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Kelly Jo Drane enjoys researching, analyzing and coming up with new strategies for issues within organizations. An active student at Murray State University, she is a member of Alpha Omicron Pi, Lambda Pi Eta, Student Ambassadors, and various honor societies. Kelly has used her public speaking skills to represent Murray State University at different high schools and has presented her research during Scholars Week. She has a passion for civic participation, and is a volunteer for the American Red Cross and the Senior Citizens Center. After graduation, Kelly will pursue a career in the sales field.

ABSTRACT

What is the Relationship among Sycophantic Behavior, Supervisor-subordinate Communication, Co-worker Relationships and Trust?

The purpose of this essay is to discuss the relationship among sycophantic behavior, supervisor-subordinate communication, co-worker relationships and trust. Once the variables have been discussed, they are tied together with the Leader-Member Exchange Theory of Graen and Scandura, and Machivellianism of Christie and Geis. By reviewing the literature, and in light of the two theories, a tentative conclusion is reached: subtle sycophantic behavior does in fact have a positive influence on supervisor-subordinate communication and co-worker relationships, if trust is maintained.

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Lou Davidson Tillson is an associate professor in the Department of Organizational Communication at Murray State University. She joined MSU in 1992 after receiving her Ph.D. from The Ohio University. Tillson is interested in a wide variety of communication topics, including assessment and communication, health communication, service learning and communication, organizational communication, instructional/educational communication, case method, small group processes, public speaking and graduate teaching assistant development. She has published and presented numerous scholarly studies throughout her career.

What is the Relationship among Sycophantic Behavior, Supervisor-subordinate Communication, Co-worker Relationships and Trust?

Flatterer, apple-polisher, yes-man, bootlicker, brown-noser, suck-up; do any of these words describe an employee you know? Perhaps the proper term dates back to the Greek ages with the word *sycophant*. A sycophant is described as “a person who tries to please someone in order to gain a personal advantage” (“Sycophant,” 2005). This type of employee will go up, over and beyond to satisfy the needs of his or her supervisor. He believes that sycophantic behavior will help him move up the organizational ladder. No matter how an employee behaves, he will always have communication with his supervisor. Supervisors try to find what motivates and empowers their subordinates to do their best, while subordinates work to please their supervisors. The communication that takes place is known as supervisor-subordinate communication. There is also communication amongst co-workers that results in co-worker relationships. Both the communication and relationships that exist depend on trust. Given the fact that these components are present in every organization, what is the relationship among sycophantic behavior, supervisor-subordinate communication, co-worker relationships and trust?

The first variable that will be discussed is sycophantic behavior. Studies will assess sycophantic behavior with relation to promotion in an organization as well as the best sycophantic influence style. The second variable is supervisor-subordinate communication. This section will include studies of positive supervisor-subordinate relationships and their effect on job satisfaction and employee motivation. The third variable to be discussed is co-worker relationships. Studies and statistics will examine good relationships between co-workers and the effect of these relationships on the organization. The final variable to be discussed is trust. Studies will examine the benefits of trust to the organization’s longevity, productivity and efficiency.

Literature Review

Sycophantic Behavior

Let’s take a walk back to elementary school. Remember that one kid in class who was always the “teacher’s pet?” He always got to put new paper on the bulletin board, call the roll, beat out the erasers, and he never seemed to miss a recess. Now, he is all grown up and sits at the cubicle right next to yours. The type of behavior he engages in is known as sycophantic behavior.

The average American “changes jobs 10 times and switches careers three times over the course of a lifetime” (Greenspan, 2002, para. 4). There is one thing that each of these jobs will likely have in common: the sycophant employee. Some specific behaviors of a sycophant may include “flattering the boss with compliments, imitating the appearance of supervisors, taking credit for another employee’s work and mindlessly agreeing to all of the supervisor’s decisions” (Underwood, 2003, p. 54).

What do these employees gain by engaging in these types of behaviors? Besides being a nuisance to co-workers, sycophants simply want to move up in the organization. Studies have been conducted to assess the influence of the sycophant employee.

In one such study by Judge and Bretz (1994), the researchers found that influence behaviors did have a positive effect on career success. The study compared influence tactics of sycophantic behavior to career success. A survey was completed by 651 past graduates of the industrial relations program from a midwestern university. The study found that in fact, supervisor-focused tactics with an ingratiation strategy positively predicted career success. Ingratiation is a soft tactic that uses techniques such as friendliness to gain acceptance and build relationships. The study found that those who used a more assertive strategy for self-promotion experienced a negative impact on career success. The researchers

concluded that “apple polishing seems to be a better means of getting ahead than blowing one’s own horn” (p. 59).

