Self-Leadership and Burnout: An Exploratory Study

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Abstract

The study examined the relationship between self-leadership and the three dimensions i.e. emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and personal accomplishment of burnout in a manufacturing plant located in the Pacific Northwest. Based on a sample of 166 employees, the results indicated that employees who experienced low levels of self- leadership had higher levels of emotional exhaustion, whereas employees who experienced higher levels of self-leadership had lower levels of emotional exhaustion. No significant relationships were found with the other two dimensions of burnout.

During the past couple of decades, organizations in the US, as well as overseas, have been incorporating self-managed work teams in their structural design. In the United States particularly its popularity has increased with estimates of organizations using self-managed work teams ranging from 30- 55% (Orsburn & Moran, 2000; Osterman, 2000; Allen & Hech, 2005). As global competition has increased traditional bureaucratic organizations are being replaced by self- managing work teams. As a matter of fact one of the most common changes that organizations have made is the implementation of teams (Mohrman, Cohen & Mohrman, 1995; Osborn & Moran; Osterman, 2000).

Among researchers, the concept of self- managed work groups has also gained increasing interest (Stewart & Manz, 1995; Cohen & Ledford, 1994; Mohrman, Cohen & Ledford 1995; Lawler 1992; Hackman 1986; Manz 1986; 1990; 1992; Manz & Sims, 1980; 1990) as organizations are moving towards a more participative style of managing employees. Self- managing work teams had its origins in the concept of socio-technical systems developed by Emery & Trist (1969).More recently as earlier noted, self- managed work groups have been utilized as a management system particularly as a response to pressures from a highly competitive environment, and a highly educated workforce for more responsibility and empowerment through team-based shared leadership (Pearce & Manz 2005). In addition, there is also additional pressure for organizations to become more innovative and creative as a response to the challenges of competing in the global economy that we live in (Writon, 1991; Druskat &Wheeler, 2003; Carmeli and Weisberg, 2006)). Self-managing work teams provides that response as several research studies have found (Druskat and Wheeler, 2003).

Self- managed work groups have a number of main features that make them different from the traditional work team in an organization. Generally they consist of a small group of individuals (8-15) who (Jessup 1990; Wall et. al, 1986) are given the responsibility for completing an entire unit of work (Jonsson & Zank, 1985) and the opportunity to make decisions within their sphere of work. The design of the work team is such where individual team members perform a variety of different tasks where they use a number of skills, which the team as a whole possesses (Wall & Clegg, 1986). The design of the work team incorporates job feedback which is seen as important to the work group, so that variance from goal attainment can be controlled by group members within a defined work area boundary. In this environment team members make decisions that were formerly made by supervisors and managers in a traditional organization (Cohen, Ledford and Spreitzer, 1996; Neck and Houghton, 2006).

Although strong empirical evidence supporting the benefits of team structures is still evolving, several case studies, both within the United States and Europe, have proved that the implementation of self- managed work teams produces outcomes such as increased employee satisfaction, the opportunity for increased socialization in the workplace, increased autonomy, opportunity to learn new skills, and other aspects such as reduced absenteeism and turnover and increased performance and motivation (lCohen & Ledford 1994; Verespej 1990; Pearson 1991; Pearce & Ravlin 1987; Wall, Kemp, Jackson & Clegg, 1986 Orsbun & Moran, 2000).

Self-Managed Work Teams and Self-Leadership

Although there has been a considerable amount of research on self-managed work teams there has been a lack of attention on the role of the leader in the team.   As a matter of fact there has been a paucity of research studies on the impact of the external leader on the operation of the group.   The design of self-managed work teams emphasizes group member control over their work environment, as well as exercising responsibility for all the assigned tasks within the group. Consequently because of this design, researchers have expressed little interest in the role of the external leader and have assumed that this role is redundant.

However research by Manz & Sims (1984, 1986, 1987, 1990 ;) and Manz, (1992) have focused their attention on the changing nature of leadership in a self-managed work team environment, and the role of self-leadership on the effectiveness of self-managed work teams. Their research has suggested that far from becoming redundant, leadership in this environment has moved away from the traditional hierarchical role of supervision and control to a management style of coaching and facilitating team members. Although much less direct, this new role is seen as being still essential to the overall effectiveness of the team.

