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Select Organizational Drivers of Counterproductive Work Behavior: Insights from Literature

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Abstract: *The purpose of this paper is to examine the organizational drivers of counterproductive work behavior (CWB), a deliberate self-motivated action that breaches significant organizational norms and threatens its existence and that of its stakeholders. Examples of such behaviors, along with the organizational drivers, were identified through literature review. CWB constructs were catalogued and organized, with two specific types of CWB being identified: CWB-O (targeting organization) and CWB-I (aimed at individuals). Organizational drivers were also identified and included: organizational culture and leadership, human resource management practices, negligent retention of counterproductive employees, job stressors and organizational justice. Literature suggests that certain factors within the organization make the organizational environment more vulnerable and prone to CWB. The implication is that organizations can contribute to CWB by either creating social conditions promoting it by generating deviant inclinations, or by lowering restraints against CWBs. The paper concludes that it is in an organization's best interest to ensure that even the mildest form of misbehavior is not condoned, and that serious effort is made to curb CWB from spreading within organizations.*

Keywords: counterproductive work behavior, organizational culture, leadership, human resource management practices, job stressors, organizational justice, negligent retention

1.0 Introduction

Nearly every day, stories abound about people, who for one reason or another, engage in behavior that is socially undesirable. Such acts have become so frequent, that they could even be construed as being social norms (Klotz and Buckley, 2013). These negative behaviors, also known as counterproductive behavior (CWB) are, more often than not, transferred to the workplace, with some employees being very eager to engage in counterproductive behavior at work, just as they do outside of work.

CWB refers to any volitional behavior by an employee that is harmful or intends to harm the organization, or behavior that directly affects organizational functioning, or its property, or hurts employees in a way that reduces their effectiveness (Klotz and Buckley, 2013). It has become a common occurrence in organizations, and may range from minor to severe types of CWB like



stealing the organization's property, filing fake claims, and absenteeism. Such behaviors are very detrimental to organizations in terms of low productivity, higher maintenance costs, and tarnishing the organization's image (Vigoda, 2002).

These CWBs have premises in organizational typology, which is related to the organization itself (Biron, 2010). Accordingly, CWB is related to organization's environment, and thus, workers' actions could be explained by factors directly related to the organization. A study by Nasir and Bashir (2012) concluded that employees performed deviant acts due to perceived injustice towards them by the organization, for example, promotion out of favoritism and nepotism. Onyishi and Onunkwo (2014) indicated that school teachers in Nigeria exhibited CWB brought about by feelings of injustice, e.g., poor remuneration, delay in promotion, poor HR practices related to recruitment, placement and training. The organization therefore, plays a pivotal role in CWB. It provides a setting in which the individual may exhibit deviant behavior and targets towards whom individuals may find easier to display their behavior. The work setting also provides all manner of stimulants that could provoke individuals who already have a high propensity towards dysfunctional behavior (Van Fleet & Griffin, 2006).

This paper covers the following areas: literature review giving the theoretical underpinnings of the study, followed by a conceptualization of the phenomenon of counterproductive work behaviors that can be found within organizations. The last part seeks to give details about the role of the organization in predicting deviant behavior within it. The paper ends by giving conclusions and recommendations.

2.0 Theoretical Review

2.1 Social Exchange Theory

Social Exchange Theory (SET) by Blau, 1964 proposes that one's actions will most likely depend upon the reactions of others (Memon, Salleh & Baharom, 2016). SET assumes that social behavior results from an exchange association, which begins for example, when a firm cares and is concerned for the welfare of its human resources. As a result, the workforce feel that they are appreciated by their firm and are in an equal association with them, causing them to respond in attitudes and behaviors that are constructive (Cropanzano, Anthony, Daniels & Hall, 2016). Conversely, when practices in an organization are perceived as undesirable, the staff will reciprocate by engaging in negative and un behavior.

2.2 Equity Theory

The Equity Theory by John Stacy Adams, 1963 proposes to clarify relational contentment in as far as understanding of fair or unfair sharing of material things is concerned in the relationship within groups or teams (Egidi, Okpa & Akomaye, 2017). According to the theory, employees value fair treatment, which in turn also motivate them to uphold similar standards of fairness in their interaction with both the organization and their colleagues (Boundless, 2015). The theory



notes that workers need to feel that their contribution is being rewarded with what they perceive as fair treatment, pay, and comfort, otherwise feelings of hostility towards their colleagues and organization may be experienced. This will in turn lead to job dissatisfaction and displays of negative work behavior (Boundless, 2015). The assumption is that discontented staff will engage in negative and even criminal behavior so as to resolve their feelings of perceived inequity, as a means of retaliation towards the organization for a poor work experience (Igbe, 2017).

