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Leadership Strategies and Behaviors that Support Career Advancement for Teleworkers

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Fundamental Research

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Abstract

Research in telework has primarily focused on the study of teleworkers or the comparison between teleworkers and non-teleworkers. For this reason, leader behavior in the telework context has been a relatively neglected area of study. This study emphasized the need for more career advancement within the telework arena, contributing to higher turnover intentions and a reluctance to participate in telework programs. This research explored explicitly leader behaviors and strategies that support career advancement for teleworkers within Denver, Colorado. The findings indicate that leaders are more intentional about communication with teleworkers than non-teleworkers. Physical distance creates many challenges, which effective and intentional communication are instrumental in overcoming. Additionally, the study findings showed that leaders employ a performance-based approach to monitoring and evaluating teleworkers and maintaining flexibility in their leadership style. These behaviors enhance leader-follower relationships within the telework environment. Leader behaviors, including intentional communication, performance-based monitoring and evaluation, flexibility, and relationship building, supported teleworkers in achieving career advancement.

Keywords: leadership behaviors, leadership strategies, career advancement, telework, communication, performance-based, flexibility, relationship building

Introduction

Telework is a growing concept within the business field. It is incorporated into the work structure to attract, motivate, and retain highly skilled employees (Morganson et al., 2010). It is also credited with increasing organizational performance, improving work-life balance, decreasing environmental costs, and providing flexible work arrangements for employees (Coenen & Kok, 2014). Although many benefits exist, some organizations are reluctant to participate (Pyoria, 2011; Weinert et al., 2014). Among the challenges are the impacts of professional isolation and career stagnation (Cullen-Lester et al., 2017). Golden et al. (2008) stated that professional isolation hurts work performance and career advancement. Research in telework focuses primarily on benefits and drawbacks, leaving room to explore the impact of leadership behaviors on the specific challenges therein. This qualitative multiple-case study explored the constructs of path-goal theory, transactional leadership, and situational leadership. Individuals within the Denver, Colorado, area were interviewed for this study. The themes presented in the findings include intentional communication, performance-based monitoring, flexible leadership, and relationship building.

Background of the Problem

Telework continues to increase in popularity as information and communication technologies (ICT) improve and employees seek increased flexibility (Morganson et al., 2010). Even so, many companies discontinued their use after implementation. Historically, Hewlett Packard, Yahoo, IBM, and Best Buy have been among the companies that have rescinded their telework programs (Weinert et al., 2014; Wright, 2017). Field scholars argue that reduced visibility through telework leads to increased work hours and decreased advancement opportunities commensurate with the level of effort required to demonstrate one's devotion to

work (Felstead et al., 2003; Golden & Eddleston, 2020; Maruyama & Tietze, 2012). According to Groen et al. (2018), telework reduces the ability to monitor employee behavior and places greater emphasis on output controls. On the same note, Golden and Eddleston (2020) asserted that limited visibility weakens collaboration, causing leaders to infer a lack of concern for one's job. This bias can outweigh production on the employee's performance evaluation.

Business Problem Studied

The general problem is that weakened career progression in telework results in low participation in cost-saving work arrangements and higher turnover intentions (Choi, 2018). Turnover costs are estimated at 150% of the employee's annual salary (Choi, 2018). Researchers indicate that teleworking arrangements negatively impact career progression, leaving some members reluctant to participate (Maruyama & Tietze, 2012; Van Steenbergen et al., 2017). The problem concerns the disconnect between teleworkers and leaders in which networking, knowledge sharing, and leadership support are diminished (Dahlstrom, 2013; Golden et al., 2008). According to Lautsch et al. (2009), communication using ICTs is more often for monitoring purposes versus information sharing or development. Consequently, teleworkers report feeling disregarded for advancement opportunities (Hill et al., 2003). Research on non-standard work structures suggests leader-follower relationships are more challenging to maintain when at least one party is primarily teleworking (Louie, 2017). The specific business problem addressed is that some leaders may need more effective leadership strategies and behaviors to support career advancement for teleworkers within the Denver, Colorado area.