Another study related influence tactics of sycophantic behavior to promotability. This study was conducted at a major midwestern university. A survey was distributed to both supervisors and subordinates to evaluate the relationship among influence tactics and promotability. Results concluded that assertiveness is not a good tactic for any employee to engage in. Supervisors feel that assertive employees are trying to take control. The most persuasive influence tactic found was reasoning. Reasoning involves the subordinate working with the supervisor and providing detailed action plans, logical arguments, facts and careful explanations. It can be described as a more subtle approach of sycophantic behavior (Thacker and Wayne, 1995).

A third study by Farmer and Maslyn (1999) focused on the best influence style. The four different tactics used were bystander influencers, shotgun influencers, tactician influencers, and ingratiation influencers. The bystanders simply used no influence tactics, shotgun influencers used an assertive approach, tactician influencers used reasoning, and ingratiation influencers used friendliness. The study was conducted by surveys filled out by supervisors and subordinates. Once again, the assertive approach was found to be the least effective. The bystander approach seemed to have almost no influence. In this study, both the tactician and ingratiation influencers had the most influence and the strongest supervisor-subordinate relationships (1999).

Although all three studies took different approaches, they had very similar findings. All studies found that assertive techniques had a negative impact on their goal of moving up the organizational ladder. However, it can be concluded that some sycophantic influence behaviors, particularly ingratiation and reasoning, do have an impact on career success, promotability, and a stronger supervisor-subordinate relationship. This research also supports the importance of the next variable, supervisor-subordinate communication.

Supervisor-Subordinate Communication

In order for an organization to run at its best, there must be open communication lines between supervisors and their subordinates. A perfect example of excellent supervisor-subordinate communication is Southwest Airlines. Southwest knows that “poor communication

creates complexity, and the organization becomes sluggish and lethargic while people sort things out” (Freiberg and Freiberg, 1996, p. 82). The communication at Southwest is open and consistent. They have broken hierarchical barriers between supervisors and their subordinates to be a true example of teamwork. Open communication has helped make Southwest a continuously profiting airline (1996).

Organizations depend on profit to keep running. Unfortunately, turnover of new employees costs the organization both money and time. According to one article, “The supervisor is the most influential factor in an employee’s willingness to stay with an organization—either specifically staying, or just showing up for work, but emotionally checking out” (Bergen, 2003, para. 19).

Studies also show the importance of open communication between supervisors and subordinates. In one study, it was found that immediacy between supervisors and subordinates is linked to motivation and job satisfaction. Some examples of non-verbal immediacy may be “leaning toward someone, touching someone, or sitting near someone” (Richmond and McCroskey, 2000, p. 86). It was also found that verbal immediacy has a direct impact on the subordinate’s attitude toward his or her supervisor. Verbal immediacy may include compliments and positive feedback. It was concluded that “increased immediacy on the part of either the supervisor or the subordinate is likely to generate reciprocity and accommodation leading to a more positive work environment and more desirable outcomes” (p. 93).

Another study went a step further to implement reciprocity and accommodation theories to supervisor-subordinate communication. The reciprocity theory suggests that people will “tend to reciprocate the communication behaviors in which their interaction partner engages” (McCroskey and Richmond, 2000, p. 279). For example, if the supervisor were to smile at the subordinate, the subordinate would likely smile back. The accommodation theory suggests that “during communication, people adapt their communication style in order to gain approval from their partner or maintain a certain social position” (p. 279). Both the reciprocity and accommodation theories “offer insight into what people are likely to do when they are in the process of building a supervisor/subordinate relationship” (p. 279). In the study, 213 full-time employees participated. The Assertiveness-Responsiveness Measure test was used to identify the socio-communicative style of the supervisors and the socio-

communicative orientation of the participants. It was found that “people who are responsive can anticipate generating more positive relationships as being the likely outcome of their behaviors” (2000). There was also a direct link between these behaviors and trustworthiness, goodwill and a positive attitude (2000).

When supervisors and their subordinates engage in behaviors such as open communication, immediacy, reciprocity and accommodation, it is inevitable that relationships will develop. Cropanzano, Howes, Gandey and Toth (1997) related supportive, collaborative relationships of supervisors and subordinates and their effect on the organization. They found that these positive supervisor-subordinate relationships had three powerful consequences.