3.0 Counterproductive Work Behavior (CWB)

Bad behavior in the workplace is not a new thing. From the dawn of the Industrial Revolution to the present day, employers the world over have had to deal with behavior from employees that damage organizational well-being (Klotz and Buckley, 2013). This type of behavior, variously referred to as counterproductive/dysfunctional/antisocial behavior (Tuna, Ghazzawi, Yesiltas, Tuna & Arslan, 2016), or workplace deviance, is a situation in which an organization's customs, policies, or internal regulations are violated by an individual or a group, thus jeopardizing its well-being or that of its citizens (Bennett and Robinson, 2003). Counterproductive work behavior, therefore, is any intentional behavior on the part of a member of an organization and which the organization views as contrary to its legitimate interests (Gruys and Sackett, 2003). It is generally a very pervasive and expensive problem to organizations, and cuts across different industries and countries (Berry, Ones & Sackett, 2007), being responsible for giving an organization a negative image to both its external and internal stakeholders (Levine, 2010).

4.0 The Role of the Organization

There are many issues that have the potential to cause or predict deviant behavior in organizations, with the major one being that the organization may be supporting or encouraging such behavior knowingly or unknowingly (Appelbaum & Roy-Girard, 2007). Empirical research (Vigoda, 2002) has categorized organizational drivers of CWBs under such general variables as perceived support, leadership style, organizational justice, organizational politics and organizational climate. Others include work stressors and job attributes, organizational culture, organizational constraints, ethical infrastructure and environmental uncertainty (Fox, Spector & Miles, 2001). The most influential organization factors however, are its history, the values and visions of its leaders, beliefs, shared experiences, reward and incentive system, and organizational norms about performance and behavior. These have all contributed to the organization culture, which is an important influence on both positive and negative consequences within an organization (Guerra, Martinez, Munduate & Medina, 2005).

4.1 Organizational Culture and Leadership

An organization's culture and leadership style are major influences on individuals at the workplace (Lok and Crawford, 2004). An organization's leaders shape its culture, but the culture also shapes the leaders. According to Tourigny, Dougan, Washburn and Clements (2003), the characteristics of organizations have been shown to have some level of influence on



the integrity and ethics of the executives, while at the same time, qualities of leaders have also been shown to be critical in developing an organization's culture (Ribiere & Sitar, 2003).

The organization can contribute to dysfunctional behavior by either creating social conditions promoting CWB by generating deviant inclinations, or by lowering restraints against CWBs (Van Fleet and Griffin, 2006). The characteristic of organizational leadership can be linked to a wide variety of both negative and positive employee outcomes (Kelloway & Barling, 2010). Positive leadership styles such as transformational leadership can affect individuals and the organization positively, while minimizing deviant behavior.

4.2 Human Resource Management Practices

Research on the impact of HR practices on deviant behavior by Saeed, Mizna, Lodhi, Gill, Amin and Iqbal (2014) reveal that when an organization practices desirable HR activities, employees will reciprocate by exhibiting positive behavior. Similarly, if desirable HR activities are not practiced, employees will engage in negative behavior. The poor implementation of HRM practices in such areas as staffing, training and development, and compensation might make the employee feel frustrated, demotivated and demoralized leading him to withhold effort in his work or resort to negative behavior (Lepak & Snell 2009).

A study by Shamsudin, Subramaniam and Ibrahim (2011) found that HR practices were negatively related to workplace deviance. These findings were consistent with the general literature on workplace deviance that argues that CWB is as a response to unfavorable work environment (Andreoli & Lefkowitz, 2009). A study by Arthur (2011) also demonstrated the effect of HR system on interpersonal deviance in organizations. A link between HR practices and CWB is also possible when the Social Exchange Theory is invoked. This theory asserts that relationships are generally built around norms of reciprocity in which favors, or injustices are reciprocated accordingly (Shamsudin et al., 2011).