Since the basis of self-managed work groups is team members experiencing autonomy in their respective jobs, the term "external leader" might seem a bit strange and out of place, particularly as self-management represents the ideal autonomous work group situation. However in reality, the formal supervisor or manager continues to play a role in the functioning of almost all self-managed work teams. In an environment where self-managed work teams operate, leadership in this situation describes the idea of "a person who leads others to lead themselves" (Whitsett & Yorks, 1983).   Manz and Sims (1986) have described this type of leadership as "Superleader" or Self-Leadership. The notion of the formal leader in the self-managed work team system implies that the leader through guiding and encouraging the work team towards self-management gradually through time works towards making his or her role redundant. In contrast transformational leadership focuses on the leader's ability to create a highly motivating and inspiring vision (Bass, 1990).The focus is on the leader's vision and the leader represents the source of direction. Individuals are expected to commit to the vision and the leader. With Self-Leadership the leader's focus is largely on the individuals in the team who are constantly being encouraged and provided opportunities to manage themselves and thereby sharing power with the leader. The leader's job in this environment then changes to one that helps team members to develop the necessary confidence and skills for carrying out the duties and responsibilities of the job, especially self- leadership (Manz & Sims, 1990; Pearce & Manz, 2005; and Neck and Houghton, 2006)

Later work by Manz and Sims (1991) provides a foundation upon which to describe leadership in the self-managed work team setting.   In this type of work system the suggested style of leadership, namely Self-Leadership reflects the basic requirements of self-managed work teams. According to Manz and Sims (1991), the leader engages in behaviors that help team members learn to lead themselves. In this organization environment, leaders help team members to recognize their own capacity for effective decision-making without the need for direct involvement by the leader. This research by Manz and Sims (1991) has revealed basic behaviors that leaders perform, which directly affect the level of self-management displayed by the team.

For example, Self-Leadership behavior encourages self-reinforcement by team members. Through reinforcement of high levels of group performance, the Self-Leadership behaviors encourage the group to recognize and appreciate actions that lead to effective performance. The leader in this work environment supplies the group with sufficient information to allow the group to evaluate its own performance. Most of the behaviors exhibited by leaders in this empowered work system encourage team members to internalize the concepts of task responsibility and influence over organizational outcomes.   In other words, the leader, through his or her behaviors, helps and encourages the team to feel responsible for its own outcomes and experience the intrinsic rewards in their respective work setting.

The leader in this empowered work environment supplies information and feedback as needed to encourage the continuance of self-leadership behaviors. Through the selective use of legitimate criticism and rewards, the leader enforces self-leadership outcomes (Manz & Sims 1987).

In addition in this work system team members are encouraged to be critical of their own performance. By learning to recognize errors and mistakes in their daily work duties, team members can gain increased knowledge of their work and recognize appropriate behaviors for group success. Not mentioned in the literature, although implicitly implied, is the need for the external leader to promote norms of behavior based on group self-management.

Since the primary goal of the leader in this empowered environment is to improve the performance of group members through the development of their own self leadership capabilities, employee self- goal setting is an important ingredient. The leader through coaching and modeling helps assist members to engage in the behavior of self-goal setting within the group, and helps them to effectively set specific challenging goals for themselves. Table 1 outlines a description of these behaviors.

Table 1: Superleader Behaviors

Variables	Description
Encourages self - reinforcement	Leader encourages work group to be self-reinforcing of high work group performance.
Encourages self-criticism	Leader encourages work group to be self-critical of low group performance.
Encourages self-goal-setting	Leader encourages work group to set performance goals.
Encourages self-coordination	Leader encourages work group to monitor, be aware of and to evaluate performance level.
Encourages self-expectation	Leader encourages work group to have high expectations for work performance.
Encourage rehearsal	Leader encourages work group to over an activity and "think through" before actually performing the activity.

