss No.3 (W Boss No.3) had a statistically significant positive correlation with each other (r = 0.47- line #8 in Table 2). Importance of Boss No.2 (W Boss No.2) and Importance of Boss No.3 (W Boss No.3) also showed statistically significant positive correlation with each other (r = 0.45 - line #9 in Table 2).

Importance of Boss No.2 (W Boss No.2) is positively correlated with R-Score Boss No.2 (r = 0.65 - line #9 in Table 2), but is negatively correlated with the time spent with Boss No.1 (Time Boss No.1) (r = -0.40 - line #1 in Table 2). Of greater interest, however, was that importance of Boss No.2 (W Boss No.2) had a statistically significant positive correlation with one's average quality of relationships with all stakeholders (R-Avg) (r = 0.49 - line #11 in Table 2).

When one has two bosses, the quality of relationship with Peer No. 1 (R-Score Peer No.1) and one's average quality of relationships with all stakeholders (R-Avg) had a statistically significant positive correlation with each other (r = 0.45 - line #6 in Table 2). In the case of one with three bosses, quality of the relationship with Boss No.3 (R-Score Boss No.3) and quality of the relationship with those stakeholders categorized as others such as HR, Accounts, etc. (R-Score Others) were the two other variables which had statistically significant positive correlation with one's average quality of relationships with all stakeholders (R-Avg) (r = 0.54 and r = 0.43 - line #11 in Table 2). The time spent with Boss No.2 (Time Boss No.2) and the time spent with Boss No.3 (Time Boss No.3) also had a statistically significant positive correlation with each other (r = 0.76 - line #2 in Table 2).

8 Conclusion

BER was generally believed to be a driving factor in the success of the employee. We can also hypothesize that BER will influence the relationships between an employee and other people essential to the success of the employee (stakeholders). However, the statement "H1: Among all the people one has a relationship

with in the workplace, it is the relationship with the boss that has the most influence on the overall quality of relationships of the individual (i.e., relationships with others,)" proved to be untrue.

The results indicate that it is not Boss No.1 who has the most influence on the overall quality of relationships of the individual. This observation applies to individuals who have either one or more bosses. We remind the reader that Boss No.1 is the boss with the highest importance as first criterion, and highest quality of relationship as second criterion. For individuals with two bosses, the overall quality of relationships (R_Avg) correlates with the importance of Boss No.2 (W Boss No.2) (r=0.49), and with the quality of relationship with Peer No.1 (R-Score Peer No.1) (r = 0.45). For individuals with three bosses, overall quality of relationships (R_Avg) correlates with R-Score Peer No.1 (r=0.45), W Boss No.2 (r=0.49), R-Score Boss No.3 (r=0.54), and R-Score Others (r=0.43).

Table 2: Results of Pearson Correlations, Median and Standard Deviations of the Measures

		Only Two Bosses			Only Three Bosses				
No.	Variables	*Median*	*S.D.*	*Correlation with*	*Median*	*S.D.*	*Correlation with*		
1	Time Boss No.1	2.88	2.72		4.23	5.25	W Boss No.2 (r=-0.40)		
2	Time Boss No.2	2.00	2.05		2.42	2.80	Time Boss No.3 (r=0.76)		
3	Time Boss No.3				7.93	1.70	Time Boss No.2 (r=0.76)		
4	R-Score Boss No.2	7.50	1.80		7.52	1.69	W Boss No.2 (r=0.65)		
5	R-Score Boss No.3				6.96	1.65	R-Avg (r=0.54)		
6	R-Score Peer No.1	7.69	1.80	R-Avg (r=0.45)	6.83	1.98			
7	R-Score Others	6.16	3.02		7.42	1.21	R-Avg (r=0.43)		
8	W Boss No.1	8.90	1.80	W Boss No.2 (r=0.46)	8.32	1.82	W Boss No.2 (r=0.55)	W Boss No.3 (r=0.47)	
9	W Boss No.2	8.30	1.80	W Boss No.1 (r=0.46)	7.88	1.99	W Boss No.1 (r=0.55)	W Boss No.3 (r=0.45)	R-Score Boss No.2 (r=0.65)
10	W Boss No.3				7.64	2.02	W Boss No.1 (r=0.47)	W Boss No.2 (r=0.45)	
11	R-Avg	7.50	0.90	R-Score Peer No.1 (r=0.45)	7.03	0.78	W Boss No.2 (r=0.49)	R-Score Boss No.3 (r=0.54)	R-Score Others (r=0.43)

Also, it is noteworthy that while the results do show a correlation between quality of the relationship with Boss No.2 (R-Score Boss No.2) and importance of Boss No.2 (W Boss No.2), they do not show a correlation

between the importance and quality of relationship with Boss No.1 (W Boss No.1 and R-Score Boss No.1) and between the importance and quality of relationship with Boss No.3 (W Boss No.3 and R-Score Boss No.3). This means that our second hypothesis (H2) is not true either. The hypothesis that the importance of the boss drives the quality of the relationship (H2) is only true for Boss No.2 in instances where an individual had exactly three bosses (but not true for two bosses). We suspect that this last conclusion is true only for the particular data set we analyzed. After all, if one works with a statistical validation of p=5%, there still is a chance that we analyzed the one data set that is one in 20.

Of the three types of organizations (one boss, two and three bosses) in a hierarchical organization, an employee has only one boss. In a matrix organization, an employee has two bosses (one for each direction of the matrix). Finally, there are people who have three or more bosses. For this reason, the authors call for further investigation to see if there would be a difference between the influence of the bosses among all three types of organizations. For each organization structure, we expect a different set of rules. Future research should also examine the optimal organization structure in which a particular project-team can have the best results and retention.

Acknowledgements

The data for this research was obtained from previous research, RT 281, funded by the Construction Industry Institute (CII). We thank CII for allowing us to continue analyzing the data collected through their leadership seminars.

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