Methodology

The qualitative method used for this study was the most suitable approach for evaluating firsthand experiences, individual and group behaviors, organizational operations, and the impact

of human interactions on professional relationships (Teherani et al., 2015). A qualitative

multiple-case study allows the researcher to build a holistic picture by analyzing participants'

words, pictures, reports, and detailed accounts in a natural setting (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This

case study provided an opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of the problem and viable

solutions by evaluating several data sources. This study examined various leadership models

including path-goal theory, situational leadership, and transactional leadership.

Path-goal Theory

According to Jeanes (2019), experts argued that there is a "best-suited" leadership style

based on the individual's motivation. The path-goal theory highlights four leadership behaviors:

directive, supportive, participative, and achievement-oriented. Directive leader behaviors refer to

a situation in which the leader explains employee expectations and how to perform a given task

(House & Mitchell, 1974). Northouse (2016) described participative leadership as one in which

leaders create an environment that invites subordinates to participate in decision-making when

there is a direct impact on the employee. Leaders will likely use participative leadership

behaviors when employees are autonomously motivated and tasks are ambiguous (Bickle, 2017).

Achievement-oriented behaviors are effective for employees who desire continuous growth

(Bickle, 2017). According to Northouse (2016), leaders using achievement-oriented behaviors

display a high degree of confidence in their employee's ability to accomplish challenging goals.

Situational Leadership

Paul Hersey and Ken Blanchard introduced the situational leadership (SL) model, which

has undergone many revisions over the years (Graeff, 1997; Hersey & Blanchard, 1969, 1977).

Even so, the central idea remains that leadership styles work best when appropriately matched to

the individual situation (Blanchard & Johnson, 2008). This model is based on the relationship

between (a) the amount of direction and guidance (task behavior) provided by the leader, (b) the amount of socioemotional support (relationship behavior) provided by the leader, and (c) the level of performance readiness exhibited by the follower in performing tasks (Blanchard & Johnson, 2008). The most effective leadership style depends on the employee's performance readiness level, comprised of *ability* and *willingness* (Blanchard & Johnson, 2008). The continuum of performance readiness (Blanchard & Johnson, 2008) includes:

- Readiness level 1 (R1): The follower is unable to perform the task and lacks confidence or commitment.

- Readiness level 2 (R2). The follower is unable to perform the task but confident, or unable to perform the task but motivated to try.

- Readiness level 3 (R3). The follower can perform the task but is apprehensive about doing it alone, or the follower is able but unwilling to apply it to the task.

- Readiness level 4 (R4). The follower is able, confident about performing and committed to accomplishing the task.

Using the SL model, leaders may employ various leadership styles (Blanchard & Johnson, 2008; Hersey, 1985; Hersey & Blanchard, 1982) including:

- Style 1 (S1). This *telling* leadership style, also referred to as crisis leadership, is characterized by a higher-than-average number of task behaviors and a lower-than-average number of relationship behaviors—best matched with readiness level R1.

- Style 2 (S2). The *selling* leadership style characterizes higher-than-average amounts of both task and relationship behaviors—readiness level R2.

- Style 3 (S3). This *participating* leadership style characterizes a lower-than-average amount of task behaviors and a higher-than-average amount of relationship behaviors—readiness level R3.

- Style 4 (S4). The *delegating* leadership style characterizes lower-than-average amounts of both task and relationship behaviors—readiness level R4.

Thompson and Vecchio (2009) stated that although suggested matches between leadership styles and readiness levels exist, the SL model does not rely on fixed rules. Instead, it improves the odds of developing successful leadership (Blanchard & Johnson, 2008). In other words, the leader's ability to effectively influence others relies on their ability to adapt (Blanchard & Johnson, 2008).

Transactional Leadership

Bass described transactional leadership as an exchange between the leader and follower in which the leader sets expectations according to previously defined requirements (Bass, 1985; Burns, 1978). Leaders can then measure success against the organization's reward-penalty system (Berkovich & Eyal, 2019). The rationale for employing a contingent reward system is to devise an incentive mechanism through which employees expect a commensurate return for quality performance (Hartley et al., 2019). According to Berkovich and Eyal (2019), transactional leadership has two major behavioral constructs: (a) setting goals and providing rewards (contingent reward), and (b) monitoring performance and applying corrective action when required (management by exception-active and passive). Field experts assert that employees are motivated by rewards and respond with more significant efforts toward work performance (Bass et al., 2003; Wang et al., 2011). Unlike annual performance evaluations, the

contingent reward system offers more frequent reviews of the employee's performance with suitable rewards when qualified (Kark et al., 2017).

