Increasing Affective Organizational Commitment in Public Organizations

The Key Role of Interpersonal Trust

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Affective organizational commitment has been equated to the public service motivation of public employees. It is a valuable component of organizational effectiveness. However, few management intervention strategies exist that specifically address increasing affective commitment. Often successful interventions are designed around correlates of the intended attitudinal construct. One hypothesized correlate of affective commitment in organization behavior literature is trust. Trust can be differentiated as interpersonal trust (between the employee and the manager) and systems trust (between the employee and the organization as a whole). This differentiation is significant for the public manager because the relationship between affective commitment and trust can prescribe two different strategies for an intervention aimed at positively impacting affective commitment. For example, if affective commitment is linked to systems trust, an intervention based on a top-down strategy would be the better choice. This study tests the relationship of affective commitment and trust in over 600 employees in three different public organizations. The study finds that interpersonal trust is the significantly stronger correlate of affective commitment. These findings suggest that intervention strategies that begin with trust building from the bottom-up are likely to have a higher likelihood of increasing affective organizational commitment than strategies reflecting a systems trust building objective.

The image of government as inefficient, ineffective and in need of systemic change is a popular one (Gore, 1993; Kanter & Mirvis, 1989; Mitchell & Scott, 1987; Osborne & Pasterik, 1997; Volcker Commission, 1989; Wildavsky, 1988). Public managers typically face highly complex problems with limited funding and elevated citizen expectations. As a consequence, public managers are involved in a constant effort to identify strategies to motivate employees to increase their effectiveness and to increase the productivity of their units.

Several notable public administration scholars posited the view that building affective organizational commitment in public organizations is key to meeting these challenges (Dobel, 1990; Golembiewski, 1985; Nachmias, 1985). Perry & Wise (1990) suggest that higher levels of affective commitment increase public service motivation and occasion greater organizational effectiveness. Several empirical studies also support the linkage between affective commitment and managerial effectiveness (Locke, Feren, McCaleb, Staw & Denny, 1980; Luthans, McCaul & Dodd, 1985; Ouchi & Wilkins, 1985; Schein, 1970; Shore & Martin, 1989; Steers, 1975). Romzek (1990) contends that increased organizational commitment is critical to the motivation and retention of quality public sector employees. However, despite its importance few management intervention strategies exist that specifically target affective commitment.

Golembiewski (1990) reports that organizational development interventions need precisely tailored intervention strate-

gies to ensure high success rates. This research constitutes an effort to identify a correlate to affective commitment for which existing intervention strategies already exist. It is proposed that trust is the key correlate to affective commitment. Further, this research is aimed at differentiating trust along two dimensions. This is the first study to test the relationship of affective commitment and a two-dimensional construct for workplace trust. The results of the study have important implications for tailoring existing trust-building intervention strategies to maximize their impact on affective commitment. Today's public manager needs to understand more fully the interpersonal dynamics of their organization to better guide their actions in attempting to improve not only results but the quality of the workplace environment for all employees.

Affective Organizational Commitment Defined

For an employee, the foundational concept of workplace commitment is identified along multiple foci, including commitment to one's work, career, job, union and organization (Mueller, Wallace & Price, 1992). Organizational commitment can be further divided into two principal dimensions: (1) affective and (2) calculative. This two-dimensional viewpoint on organizational commitment is shared by several researchers (Angle & Lawson, 1993; Cohen & Kirchmeyer, 1995; Dunham, Grube & Castaneda, 1994; Ferris & Aranya, 1983; Meyer, Paunonen, Gellatly, Goffin & Jackson, 1989; Meyer, Allen & Gellatly, 1990; McGee & Ford, 1987; Mowday, Porter & Steers, 1982).

The term affective commitment implies a strong bond between an individual and the employing organization based on:

1. A strong belief in and acceptance of the organization's goals and values,
2. A willingness to exert considerable effort on behalf of the organization, and
3. A strong desire to maintain membership in the organization (Porter, Steers, Mowday & Boulian, 1974, p. 604).

Higher levels of affective commitment are empirically linked to higher levels of *job performance* (Mowday, Porter & Dubin, 1974; Steers, 1977; Van Maanen, 1975), lower *absenteeism* (Koch & Steers, 1978; Larson & Fukami, 1984; Mathieu & Kohler, 1990), lower *turnover* (Price & Mueller, 1981; Williams & Hazer, 1986); higher *job satisfaction* (Kanungo, 1982; Mathieu & Farr, 1991); and greater *job involvement* (Blau, 1985; Brooke, Russell & Price, 1988).

