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The importance of supervisor support for a change initiative

An analysis of job satisfaction and involvement

Supervisor support for change

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Abstract

Purpose – Although organizations change on a regular basis, much of what we know about the impacts of organizational change can best be described as macro-level information. Only recently have scholars begun to examine the impact of organizational change at the level of the individual employee (i.e. micro level). The purpose of this paper is to assess the importance of a supervisor's support for a change initiative in relation to employee job satisfaction and job involvement.

Design/methodology/approach – This research made use of archival data. Police officers ($n = 88$) were randomly selected from across the USA to complete phone interviews meant to assess, in part, supervisor support for a change from traditional policing to community policing, job satisfaction, and job involvement.

Findings – While supervisor support for the change initiative was found to be related to job satisfaction and job involvement, job satisfaction mediated the supervisor support-job involvement relationship.

Research limitations/implications – The major limitation of this study is its small sample, which precluded the use of more advanced statistical techniques (i.e. structural equation modeling). The major implication is that both employees and the organization stand to benefit during a change initiative if the supervisor demonstrates his or her support for the initiative.

Originality/value – This research is of value given the prevalence of organizational change and the need for more research examining the impact of change on micro-level issues.

Keywords United States of America, Police, Organizational change, Change management, Employees behaviour, Satisfaction, Support, Involvement

Paper type Research paper

Virtually every organization will experience development and change at one time or another. While some organizations experience change intermittently, others experience change on a fairly continuous basis (Weick and Quinn, 1999). Although the body of literature dedicated to organizational change is extensive, it does possess a void that until recently has primarily been overlooked. Specifically, much of the research focusing on issues relevant to organizational change has focused on organizational-level concerns rather than individual-level concerns (Elias, 2009; Judge *et al.*, 1999; Vakola *et al.*, 2003; Wanberg and Banas, 2000). As a result, while management scholars and practitioners have gained great insight into macro-level issues pertaining to organizational development and change, we have gained much less insight into similar micro-level issues. This is unfortunate because organizational change places a fair amount of stress on individual employees (Vakola and Nikolaou, 2005), and a failure to attend to employees' psychological needs during the implementation of a change initiative can result in the change initiative failing (Deloitte & Touche, 2005).



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Such micro-level issues as personal resilience (Wanberg and Banas, 2000), locus of control (Lau and Woodman, 1995), attitudes towards change (Elias, 2009; Lines, 2005), and employee motivation (Antoni, 2004) have been investigated in relation to organizational change. Also of relevance is that Griffin *et al.* (2001) have linked supervisor support to job satisfaction. The purpose of the current research is to assess the role of supervisor support in relation to job satisfaction and involvement during times of organizational change. Specifically, this study will address the relationships between employees' perceptions of support from supervisors, employee job satisfaction, and employee job involvement. Furthermore, we expect to extend what we know about perceptions of supervisor support and job satisfaction by assessing whether job satisfaction will mediate the relationship that exists between perceptions of supervisor support and job involvement.

The focus of this study is a sample of law enforcement officers employed in police departments across the USA. Data were originally collected by Langston and Richardson (1995). Prior to data being collected, each officer's department had recently undergone an episode of organizational change in that it had moved from a traditional authoritarian model of policing to community policing. While traditional policing can be thought of as reactive in nature, community policing can be thought of as being proactive for improved service delivery. Specifically, Fielding (2005, p. 460) has defined community policing as:

[...] an iconic style of policing in which the police are close to the public, know their concerns from regular everyday contacts, and act on them in accord with the community's wishes.

The organizational change process of going from traditional to community policing involved, for example, such activities as interacting with citizens in order to assess their needs, establishing police help-posts in neighborhoods, the decentralization of procedures, and using citizen input to evaluate officer performance. By taking these officers as the focus of this study, we were able to study the role of supervisor support and related variables such as job satisfaction and job involvement among employees who had experienced a large amount of change within their organizations.

