

Organizational Commitment: Clarifying the Concept and Simplifying the Existing Construct Typology

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This paper examines popular concepts and "types" of organizational commitment in light of the definition of commitment and common factors that pertain to all commitments. It argues that a commitment is best conceptualized as a single, fundamental construct that may vary according to differences in focus, terms, and time-specific evaluation. Analysis of affective commitment measures indicates that certain measures contain more than one set of terms and make assumptions about evaluation that add constraints to the basic meaning of commitment. Recommendations include the argument that commitment measures address one set of terms and avoid evaluative phraseology. © 1996 Academic Press, Inc.

Organizational commitment has been a popular research topic during the past two decades, in part because of the powerful motivational implications of commitment (Allen & Meyer, 1990; Becker, 1992; Mowday, Porter, & Steers, 1982). Despite progress in understanding the concept, theoretical disputes persist as to the nature of the concept and how it should be applied in an organizational context (Hunt & Morgan, 1994; Mathieu & Zajac, 1990; Morrow, 1983; Reichers, 1985). The purpose of the paper is: (1) to examine and clarify differences in current descriptions of organizational commitment, (2) to reverse the trend toward defining multiple "types" of commitment, and (3) to offer an approach to understanding and measuring organizational commitment that is grounded in the basic meaning of the word "commitment."

In commitment research, two common distinctions have been that between an "attitudinal" and a "behavioral" approach to commitment, and that between an "affective" and "continuance" (or "calculative") commitment concept (Meyer & Allen, 1984; Mowday et al., 1982; Angle & Lawson, 1993). According to the attitudinal approach, commitment develops as a result of some combination of work experiences, perceptions of the organization,

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and personal characteristics, which lead to positive feelings about an organization which in turn becomes commitment (Mowday et al., 1982). Further explanation is offered under the guise of exchange theory in which persons with positive attitudes are predisposed to offer commitment in exchange for anticipated future rewards (Angle & Perry, 1983). Affective and continuance commitment have been linked to this approach, also referred to as "attitudinal commitment" (Allen & Meyer, 1990; Angle & Lawson, 1993).

In the behavioral approach, a person attains a state or position of commitment as a result of engaging in committing behaviors—behaviors that, in effect, make it costly to subsequently reverse a position or disengage from some line of activity. Salancik (1977) articulates the behavioral approach in the phrase, "To act is to commit oneself" (p. 4). Committing acts could include building up a nontransferable retirement fund, accruing vacation time, gaining academic tenure, or making statements in support of some issue or objective. A binding cost would be the thought of contradicting or reversing a previously expressed position (Salancik, 1977). According to Angle and Lawson (1993), efforts made to reconcile the attitudinal and behavioral approaches have not been universally accepted. However, at times, continuance commitment has also been associated with a behavioral approach (Mowday et al., 1982).

Within the attitudinal framework, "affective commitment" has been described as a set of strong, positive attitudes toward the organization manifested by dedication to goals and a shared sense of values. Mowday, Steers, and Porter (1979) defined commitment as "the relative strength of an individual's identification with and involvement in a particular organization." Their "organizational commitment questionnaire," or OCQ, has since become the most popular measure of commitment. Affective commitment is believed to emerge from the kinds of positive experiences associated with the attitudinal process of development.

Kanter (1968) used the term "continuance commitment" to describe a member's dedication to the survival or continuance of an organization caused by requiring members to make investments and sacrifices such that it becomes difficult for them to leave or detach. Becker (1960) had previously described commitment as a state resulting from "side-bets" or investments that a person accrues over time while working for an organization such as nonvested retirement benefits, job security, accrued vacation. In his words, "Commitments come into being when a person, by making a 'side-bet,' links extraneous interest with a consistent line of activity" (p. 33). Accordingly, continuance commitment is the tendency to remain a member of the organization because of the perceived costs of doing otherwise.

In addition to the affective-continuance distinction, Weiner (1982) and Allen and Meyer (1990) described "normative commitment" in which a sense of obligation binds a person to a certain course of action. Weiner (1982)

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