The calculative dimension of organizational commitment is concerned mainly with the process by which individuals develop a sense of allegiance *not* to an organization but rather to their own actions within the organizational setting (Halaby, 1986; Salancik, 1977; Wahn, 1998). According to Becker (1960) calculative commitment reflects a disposition to engage in consistent lines of activity as a result of the accumulation of "side bets" that would be lost if the activity were discontinued. The term "side bet" refers to anything of value the individual has "invested" (e.g., time, effort, money, status) that would be lost at some perceived cost to the individual if he or she were to leave the organization.

Calculative commitment is most often associated with extrinsic rewards such as pay, status, promotion and benefits. With respect to affective commitment, however, Romzek (1989) contends that in the public sector affective commitment can be influenced through a strategic use of intrinsic incentives. This contention is critical in an era of fiscal constraint for public managers

whose ability to offer extrinsic incentives is typically rather limited. The attention devoted to affective commitment in the public sector reflects the fact that there is some empirical evidence of the dominance of affective over calculative organizational commitment in public organizations. Balfour and Wechsler's (1990) findings support the argument of a positive correlation between public employment and affective organizational commitment. Liou & Nyhan's empirical results support Romzek's contention that public employees are more likely to be committed to their work based on their affective attachment to their public organizations than on the basis of calculative commitment. Young, Worchel & Woehr (1998) also found that extrinsic rewards are not more important than intrinsic rewards in influencing organizational commitment in public organizations.

Trust Defined

In general, trust represents the level of confidence that one individual has in another person or entity to act in a fair, ethical and predictable manner. Rotter (1971, p. 444) defines trust as "expectancy held by an individual or group that the word, promise, or written statement of another individual or group can be relied upon." Carnevale & Wechsler (1992, p. 473) find that trust "involves faith or confidence in the intentions or actions of a person or a group, the expectation of ethical, fair, and non-threatening behavior, and concerns for the rights of others." Culbert & McDonough (1986, p. 175) contend that "trust pertains to whether or not one individual is able to value what another is up to and demonstrate respect for him or her particularly when the individual's need and those of the person taking the action momentarily compete." Matthai (1989, p. 29) states that "Trust is defined

as the employees' feelings of confidence that, when faced with an uncertain or risky situation, the organization's words and behaviors are consistent, and are meant to be helpful."

Trust is also envisioned as multidimensional in the literature. In all of the above definitions there is a stated (or implied) dimensionality of trust; one dimension is that of interpersonal trust (among employees and between an employee and their boss) and the other is that of systems trust (the employee and the organization as a whole). Luhmann (1979) was the first scholar to articulate this dichotomy. "Trust occurs within a framework of interaction which is influenced by both personality and social system, and cannot be exclusively associated with either" (Luhmann, 1979, p. 6). Luhmann (1979, p. 58) believes that systems trust is latent and stands beyond the day-to-day experiences that influence interpersonal trust. This dichotomization assumes that an individual's degree of trust (and other psychological attachments) varies between their supervisor and the organization as a whole. Employees carry images of the organization based on the decisions and actions of the executive group. These "images" of the organization as an entity are separate from those which are formed based on the immediate contact the employee has on a daily basis with his or her supervisor. The supervisor-worker dyadic relationship is well documented as a critical factor in affecting behaviors in organizations (Daley, 1991). The supervisor controls the flow of information in most organizations, and access to information is a key manifestation of the level of trust in an organization (Creed & Miles, 1996).

Linkage Between Affective Commitment and Trust

There is significant theoretical and empirical support for the existence of a linkage between affective commitment and trust. Blake & Mouton (1984) view trust as synonymous with mutual respect and a key to developing affective commitment. Pascale & Athos (1981) and Kanter (1972) contend that trust complements affective commitment. Diffie-Couch (1984) concludes that mistrust leads to decreased commitment, "and an unquantifiable cost in untapped potential." The essentiality of the linkage between affective commitment and trust flows from the complexity of today's organizational climate and the need for public employees to be empowered to make decisions on behalf of the organization. Luhmann (1979) contends that trust allows organizational members to reduce the complexity of organizational life in productive ways. Romzek (1985a, 1985b) believes that high levels of affective commitment are associated with employees reacting to unexpected contingencies in a way that is in consonance with organizational interests.