Literature review and hypotheses

Supervisor support and job satisfaction

The feeling of support experienced by individuals at the workplace, be it from their supervisors or colleagues, has been consistently linked to attitudinal outcomes such as job satisfaction (Henderson and Argyle, 1985; Griffin *et al.*, 2001). Job satisfaction is commonly defined as "a pleasurable or positive emotional state resulting from the appraisal of one's job or job experiences" (Locke, 1976, p. 1304). Many studies have found job satisfaction to be directly linked to what is called "social support" (Baruch-Feldman and Schwartz, 2002; Perrewe and Carlson, 2002; Brough and Frame, 2004). Social support is understood to have three constituents: support from supervisors, support from co-workers, and support from family/friends. It is expected that in a workplace scenario support and encouragement from supervisors would be crucial for job satisfaction (Yukl, 1989; Brough and Pears, 2004).

More specific to the workplace, one could conceive of supervisors' support as being a component or facet of what Eisenberger *et al.* (1986) refer to as perceived organizational support (POS). Essentially, POS can be thought of as an employee's belief as to whether

his or her organization values his or her contributions and is mindful of his or her well-being. It is likely the case that POS is linked to supervisor support because it takes into account such social issues as social norms (e.g. the norm of reciprocity (Gouldner, 1960)) and socioemotional support (e.g. emotional support and personal approval). Empirical support has been obtained for this link in that when employees feel supported by their supervisors, their POS is enhanced, which in turn leads to greater organizational citizenship behavior (Shanock and Eisenberger, 2006).

Considering the available evidence in the literature that a positive linkage exists between POS and job satisfaction and social support and job satisfaction (Burke, 2003; Chu *et al.*, 2006; Ladebo *et al.*, 2005), we hypothesize that supervisor support for a change initiative is likely to have a positive relationship with job satisfaction. We infer that the same dynamics are at work between POS and job satisfaction as between supervisor support and job satisfaction. Support from supervisors at the workplace should generate a pleasurable work environment and a positive perception of the job. Encouragement and advice from supervisors should also make a worker feel more secure while performing his or her job. The combined result of these psychological processes should result in the employee developing a positive attitude toward his or her job. Moreover, this effect should be more impactful if the work environment and job design is in the process of change. In such a scenario, where a change initiative is being implemented, supervisor support would provide employees with the knowledge that they can draw upon the advice and help of their supervisors to do their job well and deal with mistakes, if any. This line of reasoning leads us to propose the following hypothesis:

- H1.* Supervisor support for a change initiative is positively related to job satisfaction.

Supervisor support and job involvement

Another important outcome associated with organizational support is job involvement. Job involvement refers to the individual employee's level of psychological identification with the specific job in which he or she is engaged (Kanungo, 1982). One can infer that if an employee has a positive perception of his or her organization's support, he or she is likely to possess positive attitudes toward his or her organization in general, and job in particular (Eisenberger *et al.*, 1990; Shore and Wayne, 1993). In their study of organizational support, Cropanzano *et al.* (1997) found that organizational support was significantly related to several workplace behaviors, including job involvement. O'Driscoll and Randall (1999) have also empirically confirmed the belief that when an organization cares about its employees and values their contributions, the result is higher levels of job involvement and affective attachment to the company.

In their review and meta-analysis of the POS literature, Rhoades and Eisenberger (2002) demonstrate that organizational support serves as an antecedent to numerous psychological variables. For example, when an employee perceives his or her organization as being supportive, he or she reciprocates through increased commitment to the organization. Furthermore, when employees feel supported by their organization, they experience greater job satisfaction, more involvement, and fewer strain symptoms (e.g. burnout). Similar research, conducted in diverse organizations, has demonstrated how organizational support serves as an antecedent to these psychological outcomes.

When assessing manufacturing employees' perceptions of management's support for job safety initiatives, Michael *et al.* (2005) found a link between such perceptions and numerous psychological variables. Specifically, when employees believed management supported safety initiatives, they reported greater job satisfaction and organizational commitment, while demonstrating fewer withdrawal behaviors.

