Understanding the Importance of the Integrity Factor in Trust between Subordinates and Supervisors

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ABSTRACT

The main aim of this study is to explore the underlying factors of the subordinate-supervisor trust relationship and to analyze its impact on the three components of organizational commitment. Data was collected from 192 R&D professionals working at 10 different ICT Portuguese industrial companies. The study confirms the three factors of integrity, benevolence and ability as the basis for the perceived trustworthiness of supervisors by subordinates. In addition, results show that the trust a team member places on his/her leader depends predominantly on his/her perception of integrity. The authors conclude that even in the technological field, where the prevalence of a technical competence-based trust relationship was expected, integrity emerged as an important element in the subordinate’s trust of his/her supervisor. Integrity was found to correlate significantly with affective, normative and calculative commitment. The authors’ findings suggest that organizations can “manage” commitment in ICT industrial enterprises through fostering the perception of integrity by subordinates.

Keywords: Commitment, ICT Enterprises, Integrity, Trust, Trustworthiness

INTRODUCTION

There are various studies in literature which associate trust to a set of positive results for organizations (e.g. Golembiewski & McConkie, 1975; Simons & Parks, 2001). Various studies suggest that trust in the supervisor generates a positive impact on individuals’ behaviour and performance (Dirks, 2000; Dirks & Ferrin, 2002; Davis et al., 2000; Williams, 2001). Dirks and Ferrin (2002) refer that trust in the supervisor produces a significant impact on individual results, which include performance, behavior in organizational citizenship, turnover, job satisfaction and organizational commitment. Since there is evidence of the impact of trust in the supervisor in different organizational results, its promotion is seen as a crucial issue in organizational management. For example, a study produced by Simons and Parks (2001) concluded that the perception of behavioural integrity and the trust placed in the supervi-

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sor are significantly correlated with customer satisfaction and profit. The importance of the supervisor’s integrity is an issue of great concern for organizations due to the impact this generates on different results (Schoorman et al., 2007; Caldwell & Hayes, 2007). Several managers have reported that integrity, above all other values, is the most important characteristic of prospective managers, even surpassing competence (Craig & Gustaffson, 1998; Posner & Schmidt, 1984). Other less extreme studies have identified integrity as an important component of managerial success (Mortensen, Smith & Cavanagh, 1989).

Besides, the mechanism through which trust in the leader can affect individuals’ behaviour and performance is founded on the principles of social exchange (Dirks & Ferrin, 2002). Various studies have suggested that those individuals, who feel that their supervisor demonstrates attention and consideration in a relationship and is more trustworthy, tend to reattribute this sentiment through desirable behaviour (Dirks & Skarlicki, 2004). Based on this perspective, Mayer et al. (1995) constructed a theoretical model proposing that, when followers believe their leaders possess ability, integrity or benevolence, they feel more comfortable about taking on risks. Mayer and Davis (1999) also suggest that when employees do not believe in their leaders’ trustworthiness, this can affect their performance. What these different studies have in common is that: greater levels of trust in the supervisor are associated to a more favorable attitude in relation to the organization.

Literature on organizational commitment has also proposed that the construct is better conceptualized when this is set in a framework and perspective of social exchange (Shore et al., 2006; Eisenberg et al., 1990). Existing studies have highlighted the importance of analyzing the relationship between people and companies based on the presupposition of the existence of an exchange relationship (Mowday, Porter & Steers, 1982). According to Blau (1964), a social exchange presupposes an obligation which is not clearly explicit, such as that which occurs when someone does someone else a favour and thus generates an expectation of a possible future retribution. In this sense, a relationship of social exchange depends on the existence of trust (Blau, 1964) and presupposes an investment by both parties and the inexistence of the guarantee that the investment will have a future return, so that the risk of this investment requires trust (Blau, 1964; Shore et al., 2006).

According to this theoretical framework, trust emerges as a determining factor even though there is little consensus as to its function as a predictor or result (Caldwell & Hayes, 2007). Organizational commitment has been viewed as an outcome variable through these theoretical lenses. Commitment and trust are connected by a common theoretical base despite the existence of very few studies which analyze the relationship between the two (Nambudiri, 2012), more specifically with regard to the influence of the factors of trustworthiness on the three dimensions of commitment (Colquitt et al., 2007).

It was reasoned by literature that trustworthiness might have independent relationships with commitment because they can engender a social exchange relationship (Colquitt et al., 2007; Nambudiri, 2012). Colquitt et al. (2007) refers that ability, benevolence, and integrity were significant predictors of affective commitment, and not just trust. In this sense, this study hypothesized that trustworthiness (integrity, benevolence and ability) would be correlated with the affective, normative and calculative factors of organizational commitment, analyzing the influence of integrity on organizational commitment in relation to the other factors of trustworthiness. It is in this context that this study seeks to present a contribution at this level by closing the gaps in literature and contributing to a reflection on the importance of the perceptions of integrity in the dimensions of commitment. There does not seem to be any literature study on this specific relation although clear orientations as to its pertinence have been identified (Colquitt et al., 2007).

In the contexts of ICT enterprises, trust and organizational commitment are essential
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