When employees lack confidence that their decisions will be supported, it is often the case that organizational entropy occurs. Kanter & Mirvis (1989) argue that public employees tend to be more cynical and mistrustful of their organizations (particularly if they are seen to be "politicized) than employees in the private sector, and that loss of trust by public employees creates the need for more "red-tape" and leads to a loss in organizational effectiveness. Culbert & McDonough (1986) observe that "When an individual perceives that an organizational system is not trustworthy–that the system will not recognize and reward contributions the individual seeks to make–the individual seeks to reduce his or her vulnerability by emphasizing only those performance areas that can be objectively tabulated and defended" (p.179).

Most importantly, the linkage between trust and affective commitment should vary if Luhmann's hypothesis of the dichotomization of trust is true. There is a logical assumption that both systems trust and affective commitment have the same focus, that is, the organization as a whole. However, anecdotal evidence collected during interviews with employees in this study suggested that the relationship with the supervisor was the key to understanding the employee's connection to the organization's goals and their willingness to exert their best effort and to remain within the agencies.

If an individual's degree of trust differs between themselves and their supervisor and between themselves and the organization as a whole, it is important to identify which relationship leads to the stronger attachment. If affective commitment is more strongly linked to systems trust, an intervention based on a top-down strategy would be the better choice than a bottom-up strategy focused on the interpersonal relationships between the supervisor and the employee. Consequently, a research design was developed to test the relationship between affective commitment and trust in the supervisor and trust in the organization as a whole.

STUDY RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Study Design

As a part of a series of organizational development assignments, survey instruments were used to assess the relationship of affective commitment and trust in three public sector organizations. To assess the level of organizational commitment, the Meyer & Allen (1984) Affective Commitment Scale was used. The Meyer & Allen scale is

an 8-item index that shows strong construct validity with the Porter, Steers, Mowday & Boulian (1974) Organizational Commitment Questionnaire (.78 and .86) in the Meyer & Allen 1984 and 1990 studies. Organizational trust was assessed using the Organizational Trust Inventory (OTI) (Nyhan & Marlowe, 1997). It was designed specifically to reflect the dichotomy of systems and interpersonal trust specified in Luhmann's theory. An 8-item scale was used with four questions measuring trust in supervisor and four questions measuring trust in the organization as-a-whole. Both scales use a 7-point Likert format.

Subjects

Study Group 1 included 327 employees of an engineering division in a county government organization. Sixty-seven percent of the subjects were male. Fourteen percent were supervisors, 34% were professionals, and 52% were clerical and trades personnel. Twenty percent had less than 3 years experience, 58% had 3-10 years experience, and 22% had more than 10 years experience.

Study Group 2 consisted of a 182 employees of a middle sized city government. Sixty-nine percent were male. Sixteen percent were supervisors, 32% were professionals, and 52% were trades or clerical personnel. Twelve percent had less than three years of experience, 58% had between three and ten years, and 30% had more than ten years of experience.

Study Group 3 consisted of 100 employees from a community services organization. Twenty were male. Fourteen percent were supervisors, 61% were professionals, 25% were clerical and trades personnel. Sixteen percent had less than three years of experience, 77% had between three and ten years, and 7% had more than ten years of experience.

The detailed descriptive statistics for the study are shown in Table 1. Each scale produced high Cronbach alphas ranging from .826 (affective commitment) to .876 (systems trust). The strength of these alpha values provides evidence of the internal homogeneity of the scale items. The individual study groups show variation in the mean values for each of the three components, but consistently report higher levels of supervisory trust compared to systems trust.

Findings

In order to explore the relationship between affective organizational commitment and the two components of trust, a correlation analysis was used. As shown in Table 2, both interpersonal trust (.433) and systems trust (.340) are statistically significant correlates of affective commitment. However, both trust components are highly intercorrelated (.689). Partial correlation analysis was used to control for the influence of each dimension of trust. Table 3 shows that supervisory trust is the only statistically significant correlate (.3085) of affective commitment after controlling for systems trust. Systems trust is not statistically significant (.057) after controlling for supervisory trust.

The potential effect of other organizational variables on affective commitment was tested using regression analysis. The results are shown in Table 4. The model has a high R value (.526) with only two statistically significant variables–supervisory trust ($t = 8.5$) and organization ($t = 7.63$).

The significance of organization is suggested by the variance in the mean values of affective commitment by organization in Table 1. To further investigate the differences a one-way ANOVA examination was undertaken. The results are shown in Table 5. Each organization's reported affective

commitment levels were significantly different from each other as shown in the *post hoc* analysis. To attempt to explain these differences each of the organizations were regressed separately including the demographic variables from Table 4. The results observed indicated that only supervisory trust was found to be statistically significant by organization. These results reinforce the conclusion that, based on the data collected in the three public sector organizations for this study, supervisory trust is a better indicator of affective commitment than is systems trust, even after controlling for the effects of organization, job classification, gender or tenure.