As discussed above, support from supervisors is an important element in employees' perceptions of organizational support. From an employee's stand point, his or her supervisors at different levels are the embodiment of the organization. Thus, the organization's support would likely be perceived by the employee as being comprised of support, not only from his immediate supervisor but also from upper echelons of management. A positive perception of such support would conceivably impact the extent of employee's involvement with the job. Conversely, if the employee does not feel supported by either his or her supervisors, job involvement may lessen. As with job satisfaction, this phenomenon may be more pronounced when the organization is in the process of going through change. When a change in the organization and its practices has been mandated, the support of one's supervisors assumes an important psychological sustaining mechanism for the employee to retain his or her involvement in the job. This reasoning leads us to propose the following hypothesis:

H2. Supervisor support for a change initiative is positively related to job involvement.

Job satisfaction as a mediator of the supervisor support – job involvement relationship
Prior research would indicate that the relationship between supervisor support and job involvement is not a direct relationship. For example, Coyle-Shapiro and Morrow (2006) found that among contract employees (i.e. refuse collection employees), POS from the client organization would result in greater commitment to the client. However, when studying individuals employed by numerous organizations, Saks (2006) determined that while POS is predictive of organizational commitment, the relationship is partially mediated by job and organization engagement, rather than being a direct relationship. Therefore, while organizational support would seem to affect variables such as organizational commitment, its effect is passed onto these variables through other mediating variables.

Consistent with the findings of Rhoades and Eisenberger (2002) and Hochwarter *et al.* (2003) found significant direct effects of organizational support on job satisfaction, commitment, and job-induced tension among full-time employees. Therefore, the above body of literature is supportive of an antecedent role of organizational and/or supervisor support for a number of desirable outcomes such as job satisfaction and job involvement. A link has been established between job satisfaction and job involvement (Brooke *et al.*, 1988; Dailey and Kirk, 1992). However, the mediating role of variables in support – outcome variable relationships is worthy of consideration. Of particular interest is the relationship between supervisor support and job involvement. In a meta-analysis of the review of literature on job involvement (Brown, 1996), job involvement was found to be positively related to job satisfaction. This meta-analysis also supported the conceptualization of personal and situational variables as antecedent influences on job involvement.

We have stated earlier that supervisor support is an important facet of organizational support as perceived by an individual. We have also argued that the dynamics

of the impact of organizational support on various psychological variables would be similar to the dynamics of the influence of supervisor support on such variables. Drawing upon the literature dedicated to organizational support and its influence on other job-related variables, we can conceive of a positive linkage between supervisor support and job involvement. However, when taking prior research into consideration, it is worthwhile to investigate what variables may be more proximal to job involvement than supervisor support in order to gain insight into the process by which supervisor support influences job involvement.

Based on the research cited above, the question becomes:

Is supervisor support for a change initiative a proximal variable to job satisfaction and job involvement, or is it a distal variable whose effect is mediated by other, more proximal, variables?

The purpose of the current research is to address this question. As argued above, the research on organizational support lends itself to a plausible expectation of the antecedent influences of supervisor support on job-related outcomes. In particular, supervisor support can be expected to have a direct positive relationship with job satisfaction. However, its influence on job involvement may not be that clearly defined. As stated above, job involvement refers to the level of an individual's identification with one's job (Kanungo, 1982). If the individual feels supported by his supervisors and management, he may identify more with his job. It is also possible that a feeling of supervisor support enhances the feeling of job satisfaction in employees, who then become more involved in their job. If so, job satisfaction should mediate the relationship between supervisor support and job involvement:

H3. Job satisfaction mediates the relationship between supervisor support and job involvement.

Method

As mentioned above, this study makes use of data collected by Langston and Richardson (1995) and the methods described below can be attributed to these authors.