“First, individuals are more likely to achieve their personal objectives; thus, employees are able to expend their efforts contributing to the organization, having their needs such as attaining feelings of security or economic stability. Second, since supervisory support creates an atmosphere of stability and predictability, loyalty is enhanced, resulting in higher predictability that employees will use resources in a manner beneficial to the organization. Third, supervisory support makes threatening events less frequent, since friends are less likely to mount an attack (p. 160).”

These factors increase employee satisfaction and reduce stress, thus reducing the probability of employee turnover (Cropanzano et al., 1997).

From the research presented, it can be concluded that behaviors between supervisors and subordinates such as open communication, immediacy, accommodation and reciprocity create a more positive work environment and strong relationships. The relationships that develop increase employee satisfaction for both the supervisor and the subordinate.

Along with good communication with supervisors, subordinates need to develop a relationship with other employees. This leads to the next variable to be discussed, co-worker relationships.

Co-worker Relationships

Nine-hour workdays result in more than just a paycheck at the end of the week. Face it, some employees spend more time in the

workplace than they do with their families. The amount of time spent together helps develop co-worker relationships.

According to a poll, “66 percent of employees are satisfied with co-worker relationships” (Carroll, 2003, para. 4). Although this is a high percentage, there are still one-third of the employees that are not satisfied. The same poll also reported that only “43 percent of adults were completely satisfied with their jobs” (para. 3). The poll concluded that employees who were satisfied with co-worker relationships were more likely to have complete job satisfaction.

What are the characteristics of a good relationship? In the 1970s, Carl identified five characteristics that must be represented in relationships in order for them to be considered good human relationships (Manning, Curtis and McMillen, 1996). The first characteristic of a good relationship is sensitivity. Sensitivity means that each person must be willing to understand the other’s feelings and emotions. Another characteristic essential to the relationship is open communication. Open communication involves both members being able to express their thoughts and feelings. There also must be honesty in the relationship on the part of each individual. Along with honesty, Carl identified respect as another characteristic. Each person must accept and respect the other person’s rights and beliefs. Finally, there must be a rhythm to the relationship. There must be a flow to the relationship where there is a period of sharing and openness and then both parties embrace these experiences (1996).

A study by Gersick, Bartunek and Dutton (2000) was conducted with faculty members at a business school which evaluated the importance of relationships in professional life. In-depth interviews were conducted. One participant, when asked why these relationships were important to her, responded: “Sometimes you lose confidence. And then you get with this group. And- you’re rejuvenated! You’re excited again! They value what you do! They think what you do is interesting! They—they’re sort of everything!” (p. 1028). It was concluded that good relationships between co-workers possessed qualities such as admiration for each other, positive mentoring, support and validation, personal friendship and a feeling of safety (2000).

From the research conducted, it can be concluded that good relationships in the workplace result in positive outcomes both for the individual and the organization. One of the characteristics of a good relationship is trust, our next variable to be discussed.

Trust

In a perfect world, everyone would be trustworthy. Welcome to the not-so-perfect world where co-workers may lie and be deceitful! However, a book titled, *Jobmanship: How to Get Ahead by "Psyching Out" Your Boss and Co-workers*, states that "once you understand your co-workers' personalities, you're better able to decide who can be trusted" (Redford, 1978).

Trust is an important ingredient in any successful organization. Even though it may be hard to measure, it is evident that trust must be present in order for communication to flow effectively throughout the organization. Past research has determined that "trust between individuals and groups within the organization is a highly important element in the long-term stability of the organization and the well-being of its members" (p. 45). Cook and Wall also determined that trust has a positive relationship with job satisfaction, organizational identification and organizational involvement (1980).

One such study supports Cook and Wall's conclusions. A study by Pillai, Schriesheim and Williams (1999) measured relationships among transformational and transactional leadership, procedural and distributive justice, trust, job satisfaction, organizational commitment and organizational citizenship behaviors. In this study, trust was measured by a 12-item instrument developed by Marlowe and Nyhan. Once each of the variables was tested, the researchers developed three separate models to show the relationship among the variables. The models showed a direct link between trust, job satisfaction, organizational citizenship behaviors and organizational commitment. The study concluded that reciprocal trust in the relationship positively influenced job satisfaction, organizational citizenship behaviors and organizational commitment.