While the position of the leader in self- managed work teams is described as a leader who leads others to lead themselves (Manz & Sims, 1986), the inference is that the leader is moving toward becoming redundant or at least only influential in a minor way. It would be more suitable to express the role of the leader in this environment as a leader who teaches others to appreciate the value and importance of self-leadership for enhancing both organizational and individual outcomes, and who encourages group members to reflect on management in a different, though not necessarily less influential, way. The group's relationship with the leader changes from one of basic reliance for the designation of tasks, rewards and direction, to a subtler, though just as important, role of maintenance and facilitation. The group may not rely on him/her in terms of having to ask for desired input once self-leadership is established, but the leader evolves into a facilitator of group behaviors and acts as a buffer between the group and the external environment by supplying information and resources to the team Manz & Sims 2001)

In contrast to a traditional organization design, in which an employee focuses primarily on managing one relationship (e.g. . with the supervisor), individuals in a self –managed work team must focus on managing multiple relationships, particularly with their fellow team members and, in some instances, with s supervisor as well. Consequently, self managed work team designs can contribute to burnout precisely because they require team members to have more intense and frequent interactions with each other, a key factor identified by Maslach and Jackson (1981). On can also assume that since a self managed work team is more empowered because they assume the roles of a traditional supervisor, and at the same time are encouraged to manage themselves they could be less prone to burnout because they are more in control of the work processes and hence experience less role conflict and role ambiguity. Spreitzer, Kizilos, and Nason (1997) argue that experiencing a sense of empowerment gives employees greater control over their own work and consequently are better able to cope with strain in the work environment. This was validated in a study undertaken by Laschinger et al. (2004). Hence the purpose of this study is to explore the question of whether self-leadership does or does not lead to burnout.

Burnout

To the authors' knowledge there have been no studies examining the relationship between self-leadership and burnout. Because burnout has become a major organizational problem, interest in this phenomenon has increased tremendously. Burnout according to scholars occurs as a result to stress and it involves both emotional and interpersonal stressors that individuals experience at work.

As a result of these experiences these stressors effect how an individual responds to his or her coworkers and the organization as a whole (Campbell et. al, 2013; Maslach, 2013). More specifically, Maslach and Jackson have defined burnout as a syndrome of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and a reduced sense of personal accomplishment. Emotional exhaustion is the physical, mental tension experienced as a result of experiencing job related stressors. Depersonalization occurs when an individual distances himself or herself from other coworkers, and views them impersonally. Diminished personal accomplishment is the result of a negative self evaluation. They identified four organizational factors that may affect the severity of burnout: feedback, control and clarity, social support, and personal expectations about work.

Although it is beyond the scope of this paper to review extensively the literature on burnout and work environment the bulk of the research evidence to date suggests that environmental factors, particularly characteristics of the work environment, are more strongly related to burnout than are demographic and personality factors (Maslach and Jackson 1984). Research studies have indicated that as the intensity of the job experience and the demands of the employee increase the levels of burnout appear to increase (Maslach and Pines 1977; Pines and Maslach, 1978); Savicki and Cooley, 1987). Workload, role conflict, and role ambiguity also appear to increase the frequency of burnout (Maslach and Jackson, (1986). Research studies have also collectively found that burnout has a unfavorable impact on organizations in terms of the development of negative attitudes, decreased levels of job involvement and task performance, and increased turnover intentions (Jackson & Maslach, 1982; Leiter & Maslach,1988; Wright and Cropanzano, 1998. In addition Chiu and Tsai (2006) in their study of restaurant employees found a negative relationship between organizational citizenship behavior and emotional exhaustion and diminished personal accomplishment.

The social environment of the employees' work setting is frequently related to burnout. For example, lower burnout levels have been related to supportive peer relationships (Lee and Ashforth, 1993; Leiter and Maslach, 1988), whereas conflict or unsupportive behaviors peer relationships appear to be related to higher burnout levels (Leiter and Maslach, 1988).

Method

Research Participants

Data were collected on site over a period of three days from employees working in a medium-sized heavy industry manufacturing organization in the Midwest. Surveys were completed by 215 employees for a 99%response rate. The high response rate was due to the fact that employees filled out the survey at the work site before the start of their respective shifts. The facility had been operating with self-managed work teams for a year.

Measures

Self-Leadership. Self-leadership scores were obtained using the Self- Management Leadership Questionnaire developed by Manz and Sims (1987). The 22-item questionnaire is designed to test the extent to which leaders of autonomous work groups display typical Superleader behaviors. Items were rated on a 7 point scale.

