



The role of organizational service climate in generating control and empowerment among workers and customers

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Abstract

Previous studies have found a relationship between service climate and customers' satisfaction. This paper presents two studies that used structural equation modeling to examine the role of control and empowerment in mediating this relationship. In the first study, questionnaires were administered to 113 pairs of customers and service workers. The results show that service climate is related to a customer's satisfaction through the mediation of a service worker's self-reported control of the service situation. In the second study, the service worker's sense of empowerment was predicted with service climate and the supervisor's empowering behavior. The data was gathered with questionnaires administered to 255 workers in service roles. Service climate was found to have a positive effect on empowering leadership behaviors of the service worker's supervisor which, in turn, enhance the service worker's sense of empowerment. The results are discussed in regard to the role of control and empowerment in service organizations. © 2002 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. General introduction

Increased recognition of the importance of quality service to the survival and growth of organizations has led to an interest in the nature of service climate and its relationship to customers' satisfaction with the quality of service. Service climate is described as "employees perceptions of the practices, procedures, and behaviors that get rewarded, supported and expected with regard to customer service and customer service quality" (Schneider et al., 1998, p. 151). Organizational climate for service is expressed in an organizational atmosphere of "passion for service" which focuses service workers' efforts on delivering quality service (Schneider and Bowen, 1995). Several studies found that the way workers perceive the service climate in their organization is positively related to customer satisfaction with the quality of service (Schneider and Bowen, 1985; Schneider et al., 1998). Although this relationship is intuitively comprehensible, it is likely to be mediated by several factors that have not been thoroughly studied.

This paper presents two studies examining two sets of related factors, associated with the notions of control

and empowerment, that are expected to mediate the relationship between aspects of service climate, on the one hand, and customers' satisfaction, on the other. The importance of workers' control and empowerment has been acknowledged theoretically (Liden and Arad, 1996; Spreitzer et al., 1997), but until recently was not examined empirically in relation to service climate and customer satisfaction, and with different conceptualizations of empowerment (Hartline and Ferrell, 1996; Corsun and Enz, 1999).

In general, workers in service organizations may be able to exercise control over a wide range of "hard" and "soft" aspects of their behavior at work, from their attire (Rafaeli et al., 1997), to their emotional expressions, to the extent to which they can deviate from regulations and work routines in order to handle diverse customer requests (Hopfl, 1994). Many service encounters and service roles involve "staged performances" (Deighton, 1994) in which service workers attempt to get customers involved in the service process. Research has shown that customers' perceptions of service quality are influenced, among other things, by the nature of their interpersonal interactions with customer-contact workers (Bitner et al., 1990), and by emotional aspects of such interactions, such as workers' empathy (Parasuraman et al., 1985). As Bitner et al. (1990) claim, "The importance of spontaneous interactive quality in

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service delivery cannot be overemphasized” (p. 81). Furthermore, the implementation of a service climate is considered to be strongly related to employee empowerment, expressed among other things in workers’ beliefs regarding their overall level of autonomy in light of their place and role within their organization. A necessary condition for empowerment is that managers engage in empowering behaviors, such as relinquishing parts of their authority and allowing workers to make independent decisions (Bowen and Lawler, 1992, 1995; Hartline and Ferrell, 1996). It is hence crucial to better understand the factors that affect how characteristics of the organization affect workers’ perceptions of empowerment and control over the way in which they can perform their job, and how all of these affect customer satisfaction.

The study of the concepts of control and empowerment was designed to achieve several purposes. First, the paper points to the need for a theoretical differentiation between empowerment and control, and examines both in regard to service climate. A second purpose was to examine the relationship between service climate and control reported by the service provider and satisfaction reported by the customer. Most studies that examine customer satisfaction and variables related to the service provider have measured all variables only through the report of the service provider. The methodology employed in the first of the two studies presented in the paper, using dyads of service providers and customers, provides the customer’s view point, as well as eliminates the problem of a common source error that characterizes many studies. A third purpose of the studies was to examine the effects of sense of control over the service situation in regard to both the customer and the service provider. Since the service encounter is an interactive situation, the inclusion of the customer’s point of view is essential. Finally, the fourth purpose was to examine the concept of empowering leadership in relation to service climate and empowerment of the employee. This concept has not been examined empirically so far despite its centrality in understanding organizational factors affecting empowerment.

The first of the two studies reported here used dyads of service workers and customers to examine the impact of service climate and perceived control on customer satisfaction. This study focuses on the control experienced in the service situation by both parties. The second study focused only on service workers, and examined the impact of service climate and empowering leadership on workers’ empowerment. While each study stands on its own, the questions and variables examined in each are complementary and overall contribute to our understanding of the factors that impact on workers’ empowerment and sense of control in regard to outcome variables of importance to service organizations.

2. Study 1

2.1. Introduction

The first study examines workers’ and customers’ perceived control over the service situation in relation to service climate, on the one hand, and customers’ satisfaction with the service, on the other.

People are characterized by a desire to maintain control over events (Burger, 1992). More specifically, Basso et al. (1994) distinguish between a general need to control one’s physical and social environment and the specific need to control other people. Whereas people differ in their desire for personal control (Burger, 1992), there is evidence for the positive effects of perceived control, especially in regard to coping with stress (for example, Paterson and Neufeld, 1995). In the organizational context, several authors have suggested that workers’ control is essential in service organizations due to the unique characteristics of the service situation. Bowen and Lawler (1992), for example, maintain that service workers should be allowed increased independence in the performance of their jobs when the service organization does not operate in a purely production-line fashion, in which routine encounters with customers are pre-planned and script-based as in the case of some fast-food chains. Schneider and Bowen (1995) suggest that a strong organizational climate is more important in service organizations than in manufacturing organizations. Since service workers frequently operate on their own, face to face with a customer, it is impossible for managers to observe and correct their behavior. Therefore, “in a service business the climate or culture of the work environment must serve as the guide for employees’ behavior” (Schneider and Bowen, 1995, p. 237). Along with a dominant service climate, the unique characteristics of the service role require that the service worker will be authorized to practice self-direction and self-management in a wide range of situations. Since a strong service-oriented organizational climate can substitute some aspects of managerial control of workers’ performance, organizations with a strong service climate are likely to provide service workers with a higher level of personal control. Furthermore, Kelley (1993) implies that a strong organizational culture can point employees towards appropriate means of task performance. A weak service climate, on the other hand, results in a service encounter that is managed through bureaucratic rules reducing workers and customer’s perceived control (Bateson, 1985).

The relationship between control by workers and customer satisfaction was acknowledged by several authors. For example, Bateson (1985) posits that service workers are better able to satisfy customers’ needs when workers have some control over the service encounter. Indeed, Bitner et al. (1990) found that customers are

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