An Overview of Organizational Behavior

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Abstract

This paper presents a basic overview of critical questions associated with organizational behavior that are related to the exertion of power, socialization processes, and conflict management. No specific research question is proposed and, therefore, this paper does not involve data analysis processes or the discussion of specific findings. However, in providing information regarding various aspects of organizational behavior this paper does reflect the general conclusion that organizational leaders must: effectively understand the internal and external environmental demands upon their organization; and possess a significant degree of knowledge regarding individual and group behavior within an organization. Although this paper does not propose any future research studies, the broad answers provided to the questions in each section could readily serve as the basis for a more detailed analysis of organizational behavior.

An Overview of Organizational Behavior

An organization can be defined as "a collective that has some identifiable boundary and internal structures and that engages in activities related to some complex set of goals" (Stojkovic, Kalinich & Klofas, 2011, p. 689). Achievement of these organizational goals is then dependent upon the ability of managers and employees to evolve and focus on common objectives designed to align with the changing cultural trends within society (Drucker, 2006). In theory, meeting established objectives merely requires that an organization be aligned in a manner that allows various coordinated activities to be focused on achieving a common goal (Mintzberg, 1989). However, in practice, meeting established objectives is not always such a simple task given the inherent problems associated with a continually expanding organization that must compete to obtain needed resources (Stojkovic et al., 2011).

This exploratory study is focused on providing an overview of organizational behaviors associated with the exertion of power, socialization processes, and conflict management. The vast body of literature regarding organizational behavior indicates that oversight processes evolve as new management theories emerge. However, many of these new ideas for managing behavior tend to disappear as quickly as they appear. Accordingly, in reading this paper consider that education and leadership are the most critical elements needed for any organization to effectively manage behaviors. Additionally, consider that there is no management style applicable to all situations and that what works in one case may not work another. Finally, in developing an opinion regarding the information provided for the questions posed throughout this paper, consider the monetary cost to an organization as leaders attempt to educate employees and mold behaviors. More importantly, consider the potential ramifications to an organization if leaders do not try to educate employees and influence behaviors.

Literature Review

The formal culture of an organization is developed by top leaders and serves to establish the values and beliefs integral to the activities of organizational members (Davenport & Prusak, 2000). This formal culture also helps to define the goals of an organization and establish a legitimate power base to provide the authority necessary to guide decision-making processes by managers and supervisors. However, the activities and decisions within an organization are more often controlled by an informal culture that establishes a power base to supplant legitimate authority, define relationships, shapes beliefs, enforce standards of conduct and control the manner in which conflicts get resolved (Fairholm, 2009).

Power

What is Power? Power is ingrained in all aspects of organized behavior and is an integral part of basic human interaction (Fairholm, 2009). In simple terms, power is a force that creates an action that would not have otherwise occurred (Etzioni, 1975). Therefore, any member of an organization can strive to exert power over other individuals, however, typically only organizational leaders, managers and supervisors are granted the formal authority to exercise power necessary to influence subordinates (Stojkovic et al., 2011). Given this added dimension of authority to the concept of power, it becomes readily apparent that organizational power is not a simple one-dimensional concept. Accordingly, power may be better described as the ability of a person or a group to influence the beliefs and actions of others (Mintzberg, 1989). According to Stojkovic (2011), the expression of power within an organization is best managed through the exertion of legitimate authority. However, organizational leaders must also realize that power can be exerted in many other ways. More importantly, leaders must recognize that the manner in which power is exercised is not always in the best interest of their organization.