Participants

The data used for this study were obtained from the Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research and was originally collected by Langston and Richardson (1995). As previously mentioned, prior to data being collected, each officer's department had recently undergone an episode of organizational change in that it had moved from a traditional authoritarian model of policing to community policing. Using a random number table, a total of 30 police departments from throughout the USA were selected to participate in a national survey of community policing. Data were obtained from departments ($n = 30$) in the Midwestern ($n = 8$), Southern ($n = 8$), Western ($n = 8$), and Northeastern ($n = 6$) USA. In order for a department to be eligible for selection, it must have recently implemented a change initiative in the form of shifting from traditional authoritarian models of policing to community policing. Three officers from each of the 30 departments were randomly selected to partake in a telephone interview. Complete data were obtained from 88 officers, yielding a 98 percent response rate. The typical employee was male ($n = 75$), Caucasian ($n = 74$), 36.40 years of age ($SD = 8.36$), had been employed as a police officer for 12.16 years ($SD = 11.09$), and had been officially

assigned as a community police officer for 29.88 months ($SD = 24.43$). In terms of education, most employees had attempted college ($n = 28$), earned an associates degree ($n = 15$), or completed a four-year college degree ($n = 28$).

Measures

Supervisor support for the change initiative was assessed through three items (e.g. In your opinion, does your immediate supervisor support community policing?), using a three-point Likert scale where 1 indicated “not at all,” 2 indicated “somewhat,” and 3 indicated “completely.” The three levels of supervision assessed were immediate supervisor, chief, and the agency as a whole. Higher scores are associated with greater perceptions of supervisor support and the coefficient α was 0.54. Job satisfaction was measured via the 18-item satisfaction with work facet of the job descriptive index (JDI; Smith *et al.*, 1969). Using the three-point Likert scale recommended by the authors (3 – yes, 1 – uncertain, and 0 – no), respondents indicated whether each word or phrase (i.e. satisfying, good, fulfilling, fascinating, routine, boring, creative, respected, pleasant, tiresome, useful, helpful, challenging, frustrating, simple, endless, difficult, and useless) was descriptive of their community policing duties. Of the five JDI subscales (i.e. work, pay, promotion, supervisor, and co-workers), the satisfaction with work subscale is most highly correlated with overall job satisfaction (Cook *et al.*, 1981). Higher scores are indicative of greater job satisfaction, and the coefficient α was .69.

A single-item scale was used to assess job involvement. Using a four-point rating scale ranging from “overly involved” (4) to “ready for something new” (1), employees rated how currently involved they are with their jobs. Higher scores are indicative of greater involvement.

Procedure

As previously mentioned, the procedure described below can be attributed to Langston and Richardson (1995). Employees of the Center for Criminal Justice Studies, which is the research arm of the Fraternal Order of Police, contacted participants via telephone. Respondents were informed as to how they were randomly selected to participate in a national survey of community police officers and that any information they provided would be strictly anonymous. Before the telephone interviews began, respondents were asked if they were in a location where they would be able to speak openly. Once participants agreed to participate in the study and verified that they were in an appropriate location, the interview began and lasted approximately 40-60 minutes.

Results

An α level of 0.05 was used for all statistical tests. Table I presents the means, SD , and bivariate correlations for each variable of interest. Interestingly, no demographic variable (i.e. gender, age, level of education, and ethnicity) was significantly correlated with any of the variables of interest (r s ranged from 0.01 to -0.17). The correlation coefficients presented in Table I are important not only because they offer insight into the bivariate relationships among the variables of interest, but also because they indicate a lack of multicollinearity. Multicollinearity is said to occur when a studies predictor variables are highly correlated (coefficients > 0.70 ; Vogt, 2007), a criterion that was not met for the current study.

Table I.