4.3 Negligent Retention of Counterproductive Employees

The negligent retention of counterproductive employees by organizations can be a predictor of CWB. Organizations have failed, at some level, to uphold this key employment legal doctrine that stipulates that employers should not retain on their payrolls individuals who are unfit, unqualified, and/or do not meet the essential requirements for the positions they hold, and exhibit unacceptable or dangerous behaviors (Self & Self, 2014). Such employees jeopardize organization's good name as a desirable place to work in (Stuebs & Li, 2010).

In short, organizations that chronically tolerate counterproductive employees cannot advance and/or even reward high performing employees if positions are being held by counterproductive employees. When the economy is good, such high performers who are blocked from



advancement and other opportunities will most likely look outside their organizations for promotions and advancement (Self & Self, 2014). Organizations should therefore become proactive and recognize that counterproductive employees can do harm, perhaps not in the sense of physical harm, but rather emotionally and financially (Merriam-Webster, 2006). Such organizations could also be slowly incubating a threatening atmosphere to their employees' morale, and to a healthy bottom line (Self and Self, 2014).

4.4 Organizational Justice

Employees' attitudes related to the policies, decisions and actions of an organization serves as a basis for organizational justice (Jordan & Turner, 2008). Organizational justice is categorized into distributive, procedural and interactional justice. Distributive justice is workers' perception that they are not being fully compensated as per their contribution to the organization (Greenberg, 2006). Procedural justice is employees' belief that the measures being used to determine their output are unfair and unjust. Examples include discrimination at the workplace and management's treatment of employees (Roberson & Stevens, 2006). Interactional justice is the value of interpersonal treatment one receives from other people in the firm for example, the amount of respect and dignity in interpersonal interactions (Everton, Jolton & Mastrangelo, 2007). Employees, therefore, involve themselves in CWBs as a form of retaliation against the organization for perceived injustices.

A study by Nasir and Bashir (2012) indicates a considerably positive relationship between organizational injustice and CWB, with employees involving themselves in acts of deviance such as intentionally coming late to work, gossiping about managers, intentionally ignoring supervisors' instructions, etc. Organizations perceived as fair and supportive had fewer incidences of CWB (Everton, Mastrangelo & Jolton 2005).

4.5 Job Stressors

Job stress has also been seen as a possible contributor to deviant behavior at work (Fox et al., 2001). According to Spector and Fox (2005), some of the stressful job conditions included role ambiguity, role and interpersonal conflict, workload, and organization constraints. All these conditions correlated significantly with hostility, aggression, and sabotage. Subsequent studies have continued to find linkages between a number of job stressors and employee deviant behavior (Penney & Spector, 2002; Miles, Borman, Spector & Fox, 2002). Organizational constraints and workload have also been investigated as job stressors, and they have been consistently associated with CWB (Fox et al., 2001; Penney & Spector, 2002; Miles et al., 2002).

5.0 Conclusion and Recommendations

It can therefore be concluded that the organization may actually be a contributor to CWB. Its culture and leadership style are major influences on individuals at the workplace, with the characteristics of the organization having some level of influence on the integrity and ethics of



both the executives and workers. The organization can also contribute to dysfunctional behaviors by either creating social conditions promoting CWB by generating deviant inclinations, or by lowering restraints against CWBs.

Employees of organizations with good HRM practices respond by behaving positively while the opposite is also true (Shamsudin et al., 2011). Employees who perceive injustice from their organization involve themselves in CWB in retaliation against the organization (Roberson and Stevens, 2006). Due therefore, to the expenses involved, it is incumbent upon organizations to identify and solve these problems if they are to survive. Deviant behavior begins small but escalates into many different and more severe sets of behavior. It is therefore in an organization's best interest to ensure that even the mildest form of misbehavior is not condoned, and that serious effort is made to curb CWB from spreading within organizations (Everton et al., 2007).

This paper recommends organizations to adopt leadership styles which affect individuals and the organization positively, while at the same time minimizing CWB (Kelloway and Barling, 2010). A positive cultural environment should be maintained to curb CWB in organizations (Devonish, 2013).

Management must also step forward and manage counterproductive employees in fair, compassionate, legal and responsible ways since failure to correct or terminate such employees is to commit negligent retention in its broadest definition (Self and Self, 2014). HRM practices should be implemented in a way that would not lead to undesirable and unintended behavioral consequences at work. Attitude surveys could also be used as a gauge, to find out the extent to which the HR practices are perceived by employees as being fair and favorable (Shamsudin et al., 2011). Organizations could also benefit from the implementation of a number of formal support systems and educational programs on the serious consequences of CWB for both individuals and organizations (Devonish, 2013).

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