     What kinds of power exits? Within a structured organization, certain individual will be identified by an official position and are granted permission to exert legitimate power over others. However, legitimate power is more often considered to be the authority that one individual has over another within an organization (Stojkovic et al., 2011). Additional forms of power that are exerted by individuals and groups cannot be as easily recognized when viewing the structured hierarchy of an organization (Dupree, 2004). Reward power uses specific or implied perks to exert some form of control over organizational members and is often based on an individual's ability to acquire or dispense available resources (Fairholm, 2009). An interesting aspect of reward power is that the power holder is not always in complete control of the reward since many issues often require the approval or consent of individuals in other positions. Whereas reward power uses perks, the concept of coercive power uses threats of punishment to force compliance with a desired action. In the context of an organization this could involve such actions as a transfer to another group, demotion or termination. Within the criminal justice system, coercive power is most often associated with penal institutions as a method used to force inmate compliance with the desires of correctional officers (Stojkovic et al., 2011). Unlike reward and coercive power, referent power is inherent in the interpersonal relationships that are cultivated within an organization. When a person is respected and liked within an organization, this individual is in a position to exert influence upon others (Fairholm, 2009). As an example, consider those individuals who go along with the group because of intense peer pressure, or referent power, exerted by one or more members of the group (Stojkovic et al., 2011). Lastly, individuals who possess a significant degree of competency or knowledge in a given area exert expert power to influence the actions of others. While expert power creates some degree of dependency upon the expert, this need will typically lessen over time (Stojkovic et al., 2011).

How is power administered? The manner in which power is administered is dependent upon the type of influence being exerted (Fairholm, 2009). Similarly, the behavioral change exhibited by an individual is dependent upon the type of power exerted (Stojkovic et al., 2011). When the basic types of power are examined: legitimate power is associated with the authority of an individual within an organization; reward and coercive power are based on the ability to obtain and dispense resources; referent power stems from motivation transferred to an individual; and expert power is dependent upon the abilities of an individual (Fairholm, 2009). An additional consideration in the information age is that power will belong to those who can obtain, compile and create opportunities from information obtained through internet resources (Chartrand, 1991).

What makes power effective or ineffective? The effectiveness of the application of power within an organization is dependent upon how it is applied. When legitimate power is exerted to influence the accomplishment of goals and objectives organizational members are prone to accept and embrace the direction provided (Mainiero & Tromley, 1994). Conversely, the application of power for illegitimate purposes can create an air of mistrust within an organization and cause individuals or groups to become somewhat dysfunctional (Stojkovic et al., 2011). An additional consideration in the effective use of power to influence the actions of others is associated with the underlying culture that exists within a given organization. Accordingly, the accomplishment of an organization's mission requires that leaders possess the innate ability to effectively mesh the application of power within the confines of their organization's culture (Robbins & Judge, 2007). More importantly, if an organization is to achieve its full potential, all members must understand that the effective application of power involves a relationship between individuals and that power is not an individual possession (Knights & Roberts, 1982).

Socialization

  What is occupational socialization? In general terms, socialization is the manner in which one individual learns from the actions of others. In human terms, the socialization process begins at birth and continues through an individual's adult life. Specific to an organization, socialization is associated with the manner that individuals are integrated into the limits and boundaries of organizational activities (Britz, 1997). The basic premise of occupational socialization is that a significant degree of all behavior is learned as individuals are indoctrinated into the processes used by members of an organization to accomplish a given activity (Mechanic, 1967). In other words, as individuals enter into an organization, they face pressures to conform to existing norms or suffer the consequences of nonconformance.

  What processes socialize individuals into the organization? Very often an individual may not be conscious of the fact that they are being synthesized into an organization (Fairholm, 2009). However, in actuality, the process of anticipatory socialization starts when an individual begins the search for employment by selecting jobs that align with their intrinsic values and beliefs (Stojkovic et al., 2011). Once an individual accepts a job offer, the formal socialization process begins, and the individual is provided with indoctrination into the organization, as well as the training required for a given position (Hodson & Sullivan, 2012). While the anticipatory and formal socialization processes are short-lived, the informal socialization process continues throughout an individual's membership within an organization. Typically, informal socialization occurs in small groups where members expose the individual to the rules and expectations necessary for acceptance into the established culture of an organization (Stojkovic et al., 2011). However, it is important to note that the culture that is learned from this informal socialization process may not necessarily be the desired culture of organizational leaders.