Descriptive statistics and
bivariate correlations
among the variables of
interest

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Age	36.4	8.36	–						
2. Education	4.58	1.51	–0.11	–					
3. Gender	n/a	n/a	–0.18	0.05	–				
4. Ethnicity	n/a	n/a	–0.10	–0.02	0.01	–			
5. Job satisfaction	39.65	7.69	0.14	0.02	–0.13	0.09	–		
6. Job involvement	3.15	0.67	–0.03	0.10	0.01	–0.05	0.22*	–	
7. Supervisor support	7.67	1.02	0.09	–0.17	0.01	–0.09	0.27**	0.22*	–

Notes: Correlation coefficients are significant with * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, $n = 88$; age is reported in years; for education, 1 – some high school, 2 – high school diploma, 3 – business or trade degree, 4 – some college, 5 – associate degree, 6 – college degree, 7 – some graduate school, and 8 – graduate degree; for gender, 1 – male and 2 – female; for ethnicity, 1 – Caucasian, 2 – African-American, 3 – Hispanic, 4 – Asian/Pacific Islander, 5 – Native American, and 6 – Other

In support of *H1*, a significant relationship was observed between supervisor support and job satisfaction ($R^2 = 0.07$, $F(1, 87) = 6.69$, $B = 2.01$, $SE = 0.78$, $\beta = 0.27$, $p = 0.01$), indicating that when employees perceived their supervisors as supporting the change initiative they reported greater job satisfaction than when they perceived their supervisors as being unsupportive. In support of *H2*, a significant relationship was observed between supervisor support and job involvement ($R^2 = 0.05$, $F(1, 87) = 4.23$, $B = 0.14$, $SE = 0.07$, $\beta = 0.22$, $p = 0.04$), indicating that when employees perceived their supervisors as supporting the change initiative they reported greater job involvement than when they perceived their supervisors as being unsupportive.

The hypothesis that job satisfaction would mediate the relationship that exists between supervisor support and job involvement (*H3*) was tested via the Baron and Kenny (1986) approach for testing mediated relationships (James *et al.* (2006) for a recent review of the Baron and Kenny approach in relation to structural equation modeling). According to Baron and Kenny, mediation can be assessed via four regression equations. In first, the mediator variable (i.e. job satisfaction) must be related to the distal variable (i.e. supervisor support), a relationship we have already established ($B = 2.01$, $\beta = 0.27$, $p = 0.01$). In second, the distal variable (i.e. supervisor support) must be related to the criterion measure (i.e. job involvement), a relationship we have already established ($B = 0.14$, $\beta = 0.22$, $p = 0.04$). In third, the mediator variable (i.e. job satisfaction) should be related to the criterion measure (i.e. job involvement), which it was ($R^2 = 0.05$, $F(1, 87) = 4.46$, $B = 0.02$, $SE = 0.01$, $\beta = 0.22$, $p = 0.04$). In fourth, the distal variable (i.e. supervisor support) can no longer account for a significant amount of variance in the criterion measure (i.e. job involvement) when the mediator variable (i.e. job satisfaction) is included in the equation. Because supervisor support no longer accounts for a significant amount of variance in job involvement when job satisfaction is included in the model ($B = 0.11$, $\beta = 0.17$, $p = 0.12$), it can be said that job satisfaction mediates the supervisor support – job involvement relationship.

In order to determine if the mediated effect of supervisor support on job involvement is statistically significant, the *post hoc* probing technique recommended by Holmbeck (2002) was performed. This technique, frequently referred to as the Sobel test, is used to calculate a ratio of indirect effect to error, which is interpreted like a *z*-test.

A significant z -score is indicative of a significant mediated effect. For the current data, $z = 1.64$ ($p = 0.05$) indicating the mediated effect is significant.

Discussion

The dynamics of workplace behavior is a complex and much studied subject. Various dimensions of the linkages between antecedent variables such as organizational support and social support, psychological states such as affective commitment and stress, and behavioral outcomes such as job satisfaction and job performance have been theorized and empirically demonstrated. However, there have not been many studies of these phenomena under conditions of organizational change. While organizational change has been studied extensively, most of the studies have focused on macro-level phenomena rather than on micro-level implications. However, considering that organizational change directly impacts the members of the organization, an examination of job-related variables at the individual level has theoretical and practical implications. The purpose of our study was to examine relationships among supervisor support, job satisfaction, and job involvement under conditions of organizational change. We chose to study these connections to elucidate the apparent importance of supervisor support during a change initiative that is mandated by the organization.