Another study by Schindler and Thomas (1993) examined the structure of interpersonal trust in the workplace. Interpersonal trust may be "directed in any or all of three directions from the individual: upward to the supervisor, downward to a subordinate, or laterally to co-workers" (p. 564). Therefore, the study focused on all types of relationships in the organization. Sixty-six supervisor and managerial level employees completed the questionnaire. It was found that "no matter whether the relationship is between oneself and a supervisor, a subordinate or a peer, the order of importance in trust components from most to least is integrity, competence,

loyalty, consistency and openness" (p. 572). The research also concluded:

"Organizations must work toward recognizing and remedying their trust deficiencies. Give the ordering of importance of the five trust conditions, as determined here, companies should concern themselves with fostering employees' integrity (i.e., honesty and truthfulness). In doing so, the likelihood of increasing trust among employees is enhanced as is the potential for bettering the flow of communication, productivity and the overall quality of work life (p. 570)."

With past and present research, it can be concluded that trust among employees in any organization is beneficial to the organization's longevity, productivity, efficiency and employee job satisfaction.

Now that all four variables have been thoroughly examined and discussed, the next step is to analyze. In the next section, the analysis, the variables will be tied together with communication theories to draw a conclusion to the research question.

Analysis

Leader-Member Exchange Theory

The Leader-Member Exchange Theory, also known as LMX, was introduced in the 1970s by theorists Graen and Scandura. The theory examines the relationship and the role processes between a leader and the individual followers. According to the LMX theory, subordinates fall in either one of two groups. The first group is known as the "in-group." These are individuals who have a special relationship with their leader. Those in the "in-group" can be compared to the popular students at school who always got special rights and privileges because of their relationship with the teacher. According to Thomas (2003), those in the "in-group" have "greater access, influence and favor, and are typically considered the trusted advisors, assistants or lieutenants of the leader" (para. 2). The other group of subordinates fall into what is known as the "out-group." This group follows the same expectations from the leader, but lacks that special relationship. Members of the "out-group" can be related to the "other" students at school. They followed school rules and procedures, but never received the same special privileges as the students in the "in-group" (Thomas, 2003).

The special relationship shared between members of the “in-group” and their leader also calls for certain responsibilities. According to Thomas (2003), members of the “in-group” “have a greater sense of commitment, deeper loyalty to the leader, and share difficult administrative responsibilities” (para. 2). With these responsibilities, the leader and the member “mutually gain more personal power because of reciprocal trust and respect for each other” (para. 3). As a result of the reciprocal trust and respect, Truckenbrodt (2000) found “a mutual trust, positive support, informal interdependencies, greater job latitude, common bonds, open communication, a high degree of autonomy satisfaction, and shared loyalty exist” (p. 234).

What distinguishing characteristics place individuals in either the “in-group” or the “out-group?” Although it cannot clearly be explained as to why some people prefer others, it can be determined that bias or perceived similarities do play a role in the process (Thomas, 2003).

A study by Deluga and Perry (1994) examines the role of subordinate performance and communication with the Leader-Member Exchange Theory. The researchers used several different scales to measure the supervisor and subordinate relationships. The researchers found that higher quality exchanges between the leader and the member did in fact positively influence subordinate performance. Also, the use of ingratiation by subordinates “added a significant incremental contribution beyond performance in the prediction of higher quality exchanges” (p. 81).

This theory relates directly to each variable and can help us answer the research question. Through the use of subtle sycophantic behaviors such as ingratiation, a stronger supervisor-subordinate relationship emerges. This is due to a higher exchange level between the supervisor and the subordinate. However, using a strong assertive style of sycophantic behavior will weaken bonds with co-workers and subordinates alike. Often, the “yes-man” in the organization accepts too many responsibilities that he often cannot fulfill. Also, he is constantly trying to undermine his co-workers, and therefore, he is not only a nuisance, but is viewed as untrustworthy (Gable and Dangello, 1994).

Machiavellianism

The next theory to be examined is Machiavellianism. Christie and Geis studied Machiavellianism and wrote a book on the subject

in 1970 titled *Studies in Machiavellianism*. Since that time, Machiavellianism has been widely researched and applied to many different business settings (Moss and Barbuto, 2004).