What is Culture? An organization is characterized by unique values and beliefs that guide leaders and establish standards for individual and group behaviors (Santoro, 2008). Unlike the decision-making process of individuals, organizational culture attempts to align the efforts of members with the interests of the organization (Mintzberg, 2009). Additionally, the task of managing culture requires that leaders reinforce the fundamental values, beliefs, and principles of their organization on a continual basis to effectively control organizational behavior (Stojkovic et al., 2011). However, the culture of an organization must align, or be made to align, with the beliefs and values of organizational members to establish a productive environment needed to accomplish the stated mission and goals of an organization (Fairholm, 2009). In the context of the law enforcement profession, police officers tend to develop a general attitude and internalized set of values that create a subculture within an organization that extends from low-level recruits to the management hierarchy (Palmiotto & Unnithan, 2011).

What are the by-products of socialization? A well-established socialization process can be a very powerful tool in ensuring consistent operation and decision making processes of organizational behavior as members become aware of the expected behaviors (Stojkovic et al., 2011). However, some occupational behaviors may be more related to an individual's unique personality rather than from any aspects associated with the socialization process within an organization. In the context of law enforcement, the police sub-culture reinforces established social norms among its members and is believed by some to attract individuals with a particular type of personality, which in turn continuously perpetuating established group behaviors (Hollin, 1989). While this police subculture can perform a needed function within an organization, it can also have a detrimental effect upon the life of its members and family in addition to the community as a whole (Palmiotto & Unnithan, 2011).

What are the negative aspects of socialization and culture? When organizational members are faced with problems, the solution is very often found in the cultural norms of their organization (Stojkovic et al., 2011). However, often a problem arises that has conflicting solutions which can make adhering to cultural expectations or group norms difficult, if not impossible (Stojkovic et al., 2011). Ultimately, conflicts of this nature may result in job dissatisfaction, loss of motivation and can often adversely affect an individual's personal life (Fairholm, 2009). In the context of law enforcement, the police subculture can serve the negative function of socializing new members into performing their duties in a manner that is not aligned with the formal culture of an organization (Palmiotto & Unnithan, 2011). This police subculture can also involve aspects of secrecy in discussing daily activities and supporting the use of violence in the performance of an officer's assigned duties (Stojkovic et al., 2011).

Conflict

What is organizational conflict? In its purest form, conflict is akin to an athletic competition where two emotional participants attempt to exert power over another in order to achieve victory (Fairholm, 2009). In context of an organization, conflict is caused by a denial of members needs or when members engage in activities that are contrary to the expectations of their internal peers or external customers (Stojkovic et al., 2011). From a broader perspective, organizational conflict can be defined in terms of incompatibilities and disagreements between individuals, groups or organizations (Rahim, 2011). However, consideration must also be given to the premise that conflict within an organization does not always entail negative connotations. Competition and differences of opinion between individuals and groups that result in increased initiative and creativity or the clarification of points of view can be essential in establishing or maintaining the forward momentum of an organization as a whole (Robbins, 1974).