Drawing upon the literature of workplace support on job satisfaction, we hypothesized that supervisor support would be positively related to job satisfaction amongst employees of an organization undergoing a change. In a scenario where job design and organizational procedures are under change, it is likely for employees to feel apprehensive and uncertain. Consequently, such employees would be more dependent on their supervisors for support, direction, and encouragement. If employees perceive such support to be available, they are likely to be more satisfied in their jobs. The results of the current study support this belief, as well as prior research (Henderson and Argyle, 1985; Griffin *et al.*, 2001). By the same logic, a feeling of support from supervisors during the implementation of a change initiative was also expected to create conditions in which the employees' involvement with the job is enhanced. Again, the results of this study support this principle and prior research (Cropanzano *et al.*, 1997; O'Driscoll and Randall, 1999).

The literature was also suggestive of a relationship between job satisfaction and job involvement (Brooke *et al.*, 1988; Dailey and Kirk, 1992). This led us to question which variable would be more proximal to job involvement during the implementation of a change initiative. Assuming that both supervisor support and job satisfaction were related to job involvement, we hypothesized that job satisfaction would be more proximal to job involvement. To be specific, we hypothesized that job satisfaction would mediate the relationship between supervisor support and job involvement. Support for this hypothesis was obtained, indicating that when supervisors demonstrate support for a change initiative, subordinates' job satisfaction increases, which in turn increases job involvement.

Implications

Our findings have several theoretical and practical implications. In addition to demonstrating a positive relationship between supervisor support and job satisfaction under conditions of organizational change, we demonstrated that supervisor support also positively impacts job involvement and that such influence is transmitted through

job satisfaction. Thus, these findings add to our knowledge regarding the processes by which these job-related variables interact with each other during organizational change. On the practical side, our results underscore the importance of supervisor support for achieving the desirable affective state of job satisfaction, in addition to high levels of job involvement. Therefore, while mandating and managing change in any organization, upper-management would do well to ensure that supervisors are suitably trained and attuned to provide support to their subordinates so that satisfaction and involvement are maintained during what may otherwise be a difficult time for employees. Conversely, a failure to create conditions conducive to supervisor support could lead to the resistance to change previously discussed (Deloitte & Touche, 2005).

Limitations and directions for future research

While this study examined several psychological and organizational variables, these variables were assessed in the context of a police department. As such, there may be organizational culture and power structure differences between this sample and a more traditional employee sample. While prior research on organizational change (Elias, 2009) and POS (Armeli *et al.*, 1998) has been conducted in the context of police departments, future research might want to replicate and extend the current study in a more common work environment. Another issue pertaining to this study's sample is its size ($n = 88$), which precluded the use of more powerful statistical analyses (e.g. structural equation modeling or hierarchical linear modeling). Contrarily, a strength of this study's sample can be seen in that the participants were randomly selected from across the USA, increasing the extent to which the sample is representative.

A note may also be made of the fact that due to the limitations imposed by archival data, job involvement was assessed via a single item. While it is certainly desirable to assess a construct through the use of multiple indicators, single-item measures have a long history in industrial-organizational psychology, human resource management, and organizational-behavior research (Wanous and Hudy, 2001). In fact, single items have been appropriately used to assess such issues as turnover intentions (Leong *et al.*, 1996), organizational identification (Shamir and Kark, 2004), overall job satisfaction (Wanous *et al.*, 1997), and facet job satisfaction (Nagy, 2002). However, future research may wish to replicate and extend the current study while utilizing multi-item scales. Lastly, common method variance (CMV) is a concern given this study made use of cross-sectional, self-report survey data (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2003). However, according to Spector (2006), the issue of CMV is greatly overstated to the extent that it has become an urban legend.

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