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# Organizational commitment—A missing link between leadership behavior and organizational performance?

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## KEYWORDS

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## Abstract

This paper investigates the effect of executive leadership behaviors on the organizational commitment (OC) of subordinate managers and the influence of the latter on measures of company performance. Based on pertinent research and the main leadership dimensions identified in the GLOBE project, we formulate hypotheses concerning the relationship between perceived leadership behaviors and subordinates' OC, as well as the assumption that this organizational commitment is beneficial to performance ratings on a corporate level. Data stem from a sample of 78 companies from the Germanic cultural area. Our results suggest that desirable leadership behavior is positively related to subordinates' OC, and that OC contributes to company performance, even when analyzed in conjunction with crucial contextual variables.

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## 1. Introduction

Organizational commitment (OC), defined as “the relative strength of an individual's identification with and involvement in a particular organization” (Mowday, Porter, & Steers, 1982, p. 27), has long been an object of interest for management research (Swales, 2002). It originally emerged as an alternative explanation for certain workplace behaviors such as turnover and absenteeism, after earlier approaches had led to somewhat disappointing findings.

Indeed, one axiom of OC theory is that high OC results in positive outcomes for organizations, an assumption that has been at least partly confirmed empirically. For instance, a meta-analysis by Meyer, Stanley, Herscovitch, and Topolnytsky (2002) concluded that commitment relates negatively to turnover and several other types of withdrawal cognitions. Another avenue of OC research was to examine antecedents and correlates of OC (e.g. Bourantas & Papalexandris, 1992; Lok & Crawford, 2001; Mathieu & Zajac, 1990; Meyer & Allen, 1997), including not only personal characteristics such as age and organizational tenure, sex and occupation, but also several organization-related antecedents of OC, among others job security, job satisfaction, role ambiguity, and organizational culture.

Soon explored, too, was the relationship between leadership behavior and OC, with somewhat contradictory results.

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Thus, some studies found OC to be influenced by participative decision-making and consideration (e.g. Glisson & Durick, 1988; Jermier & Berkes, 1979; Savery, 1991), flexibility, emphasis on rules and regulations, hierarchy and role specialization (Zeffane, 1994), as well as by various aspects of organizational politics and leadership power (Wilson, 1995). On the other hand, O'Reilly and Roberts (1978), Hampton, Dubinsky, and Skinner (1986), Johnston, Parasuraman, Futrell, and Balck (1990) and Savery (1991) reported no linkage between OC and leadership behavior, while Hunt and Liebscher (1973) found a negative association between leaders' production emphasis and some aspects of OC. By contrast, more recent studies investigating charismatic and transformational leadership have shown, with some consistency, a positive relationship with followers' OC (Avolio, Zhu, Koh, & Bhatia, 2004; Barling, Weber, & Kelloway, 1996; Bono & Judge, 2003; Dubinsky, Yammarino, Jolson, & Spangler, 1995; Dumdum, Lowe, & Avolio, 2002; Lowe, Kroeck, & Negaraj, 1996; Walumbwa & Lawler, 2003; Walumbwa, Orwa, Wang, & Lawler, 2005).

This posited link between leadership behavior and followers' commitment raises the question of where commitment is focused. Employees are likely to be committed to multiple and different actors, goals and values. The relationships between the various foci of commitment have been illuminated by Becker and Billings (1993), who differentiated essentially between commitment to the immediate superior or work group (local commitment) and that to top management and the organization as a whole (global commitment). Empirical findings from Hunt and Morgan (1994) suggest that commitment to top management is the best predictor of overall OC. In their theoretical considerations, Meyer and Allen even go a step further: "It should be kept in mind, however, that when we as researchers measure commitment to the organization as a whole, we are probably measuring employees' commitment to 'top management'" (Meyer & Allen, 1997, p. 19). Our study therefore focuses on leaders at the senior executive level, on the assumption that these play a crucial role in shaping employees' OC.

While the connection between charismatic/transformational leadership and OC is fairly well established (DeGroot, Kiker, & Cross, 2000), the results relating to a possible link between OC and performance are more ambiguous and indicate only a weak relationship (Caruana, Ewing, & Ramaseshan, 1997; Keller, 1997; Meyer et al., 2002). This is especially so when independent performance measures are employed instead of subjective self-rating (Dumdum et al., 2002; Swailes, 2002).

The preceding brief overview leads us to the two questions this study addresses: (1) How does senior leadership behavior influence followers' OC? (2) What relationship, if any, exists between OC and measurements of corporate performance?

## 2. Literature review and hypotheses

### 2.1. Leadership and OC

Most people develop their own ideas about the nature of leaders and leadership. These concepts are based on more or less naive or idiosyncratic, personal assumptions that

have been analyzed under the heading of "implicit leadership theory" (Lord, Foti, & De Vader, 1984). One major assertion of this theory is that leadership is in the "eye of the beholder": it is a social label attributed to individuals if one of two conditions applies: either their personality and behaviors sufficiently match the observer's beliefs about leaders, or the observer ascribes group success or failure to the activities of perceived leaders (Lord & Maher, 1991).

The so-called GLOBE studies ("Global Leadership and Organizational Effectiveness Program"), which form the basis of our own work, went a step further, investigating the extent to which these everyday theories are influenced by cultural norms (Den Hartog, House, Hanges, & Associates, 1999; Dorfman, Hanges, & Brodbeck, 2004; Holmberg & Akerblom, 2006; Waldman et al., 2006).<sup>1</sup> Within this context leadership is defined as "the ability of an individual to influence, motivate, and enable others to contribute toward the effectiveness and success of organizations of which they are members" (House, Wright, & Aditya, 1997, p. 548). As part of the overall GLOBE program originally 382 leadership attributes and behaviors were inductively generated with a focus on developing a comprehensive list rather than on developing an a priori leadership scale. These 382 attributes and behaviors were then condensed to 112 questionnaire items. This questionnaire was distributed to more than 15,000 middle managers from 61 different societies/cultures (Brodbeck et al., 2000).

Based on the responses, six global leadership dimensions were identified: 1. *charismatic/value-based leadership*, 2. *team-oriented leadership*, 3. *participative leadership*, 4. *humane-oriented leadership*, 5. *autonomous leadership*, and 6. *self-protective leadership*. Of these, charismatic leadership contributed most to the making of outstanding leaders, while self-protective leadership contributed negatively (Den Hartog et al., 1999).

Why did we use these GLOBE dimensions for analyzing the connection between leadership and OC? First, there have been very few studies based on implicit leadership theories and dealing with work attitudes (Epitropaki & Martin, 2005, p. 662). Second, as argued above, OC is a consequence of—among other things—commitment to top management. The link between the two is arguably facilitated by prototypical leader behaviors (Epitropaki & Martin, 2005), and one aim of GLOBE is to identify and describe the chosen dimensions, which are now presented in more detail.

1. The dimension *charismatic/value-based leadership* reflects the ability to inspire, to motivate, and to successfully demand high performance outcomes from others, on the basis of firmly held core values. As mentioned above, several empirical findings have confirmed a positive connection between charismatic leadership and OC. This relationship can be best explained by *self-concept-based theory* (Bono & Judge, 2003, Shamir, House, & Arthur, 1993), which outlines three ways of motivating followers: (1) by providing a sense of direction and decisiveness (vision),

<sup>1</sup>Beside the investigation of universally endorsed leadership characteristics, the project goals included the analysis of empirical findings concerning the ranking of 62 societies with respect to nine attributes of their cultures and the development of an empirically based theory that describes the relationships between societal culture and leadership.

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