TABLE 1. Descriptive Statistics for Survey Sample

SCALE	COEFFICIENT ALPHA	MEAN	SD
All Groups			
Affective commitment	.826	34.87	9.64
Supervisory trust	.867	20.15	5.47
Systems trust	.876	17.69	5.82
Study Group 1			
Affective commitment		32.83	8.84
Supervisory trust		20.17	5.49
Systems trust		18.08	5.47
Study Group 2			
Affective commitment		35.75	9.94
Supervisory trust		19.31	5.36
Systems trust		16.65	6.41
Study Group 3			
Affective commitment		39.44	9.58
Supervisory trust		21.31	5.41
Systems trust		18.44	5.54

TABLE 2. Correlation Analysis

	AFFECTIVE COMMITMENT	SYSTEMS TRUST	SUPERVISORY TRUST
BIVARIATE ANALYSIS*			
Systems trust	.340	—	.689
Supervisory trust	.433	.689	—

*All correlation coefficients are significant at $p < 0.001$ level

STRATEGIES FOR INCREASING INTERPERSONAL TRUST

If interpersonal trust is a key to increasing affective commitment in public organizations, managers need to develop practices that increase interpersonal trust among workers and between workers and supervisors. Three related practices that are integral to successful trust building interventions in public organizations are: (a) participation in decision making, (b) employee empowerment, and (c) feedback from and to employees.

Several authors contend that participation is a necessary antecedent to trust building (Miles & Richie, 1984; Rosen & Jerdee, 1977; Savery, 1989; Steel & Lloyd, 1988). Participation in decision making requires willingness by supervisors to involve employees in decision-making and a perception by employees that their involvement is meaningful. Argyris (1964) contends that workers will demonstrate adult behaviors only when supervisors involve them in the decision making processes. Sashkin (1984) finds that "The evidence of 50 years of action research clearly, consistently and strongly demonstrates the effectiveness of participative management... Participative management has positive effects on perfor-

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TABLE 3. Partial Correlation Analysis

Partial Correlation – Controlling for Systems Trust

	AFFECTIVE ORGANIZATIONAL COMMITMENT
SUPERVISORY TRUST	.3085*

Partial Correlation – Controlling for Supervisory Trust

	AFFECTIVE ORGANIZATIONAL COMMITMENT
SYSTEMS TRUST	.057

*statistically significant at $p < .001$

TABLE 4. Regression Analysis Predicting Affective Commitment

	B	STD ERROR	T	SIG.
VARIABLES				
Supervisory trust	.682	.080	8.5	.000*
Systems trust	.098	.086	1.14	.255
Organization	2.19	..287	7.63	.000*
Gender	-.831	.740	-1.12	.262
Job classification	-.355	.485	.710	.464
Tenure	.393	.554	.710	.478

$R = .526$; Adj.$R^2 = .268$; F=31.77*

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mance, productivity, and employee satisfaction because it fulfills the three basic human needs: increased autonomy, increased meaningfulness and decreased isolation" (Sashkin, 1984, p.7,11). Participation is also linked to increased affective organizational commitment (DeCotiis & Summers, 1987; Castrogiovanni & Macy, 1990), especially when combined with supervisory supportiveness (Cotton, Vollrath, Foggatt, Longnick-Hall & Jennings, 1988; Larson, 1989, Niehoff, Enz & Grover, 1990). Along these same lines, Nachmias (1985, p. 137) contends the following: "In the context of public bureaucracies, a sense of efficacy is dependent on one's participatory experiences in the organization. Success in one's attempts to influence changes in the organization increases one's trust in the organization."

Empowerment is also viewed as a significant prerequisite to developing trust in organizations (Barnes, 1981; Culbert & McDonough, 1986; Navran, 1992). Empowerment means creating an environment in which employees take more responsibility and have more authority for accomplishment of their work tasks. Empowerment also implies that employees can operate in a nonthreatening environment. Sitkin & Pablo (1992) find that a nonthreatening environment allows decision makers (and workers) to pursue more innovative strategies. Block contends that employee empowerment is causally linked to organizational effectiveness (Block, 1988). Empowerment often results in employees taking "ownership" of their work. To establish ownership, organizations must trust in the abilities of their workers, thereby sending a clear signal to them that the organization values their contributions. Eisenberger, Fasolo & Davis-LaMastro, (1990) find that employees are more likely to be committed to their