In management by exception (MBE), the leader takes corrective action to prevent mistakes using either an active or passive approach (Bass, 1991). Bass et al. (2003) described using sanctions, active MBE, as a search for deviations from performance standards followed by necessary corrective actions. Conversely, passive MBE involves intervention in response to unmet performance objectives (Bass et al., 2003). Employees are motivated to avoid negative consequences for failing to meet standards (Kark et al., 2017).

Data Analysis

The study data are a compilation of insights from twelve industry participants. The data analysis process included thorough interview transcriptions, member-checking strategies, and field note articulation. All research participants established eligibility through a pre-screening survey. The researcher used open-ended semi-structured interview questions to collect data. Data were manually analyzed and coded. The transcribed data were entered into NVivo coding following manual analysis to reveal additional codes not previously identified. Standard codes were grouped and categorized by topic while noting the frequency of repeating terms. Themes were identified and subsequently compared to the conceptual framework and constructs therein.

Findings

Top-level themes emerging from the collected data included (a) intentional communication, (b) performance-based monitoring and evaluation, (c) flexible leadership, and (d) relationship building. In addition, participants suggested that advantages or disadvantages existed primarily when some employees were teleworking while others were not.

Intentional Communication. Ninety-two percent of participants noted the significance of intentional communication. Participants described it as discussing requirements, sharing information, speaking informally to build relationships, creating a social presence through videoconferencing, discussing corrections privately, and other team-building activities. The type of communication applied aligns with the teleworker's needs. This idea follows the premise of path-goal theory, in which experts suggest a "best-suited" leadership style is determined by the individual's motivation (Jeanes, 2019). Participants described communication as a directive when applied to inexperienced employees or those lacking confidence. Directive behaviors refer to situations where the leader explains expectations and task objectives (House & Mitchell, 1974). The directive style was the least preferred approach among participants.

Alternatively, several participants discussed supportive styles of leadership. Supportive leaders are friendly, approachable, and respectful (Northouse, 2016). Participants agreed that leaders should be approachable, fostering a safe environment for teleworkers to address their values, needs, and goals. Communication strategies create a healthy perception of leaders. Further, participants shared that involving teleworkers in decision-making was instrumental in developing career advancement plans. Northouse (2016) described participative strategies as one in which leaders create an environment that invites subordinates to participate in decision-making when directly impacted.

Similarly, participants shared experiences that described the use of flexibility in one's leadership approach to communication. Under the situational leadership model, the leader assesses the follower's readiness level regarding ability and willingness (Blanchard & Johnson, 2008). Participants provided more direction and were more involved in task activities with

teleworkers who demonstrated a lack of ability. Similarly, these participants offered experienced

teleworkers more autonomy over their tasks and schedules.

Performance-Based Monitoring and Evaluation. Eighty-three percent of participants

utilized a performance-based approach to supporting career growth for teleworkers. Participants

agreed that performance output outweighed behavioral elements in career advancement

decisions. Peters et al. (2016) affirmed that productivity and work quality may be the most

important and relevant outcomes. Groen et al. (2018) explained that teleworking reduces the

ability to monitor employee behavior, emphasizing output controls more. Participants also found

that success is a motivator; therefore, working toward set career goals bolsters individual

performance. The rationale for employing a contingent reward system is to devise an incentive

mechanism through which employees expect their efforts to produce a commensurate reward in

response (Hartley et al., 2019).

Flexible Leadership. Similarly, 83 percent of participants posited that employee

diversity of skill, temperaments, values, and needs led to flexible leadership. A willingness to

adjust to the needs of their employees fostered success for both the organization and the

teleworker. This level of flexibility is supported by path-goal theory and situational leadership.

The path-goal theory highlights flexible leader behaviors consistent with follower motivation

(Northouse, 2016). Similarly, situational leadership highlights using flexible leadership

according to employee readiness (Blanchard & Johnson, 2008). Participants explained that

flexibility is vital in creating an environment where employees feel confident performing tasks.