Burnout.Burnout was measured using the Maslach Burnout Inventory (Maslach and Jackson 1981). The inventory focuses on three dimensions. Emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and diminished personal accomplishment. Items were rated on a 7 point scale.

Analysis

Measures for burnout and self-leadership were purified using Exploratory Factor Analyses (EFA). The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy was determined, and the Bartlett's test of sphericity was conducted on both sets of measures. Results indicated that the measures could be purified using EFA (Stewart 1981).

In the EFA, principal components analysis was used for factor extraction, parallel analysis for determining number of factors to retain, and varimax rotation for aiding the interpretation of factors. This package of decisions was used because of its accuracy over other available approaches (Patil et al. 2008).

The factor analysis of 22 burnout items suggested the retention of 3 factors. After cleaning the factor structure for variables with low communalities (lower than 0.4, Costello and Osborne 2005), high cross-loadings (higher than 0.32, Tabachnick and Fidell 2001), and factors with low loadings (lower than 0.5, Hair et al. 2005), 14 variables loading across three factors were retained. These factors were labeled as emotional exhaustion (7 items, alpha =.86), depersonalization (3 items, alpha=.71), and personal accomplishment (4 items, alpha=.60).

EFA of the self-leadership scale resulted in all items loading on to a single factor. Mean scores of all items loading on a factor were calculated for subsequent regression analysis.

The relationship between self-leadership and different types of burnout was studied using two approaches. First, we conducted simple regressions between self-leadership scores and each of the three types of burnout. Our results indicated that only the coefficient for emotional exhaustion was statistically significant (B = -.207 (.079), $t = -2.64$, $p = .01$). The coefficient for personal accomplishment was, however, approaching significance (B = -.121 (.067), $t = -1.82$, $p = .07$)

Second, we performed a median split of self-leadership scores and classified respondents as being low or high on that trait. We then conducted a multivariate analysis of variance with the binary-coded self-leadership score as the independent variable and the three types of burnout as dependent variables.

Table 2: Manz and Sims (1987).

	Self Leadership	Mean	Standard Deviation	N
Emotional Exhaustion	Low	3.63	1.33	**81**
	High	3.15	1.25	**85**
Depersonalization	Low	2.63	1.19	**85**
	High	2.36	1.12	**85**
Personal Accomplishment	Low	3.81	1.04	**81**
	High	3.66	1.08	**85**

Yet again, a statistically significant relationship between self-leadership and emotional exhaustion was obtained ($F = 5.844$, $df = 1$, $p = .02$). The relationships between self-leadership and the depersonalization and personal accomplishment were not statistically significant. As the table below suggests, higher levels of self-leadership resulted in lower emotional exhaustion.

Discussion

In this study, it appears that low levels of self-leadership leads to high levels of emotional exhaustion when employees work in an environment where they are not empowered to make decisions and where they lack the autonomy and responsibility to make decisions, they perhaps experience a lack of control and consequently experience higher levels of emotional exhaustion. On the other hand, employees who experience higher levels of self-leadership also have more autonomy and are more empowered to make job-related decisions. This feeling of being more in control appears to reduce the levels of emotional exhaustion.

With respect to personal accomplishment, although the results were not significant, but were in the right direction, employees who experienced lower levels of self-leadership also had lower levels of personal accomplishment. On the other hand, employees who experienced higher levels of self-leadership had higher levels of personal accomplishment. No significant relationship was found with depersonalization, indicating that they were not totally disengaged from their job. One possible reason for this could be that employment security was important for the employees. However, further research is needed to explore the causes of this result.

In the fast changing world of today, where there is a strong emphasis on efficiency and profitability, organizations expect employees to be productive and high performers. In order for this to happen as well as prevent employee burnout, it behooves an organization to create an environment where employees are actively engaged in their jobs. An environment that is designed to support and encourage the involvement of employees should be successful in not only promoting their well-being and enhancing their performance and productivity, but also in preventing burnout from occurring. For example a study undertaken by Garman, Corrigan and Morris (2002) indicated a significant relationship between an employees' emotional exhaustion and satisfaction with the environment. The bottom line is that an organization that actively addresses employee burnout will have more effective and satisfied employees.

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