organization, and have lower absenteeism, when they perceive that the organization values their contributions. Bowen & Lawler (1992, p. 35) find that "empowerment is a part of the still evolving 'commitment' or 'involvement' model." This new model emphasizes the need for information on performance (feedback) and the "power to make decisions and to influence work procedures" (Bowen & Lawler, 1992, p.36). They contend that the "commitment" model represents the antithesis of the control (bureaucratic) model and that service-related industries need to empower employees in order to improve relations with customers. Odom, Boxx & Dunn (1990) report that supportive and innovative cultures in public bureaucracies lead to higher levels of organizational commitment. Eubanks (1991) found that employee empowerment and trust were critical to changing the organizational culture and improving health care delivery at a medical center.

Feedback is viewed as one of the most significant dimensions in overall group effectiveness (Nadler, 1979; Pritchard, Jones, Roth, Stuebing & Ekeberg, 1988). Inherent in the concept is a two-way exchange of information to and from the supervisor and worker. In particular, under TQM the emphasis on continuous improvement requires continuous feedback on performance. Nadler, Cammann & Mirvis (1980) find that feedback positively impacts performance as an error correction device and helps to identify problems. Feedback is also seen as bi-directional, with subordinate feedback being an important dimension of organizational effectiveness (Rosebush & Tallarigo, 1991). Larson (1989) notes that feedback from employees improved overall performance in the federal agencies that he studied. Norgradi & Koch (1981) find a linkage between feedback and organizational

commitment in public sector organizations by establishing "joint ownership" of decisions and actions. Finally, Witt & Hellman (1992) conclude that higher levels of feedback and participation have significant positive impacts on supervisor-worker relations and organizational effectiveness.

CONCLUSION

This study indicates that supervisory trust is a key correlate of affective commitment. Further, the study suggests that if affective commitment is strongly linked to supervisory trust, an organizational development intervention strategy intended to increase affective commitment should be based on a bottom-up approach focusing on building stronger bonds of trust between supervisors and employees. Finally, the study provides three management practices that are integral to successful trust building interventions in public organizations. These include participation in decision making, employee empowerment, and feedback from and to employees.

The study was designed to further the research on the interrelationships between affective organizational commitment and trust in the public sector. The author's intention in this study is not to generalize findings to the entire public sector. Confidence in the findings is limited by the individual interpretations of the questions on the survey and the attitudes of employees at the time of their participation. Further, field (action) research has inherent deficiencies since the researcher is not able to manipulate the variables or differentiate between control and treatment groups. The researcher cannot fully account for organizational dynamics, or control what individuals choose to read into survey questions during the "snap shot" in time which the survey data captured.

This study does suggest the need for more research to expand our understand-

TABLE 5. One-Way ANOVA Results

	SUM OF SQUARES	DF	MEAN SQUARE	F	SIG.
Between groups	3597.181	2	1798.591	20.623	.000
Within groups	51891.962	595	87.213		
Total	55489.143	597			

Post Hoc Results - Tukey HSD

MEAN DIFFERENCE (I-J)			STD. ERROR	SIG.*
(I) ORGAN	(J) ORGAN			
1.00	2.00	-2.88	.869	.003
	3.00	-6.68	1.072	.000
2.00	1.00	2.88	.869	.003
	3.00	-3.81	1.162	.003
3.00	1.00	6.68	1.072	.000
	2.00	3.81	1.162	.003

* All mean differences are significant at the .05 level.

ing of the dynamics of trust among peers and between employees and their organizations as a whole. Cook and Wall (1980) found that trust is differentiated between peers and management. The results reported here support Luhmann's (1979) hypothesis that attitudes of trust vary within organizations depending on structural relationships. Further, there is growing cultural diversity in public organizations that needs further exploration with regard to trust (Chan, 1997). Mayer, Davis & Shoormann (1995, p. 710) point out that "A diverse workforce is less able to rely on interpersonal similarity and common background and experience to contribute to mutual attraction and enhance willingness to work together." More research is needed that addresses diversity and the dynamics of cross-gender and cross-racial dyads (Jeanquart-Barone,1993). Finally, downsiz-ing is a reality in many public organizations. Trust was recently theorized as a critical mediating variable in successful downsizing efforts in organizations (Mone, 1997), but empirical studies need to be designed to test those hypotheses.

Better understanding of affective commitment and interpersonal trust are key elements in building successful organizations by public managers. Managers must be willing to build on their investments in the people in their organizations. Participation in decision making, empowerment and feedback from and to employees are important strategies to positively impact affective commitment and interpersonal trust in public organizations.

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