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Commitment in the workplace Toward a general model

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Abstract

It is now well recognized that employees can develop multiple work-relevant commitments, and that commitment itself is a multidimensional construct. Unfortunately, there remains considerable disagreement, both within and across work commitment literatures (e.g., organizational, occupational, union), about what commitment is, its dimensionality, how it develops, and how it affects behavior. We argue that commitment should have a “core essence” regardless of the context in which it is studied, and that it should therefore be possible to develop a general model of workplace commitment. We propose such a model based on the propositions that commitment (a) is a force that binds an individual to a course of action of relevance to a target and (b) can be accompanied by different mind-sets that play a role in shaping behavior. We demonstrate how this model helps to explain existing research findings and can serve as a guide for future research and for the management of workplace commitments. © 2001 Elsevier Science Inc. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

Commitments in the workplace can take various forms and, arguably, have the potential to influence organizational effectiveness and employee well-being. Despite the increase in attention given to the study of workplace commitments, there still appears to be considerable confusion and disagreement about what commitment is, where it is directed, how it develops, and how it affects behavior. Newcomers to the commitment literature will find several conceptual frameworks in which commitment is conceptualized as either a unidimensional

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(e.g., Blau, 1985; Brown, 1996; Mowday, Porter, & Steers, 1982; Wiener, 1982) or multidimensional (e.g., Allen & Meyer, 1990; Angle & Perry, 1981; Gordon, Philpot, Burt, Thompson, & Spiller, 1980; Jaros, Jermier, Koehler, & Sincich, 1993; Mayer & Schoorman, 1992, 1998; Meyer & Allen, 1984, 1991; O'Reilly & Chatman, 1986; Penley & Gould, 1988) construct, each accompanied by a recommended measure or set of measures. Moreover, they will discover that workplace commitments can take various forms, including commitment to organizations (e.g., Mathieu & Zajac, 1990; Meyer & Allen, 1991; Mowday et al., 1982), unions (e.g., Barling, Fullager, & Kelloway, 1992; Gordon et al., 1980), occupations and professions (e.g., Blau, 1985; Meyer, Allen, & Smith, 1993), teams and leaders (e.g., Becker, 1992; Hunt & Morgan, 1994), goals (e.g., Campion & Lord, 1982; Locke, Latham, & Erez, 1988), and personal careers (e.g., Hall, 1996). Answers to questions about how these commitments develop, and how they influence work behavior, organizational effectiveness, and employee well-being vary somewhat across the different frameworks. This state of affairs can be viewed as a challenge or a frustration to those whose interests are primarily scientific. It is likely to be particularly disconcerting to practitioners who look to this literature for answers to questions such as: Should we try to foster commitment in employees? Commitment to what? How? For what purpose?

The purpose of this article is to clarify some of the confusion that exists in the literature and to demonstrate that it is possible to develop a general model of workplace commitment to be used as a guide in research and practice. We argue that, if we accept the notion that there are multiple constituencies within the workplace to which employees can become committed, our understanding of how these commitments combine to shape organizational behavior will be greatly enhanced if the conceptualization of the construct itself remains constant across constituencies. Our objective, therefore, is to illustrate how existing conceptualizations can be integrated to achieve this purpose. To this end, we review the work commitment literature with a focus on five basic issues. First, we address the issue of what commitment is and how it can be distinguished from related constructs (e.g., attitudes, motivation). Second, we consider the question of dimensionality — is commitment a unidimensional or multidimensional construct? Third, we discuss the target(s) of commitment — do employees develop commitment to specific entities, courses of action, or both? Fourth, we examine the behavioral consequences of commitment. Finally, we address the issue of how commitment develops. As we consider each of these issues, we develop propositions that serve as the basis for a general model of workplace commitment. We then describe the model and discuss its implications for theory, research, and management.

2. What is commitment?

Over the years, commitment has been defined and measured in many different ways (see Meyer & Allen, 1991; Morrow, 1993; Mowday et al., 1982). Indeed, this lack of consensus in the definition of commitment contributed greatly to its treatment as a multidimensional construct (Meyer & Allen, 1991). Even if we acknowledge the existence of multiple dimensions, or forms, of commitment, however, there has to be a *core essence* that characterizes the construct and distinguishes it from other constructs. To establish what that core essence is, we begin by looking for commonality among the existing conceptualizations.

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