Participants were willing to communicate more frequently with less skilled teleworkers and offer

more autonomy to those who demonstrated higher proficiency levels. Participants allowed

teleworkers to participate in decision-making activities instead of micromanaging motivated and

highly skilled teleworkers. One participant found this strategy to be the most effective in supporting career advancement for teleworkers.

Relationship Building. Again, 83% of participants mentioned relationship building as an essential leadership behavior, noting that its effectiveness is related to trust. In contrast to task behaviors within the situational leadership model, relationship behaviors include creating harmony, engaging in two-way or multiway communication, integrating employees into developing action plans, and reducing emotional conflict (Bass, 2008; Blanchard & Johnson, 2008; Daft, 2014). Improving communication was described as the primary tool for building healthy relationships. Participants noted that being supportive as a leader was paramount to the teleworker's success. One participant asserted that clarifying misunderstandings and resolving conflicts were among the most important behaviors for a leader in the telework environment. Allen et al. (2015) stated that telework alters communication so that leader-employee relationships may suffer. To combat the effects of physical distance, participants discussed the use of video conferencing as a tool to bolster healthy professional relationships.

Biblical Integration

This study focused on leader behaviors that support career development for teleworkers. The premise is that leaders possess the skills, tools, and information necessary to support career growth among subordinates. The challenge in telework is the visual absence, forcing members to learn new ways to be effective while physically distanced. Teleworkers must trust leaders, although they are unseen, and leaders must labor for their followers. Many references in Scripture lend themselves to this concept.

The first concept is that true leaders care for their followers. Acts 20:28 says, "Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to

care for the church of God, which he obtained with his blood." In business, leaders can demonstrate selflessness by concerning themselves with the needs of their subordinates. Nurturing leader-follower relationships and supporting the follower's career growth is a display of caring for the needs of others.

The second concept is the requirement for followers to trust unseen leaders. Scripture says that faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen (Hebrews 11:1). The concepts drawn from this verse are confidence, faith, trust, reassurance, and uncertainty. While this verse refers to our faith in God, who is unseen, these concepts also apply to the physical realm. Humans are imperfect; leaders should ensure they are trusted to provide as promised. In the telework environment, physical distance creates doubt and uncertainty. In this circumstance, leaders must develop an atmosphere of trust and credibility to allow followers to resolve these fears.

Conclusion

The problem studied was the need for more effective leader behaviors and strategies supporting telework career advancement. To investigate the problem, the researcher used a qualitative multiple case study and interviewed organizational leaders who manage teleworkers across various industries. The findings revealed that leaders implemented intentional communication, performance-based monitoring, flexible leadership, and high-quality relationships. These behaviors were successful strategies that promoted career growth for teleworkers. These findings aligned with the study's conceptual framework with themes supporting path-goal theory, situational leadership, and transactional leadership.

The consensus was that communication played an instrumental role in this effort. All of the participants discussed communication, leading the researcher to draw conclusions based on

its significance. Physical distance between leaders and followers impedes the free flow of information and informal conversations. This study found that communication was the primary challenge experienced by leaders of teleworkers who sought to become more purposeful with their communication methods.

The study also found that leaders rely on performance-based monitoring in the telework environment, particularly concerning career advancement. Many participants noted the importance of performance monitoring over behavior monitoring as it produces a more reliable picture of the teleworking employee's skillset and motivation. The study found that leaders believed performance metrics outweighed behavioral metrics regarding career advancement and potential growth opportunities. Leaders demonstrated intentionality in workload assignments, giving high-performers more significant projects supporting career advancement. Similarly, flexible leadership supports career advancement for teleworkers. Participants discussed the significance of maintaining fluidity in one's approach to leading teleworkers. Leaders are more apt to practice flexibility and find it necessary, given the shifts in work environments and leadership strategies with telework.

Finally, the findings of this study showed that building relationships within the telework environment was a notable challenge. This challenge is primarily related to the communication obstacle created by physical distance. Participants suggested that the leader-follower teams served a dual purpose in which positive behaviors mutually benefited the individual and organization while the converse held negative implications for both. The study found that leaders practiced intentionality in relationship building across the telework field to ensure trust and cohesiveness were present. Career advancement is more likely to occur when communication, performance, flexibility, and leader-follower relationships are strong.

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