How does organizational conflict manifest? Conflict is an inevitable part of an individual's life and can arise from various sources to include power, values, ideology and group norms. When conflict is poorly managed it tends to escalate easily and can very quickly reach the point of confrontation between individuals, groups or organizations (Cowan, 2003). The process of organizational conflict also tends to occur in waves that vary in duration and intensity (Champoux, 2011). In the initial latent conflict, stage conditions exist which involve underlying issues such as competition for resources, allocation of funds or personality issues (Stojkovic et al., 2011). When left unchecked this latent conflict progresses to the perceived conflict stage where one or more individuals involved in the situation comes to realize that a conflict exists and chooses to either ignore or escalate the issue (Stojkovic et al., 2011). If the conflict escalates, it moves to the manifest conflict stage where an individual takes some action to subvert the desires of the other individual or group (Stojkovic et al., 2011). In considering that conflict cannot be resolved, for good or bad, until it is effectively dealt with, the felt conflict stage is perhaps the most detrimental to an organization. In this stage, the conflict is internalized to the degree that hostile feelings exist and anxieties may result not just in the individual directly involved in the issue, but, their peers as well (Champoux, 2011). Ultimately, an issue may progress to the conflict aftermath stage that, depending on how the particular issue is resolved, can have either a positive or negative effect on an organization as a whole (Wall & Callister, 1995). If the issue is addressed to the satisfaction of individuals involved the groundwork may have been established for a more productive relationship in future endeavors or to allow the individuals to resolve other latent conflict issues (Champoux, 2011). However, the genuine possibility exists that the issue may become more severe and progress to the point that the individuals involved will never be able to return to a more cooperative state (Stojkovic et al., 2011).

How is organizational conflict managed effectively and ineffectively? Because any organization is comprised of humans with individual personalities, it is inevitable that at some point these personalities will clash and create some degree of conflict within the workplace. To successfully resolve conflict when it does arise requires some mechanism to satisfy the needs of both parties in a given situation (McConnon, 2007). The absence of any satisfactory resolution can result in the situation quickly escalating to the point that individuals spend more time worrying about conflict than on productive work. Consequently, the essential first step in managing conflict to any degree is recognizing and understanding the underlying behaviors (Stojkovic et al., 2011). To do otherwise allows the underlying issue to fester in the latent and perceived stages to the degree that it creates turmoil within an organization or, in a worse scenario, escalates into violence (Kerr, 2010).

Effectively managing conflict. When effectively managed, conflict provides an opportunity to induce productive change into an organization in addition to merely providing for a resolution to a given situation (Rahim, 2011). The types of conflict intervention techniques used by a third party vary depending upon the nature of a given situation. However, when the efforts of a third party are effective in resolving the situation, both parties in the conflict become willing participants in working to achieve a common goal (Stojkovic et al., 2011). Equally as important to resolving identified conflicts is the need to proactively communicate organizational goals and expectations. In the absence of clear patterns of communication within an organization, members often become frustrated, and conflict can arise from both real and perceived issues. Accordingly, to minimize the potential for long-term conflict within an organization, the ability of all members to effectively communicate both laterally and within the management hierarchy is of the utmost importance (Stojkovic et al., 2011).

Ineffectively managing conflict. Conflict is a normal part of human existence and, when properly managed, can actually be beneficial to the long-term survival of an organization (Stojkovic et al., 2011). However, when ignored and ineffectively managed, conflict can have an adverse impact upon all facets of an organization. Not only can conflict induce stress and anxiety upon individuals involved, but it can also impact the overall satisfaction of coworkers leading to increased absences and turnover (Kerr, 2010). When conflict has reached this stage without resolution, trust and respect are diminished in management, supervisors, and coworkers (Mintzberg, 2009). As unresolved conflict continues to permeate an organization, the effects can ultimately have a negative impact upon an organization's customers through actions such as missed deadlines and poor quality of products and services (Rahim, 2011).

Conclusion

Organizational leaders strive to establish the culture of an organization with the intent of encouraging the best efforts of individuals and the alignment of their interests with the needs of the organization (Mintzberg, 1989). However, the members of an organization are also engaged in a quest to fulfill their own basic needs by searching for ways to increase their power, status, and influence within the organization (Stojkovic et al., 2011). Concurrently, an organization must meet the product and service demands of external customers to survive. Given these somewhat convoluted needs and desires, it is imperative that organizational leaders understand both the internal and external environmental pressures upon their organization (Scott, 1994). Therefore, an organizational leader must possess a significant degree of knowledge regarding how individuals and groups behave within an organization (Mintzberg, 1989). Only then can a leader effectively manage the key components of organizational behavior associated with power, conflict, and socialization.

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