The amount of Machiavellianism in one’s personality is measured on a scale developed by Christie and Geis. The scale is known as the Mach IV scale. Individuals who take the test are identified by the higher or lower amount of Machiavellianism in their personalities. According to Christie and Geis, those who are identified as high Machiavellian are described as “being a hardheaded cynic, not very trusting of human nature, and ready to deal with what is, rather than what ought to be” (p. 11). Christie and Geis go on to describe that high Machiavellians are “pragmatic, maintain emotional distance, manipulate more, are persuaded less, and can persuade others more” (p. 11). Those who are lower on the Machiavellian scale “value trust and loyalty, are less willing to manipulate others for personal gain, and are concerned with the effect of their actions on others” (p. 11).

A study by Moss and Barbuto in 2004 examined the relationship between influence tactics and Machiavellianism. The study found that “higher scores on Machiavellianism indicate a greater association with the use of soft tactics regardless of the source of motivation” (p. 938).

The Machiavellian theory can be used to help answer our research question. Those with a middle to higher Machiavellian attitude are the most persuasive and use softer influence tactics. Although those at the highest end of the Machiavellian scale may be too concerned with self-promotion, the most effective subordinates used tactics such as reasoning and ingratiation. Therefore, it can be determined that a Machiavellian attitude and soft tactics do have an influence on supervisor-subordinate communication. Other co-workers may find that a very high Machiavellian attitude is very deceptive and manipulative. If these characteristics are in fact true, co-workers and supervisors may lose trust in this type of behavior.

With the Leader-Member Exchange theory and Machiavellianism in mind, and from the research presented in the paper, the conclusion drawn is that subtle styles of sycophantic behavior, particularly ingratiation and reasoning, do in fact, have a positive impact on supervisor-subordinate communication. More assertive styles aimed at promotion of oneself appear to have a negative influence on both the supervisor and fellow co-workers. Co-worker relationships, as well as supervisor-subordinate communication,

depend on trust, and if an employee is engaging in sycophantic behavior for apparent personal gains, the trust becomes violated. However, if the subordinate is engaging in subtle sycophantic behaviors to improve the communication flow between himself and his supervisor, and trust is maintained between himself and his fellow co-workers, then this approach can be beneficial to the employee and the organization.

Conclusions

The variables were researched and examined before presenting the information. The first variable presented in the literature review was sycophantic behavior. A brief introduction was given along with examples of sycophantic behavior. Studies by Judge and Bretz, Thacker and Wayne, and Farmer and Maslyn agree that assertive behavior is not an effective technique to positively influence supervisors or co-workers. The studies also agreed that subtle approaches to sycophantic behavior have shown a positive link to effective supervisor-subordinate communication.

This leads to our next variable examined, supervisor-subordinate communication. It was found that relationships that developed between the supervisors and subordinates through different communication behaviors such as immediacy, reciprocity and accommodation resulted in a more positive work environment for both the supervisor and subordinate.

The next variable discussed was co-worker relationships. In this section, statistics related good co-worker relationships to job satisfaction. Carl identified the components of a good relationship, and a study by Gersick, Bartunek and Dutton proved the impact of good co-worker relationships on the employees and the organization.

The final variable discussed was trust. A discussion of the importance of trust in relation to the communication flow in an organization was given. It was concluded that trust among employees is related to their job satisfaction, thus improving the organization's longevity, productivity and efficiency.

The next section of the paper was the analysis. This is where theories were used to help answer the research question presented. The theories used were the Leader-Member Exchange Theory of Graen and Scandura and Machiavellianism of Christie and Geis.

Through the analysis of the theories and the examination of the variables, the conclusion drawn was that subtle sycophantic behaviors do in fact have a positive influence on supervisor-subordinate communication. If proper styles of sycophantic behavior such as ingratiation and reasoning are properly used, there is also a positive relationship among the employee and his fellow co-workers, and trust is obtained. However, if behaviors of an employee are too assertive and manipulative, trust from co-workers and supervisors are lost, thus defeating his purpose of self-promotion.

The research conducted for this paper was not only looked at from an individual standpoint, but as a beneficiary to the organization as a whole. Future research might, for example, look at additional variables - perhaps exploring the gender and age differences in sycophantic behavior, or the perceptions of sycophantic behavior from co-workers. Other research may include the effect of technology, the decline of face to face communication, and their effect on sycophantic behavior.

Confucius once said, "The superior man is modest in his speech, but exceeds in his actions." Implications from the research support this quote. Becoming the annoying, assertive, yes-man will not move you up the organizational ladder. However, gaining trust from co-workers and supervisors through your actions, mixed with a little bit of schmoozing, may one day have them polishing your apples!

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