Work–family climate, organizational commitment, and turnover: Multilevel contagion effects of leaders ☆

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents empirical research analyzing the relationship between work–family climate (operationalized in terms of three work–family climate sub-scales), organizational leadership (i.e., senior manager) characteristics, organizational commitment and turnover intent among 526 employees from 37 different hotels across the US. Using multilevel modeling, we found significant associations between work–family climate, and both organizational commitment and turnover intent, both within and between hotels. Findings underscored the importance of managerial support for employee work–family balance, the relevance of senior managers' own work–family circumstances in relation to employees' work outcomes, and the existence of possible contagion effects of leaders in relation to work–family climate.

1. Introduction

Previous research has shown that the availability of organizational work–life benefits, in conjunction with a supportive supervisor and an organizational climate promoting their utilization, aids organizations in attracting and retaining human resources (Casper & Buffardi, 2004). Other research has suggested that organizational work–life benefits and a supportive work climate are linked positively to employee job satisfaction and motivation, and reduced employee stress (Allen, 2001; Anderson, Coffey, & Byerly, 2002; Behson, 2005; Casper & Buffardi, 2004; Thompson, Beauvais, & Lyness, 1999). The purpose of this study was to conduct a multilevel examination of the implications of top management spillover and work–family climate for lower-level managerial employees' commitment and retention in the organization. In doing so, we focused on service occupations in the US, specifically jobs within the hotel industry, and we analyzed both within- and between-organization differences.

In the aftermath of the 2001 US terrorist attacks and the subsequent drop-off in travel, many hotel companies faced stiff challenges and, as a result, learned to do more with less. Lean staffing structures have restored profitability for many hotel companies, but have also placed heavy demands on employees which may, in turn, pose challenges for their physical and psychological health, work performance, and productivity, as well as their lives off the job (Mulvaney, O'Neill, Cleveland,

& Crouter, 2006). Although work–family balance has been listed as one of the top five factors determining job satisfaction for employees in the service sector such as the hospitality/tourism industry (O'Leary & Deegan, 2005), employees often do not use family-friendly benefits even though organizations provide them (Butler, Gasser, & Smart, 2004; Judiesch & Lyness, 1999; Thompson et al., 1999). Employees may be reluctant to use such benefits unless they perceive their supervisor and organization as supportive of them doing so. Therefore, it is important to learn more about the work–family characteristics of top level organizational leaders or senior managers (e.g., in hotels, the general manager, or GM) who play a significant role in shaping the organization's climate and who may set the stage for employees' work outcomes.

1.1. Organizational climate

Employees may be offered a variety of family support benefits by their organization to help them balance their multiple roles (Thomas & Ganster, 1995). Formal family-friendly policies and benefit availability can reduce work–family conflict and enhance employee job outcomes (Anderson et al., 2002; Behson, 2005). Further, formal practices, such as childcare, telecommuting, and flex-time, help employees manage their work and non-work life, and enhance employee perceptions of the supportiveness of their organization regarding their family life (Allen, 2001; Casper & Buffardi, 2004). However, when employees expect that using family-friendly benefits would seriously harm their career progress and status at work, they are less likely to use such benefits (Butler et al., 2004).

Indeed, formal organizational policies and benefits alone are not useful to the organization or its employees when the climate is not supportive of their use (Allen, 2001; Thompson et al., 1999). The informal organizational support that creates a family-friendly climate in an organization has more influence on employee attitudes toward their job and organization than has formal support (Anderson et al., 2002; Behson, 2005). For example, a workplace intervention described by Munck (2001) illustrated the importance of informal practices, e.g., significant requirements for non-productive "face time" for upward mobility. Leaders provided mid-level managers with greater technological support and enhanced job efficiency, and eliminated inefficient procedures such as wasteful meetings (Munck, 2001). This enhanced organizational support reduced the percentage of managers who considered their job too demanding to spend their time with family from 77 to 36 percent (Munck, 2001). It also changed managers' perceptions of organizational climate. The proportion of managers who thought the organization was more focused on hours worked than work accomplished dropped from 43 to 15 percent (Munck, 2001).

In the present study, we used multilevel modeling to examine both the individual-level (i.e., psychological level) and organizational level climate effects on turnover intentions and organizational commitment. We applied Thompson et al. (1999) work–family model to assess hotel and employee level perceptions of work–family supportive climate. Thompson et al. (1999) identified three dimensions of work–family climate: managerial support for work–family balance, perceived negative career consequences regarding work–family benefit use, and organizational time expectations that require employees to sacrifice their family lives. These dimensions of work–family climate are related to employee benefit use (Allen, 2001; Thompson et al., 1999), work–family conflict (Anderson et al., 2002; Behson, 2002), and employee job attitudes (Allen, 2001; Thompson et al., 1999). The present research contributes to existing literature in at least two ways. One, we assess organizational climate at both the individual and organizational levels. Two, using multilevel analyses, we demonstrate the linkage between top manager or leader attitudes and characteristics, and the perceptions of their lower-level managers.

1.2. Employee perceptions of climate and withdrawal

Employee perceptions regarding the family supportiveness of their organization are related to intentions to leave the organization (Allen, 2001; Anderson et al., 2002; Thompson et al., 1999). This association is important to consider because turnover, especially among mid and lower-level managers, referred to as department managers or DMs in our study, is one of the most pervasive problems in service organizations (Deery & Shaw, 1997). Specifically, the annual turnover rate has been estimated to be 50 percent in the hotel industry (Smith Travel Research, 2003). Causes of turnover include limited career and financial advancement, organizational climate, and work–family conflict (O'Leary & Deegan, 2005; Stalcup & Pearson, 2001). Stalcup and Pearson (2001) reported that long working hours and regular relocation are additional reasons for hotel management turnover, but participants in their study emphasized that the primary concern regarding work time was not working too much, but not having enough time to spend with family.

O'Leary and Deegan (2005) examined career progression of hospitality and tourism management graduates. There was a significant drop-out rate from employment in the tourism/hospitality industry over the course of 10 years. Unsuitable working hours and poor remuneration were the major reasons for the turnover. There was also reference to work/life balance. Many of the respondents reported that they left the industry because of the incompatibility of work and family life and that the incompatibility hampered their advancement in the industry (O'Leary & Deegan, 2005). Therefore, we propose the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1. Lower-level manager perceptions of a supportive work–family climate (including organizational time expectations, career consequences, and managerial support) are negatively associated with their turnover intentions.

Employee perceptions regarding the family supportiveness of their organization are also significantly related to their job outcomes and attitudes toward the organization, such as job commitment and job satisfaction (Thomas & Ganster, 1995). Employees who perceive their organization to be more family supportive report greater job satisfaction (Anderson et al.,