Perceived Effectiveness of Supervisory Leadership Behaviors in a Manufacturing-Union Environment

Nalini Govindarajulu
Creighton University
Department of Information Systems and Technology; 2500 California Plaza, Omaha, NE 68114
Phone: (402) 280-3898
NaliniGovindarajulu@creighton.edu

Bonnie Daily
New Mexico State University
MSC 3DJ; Las Cruces, NM 88003
Phone: (505) 646-2015, Fax: (505) 646-1372
bdaily@nmsu.edu

ABSTRACT

Labor unions have a significant impact on the economy in the United States and rest of the world. Although membership rate in unions has declined slowly over the last few decades, there were over 15 million unionized wage and salary employees in the United States alone in the year 2004 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2005). In addition, almost 13% of manufacturing employees were unionized last year (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2005).

The impacts of unions on various measures of organizational effectiveness have been well researched. For instance, firms are more likely to incur lower investment in plant, equipment, and research and development if they are unionized (Bronars & Deere, 1993a; Hirsch 1991b, 1992). Similarly, unionization rates have positive impacts on labor productivity (Allen, 1984).

In addition, unions have several implications for manufacturing supervision and leadership. For instance, unionized employees are believed to have different expectations from their work environment compared to their non-union counterparts (Bryson, Cappellari, & Lucifora, 2003; Hammer & Avgar, 2005). Hence, unionized employees may have different role expectations from their supervisors. For example, abiding by the labor contract and settling employee grievances are some of the key roles that supervisors have to fulfill in a union environment (e.g., Stanley, 2005).

Similarly, certain leadership behaviors are positively associated with subordinates’ perceptions of leadership effectiveness. In particular, supervisors who scored highly on Leader Consideration behaviors (i.e., showing concern towards subordinates) had fewer employee grievances than supervisors who scored low on the Leader Consideration scale (Fleishman & Harris, 1962).

Consideration and Initiation of Structure (i.e., task oriented behaviors) were the two main factors of leadership behavior put forth by Halpin and Winer (1957) and Fleishman, Harris, and Burtt (1956). Other researchers have explicated ten additional factors of leader behavior including Demand Reconciliation (i.e., reducing disorder to the system), Integration (i.e., resolving
conflicts), Superior Orientation (i.e., maintaining cordial relations with superiors), Tolerance of Freedom (i.e., enabling followers to make their own decisions), Persuasiveness (using persuasive arguments), Role Assumption (exercising leadership roles actively), and Production Emphasis (i.e., emphasizing productive output) (e.g., Stogdill, 1959; Stogdill, Goode, & Day, 1962; 1963).

Studies have shown that certain leader behaviors are more dominant in some industries and organizational positions. Specifically, Initiation of Structure and Integration were found to be the main patterns of leader behavior in the health care industry, while Initiation of Structure, Tolerance of Freedom, and Superior Orientation were prevalent leader behaviors among engineers (Putti & Tong, 1992). Similarly, Persuasiveness, Role Assumption, & Consideration were the main leader behaviors exhibited by corporation presidents (Stogdill, Goode, & Day, 1962; 1963).

However, it is not clear as to which leadership behaviors are dominant among supervisors in a unionized manufacturing environment. Since supervisors are bound by contractual rules, they may not have a lot of flexibility in goal setting, empowering employees, or settling intermember conflicts. At the same time, the monotonous nature of the work (e.g., assembly lines) may require supervisors to actively engage employees in redesigning or enriching their jobs. Hence, one objective of this study is to examine the predominant supervisory leadership behaviors in a unionized manufacturing setting.

In addition, the contingency models of leadership theorists have argued that task structure, leader-member exchange, and leaders’ position power moderate the relationship between leaders’ traits and effectiveness (Fiedler, 1964, 1967). Since then, numerous studies have pointed out that certain leader behaviors are found to be more effective in various settings. For instance, the extent to which leaders provided fair rewards and clear direction were determinants of leadership effectiveness in a relatively stable work environment (Lowe et al., 1996). Conversely, leaders who provided a vision and emphasized collective identity were found to be more effective in a turbulent work environment including layoffs and mergers (McWhinney, 1997). In addition, a situational leadership style that combined both task initiating and consideration behaviors was found to be effective among public relations employees (Aldoory & Toth, 2004).

Moreover, it is not known which supervisory leader behaviors are considered to be effective by subordinates in a unionized manufacturing environment. Although a manufacturing environment is relatively structured and stable, a single occurrence of a major quality defect may drive the entire organization into a state of chaos and disorder. Hence, supervisors who bring order and certainty to the work environment may be considered more effective. Similarly, unionized employees may be more concerned with how grievances are settled than non-unionized employees. So, leader consideration behaviors may be more important in a union setting. Thus, our second objective is to examine which supervisory leadership behaviors are perceived to be effective in a unionized manufacturing environment. It is important to elicit subordinates’ perceptions of supervisors’ effectiveness because unionized employees are generally less satisfied with their supervisors and more likely to be absent compared to non-unionized employees (e.g., Allen, 1984; Bryson, Cappellari, & Lucifora, 2003; Schwochau, 1987).
We addressed these two research questions by collecting survey data from a Mid-western manufacturing plant in the United States. Respondents included 231 unionized employees working in various departments on an assembly line. The surveys were first pre-tested by upper management to ensure appropriateness of item wording.

We used items from the Leadership Behavior Description Questionnaire (LBDQ) to measure supervisory leader behaviors. The LBDQ contains twelve distinct sub-scales of leader behavior. In addition, we included ten items to measure supervisory leadership effectiveness and plant performance. Most of the survey items were measured on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree.” Respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which each statement best represented their immediate supervisor’s leader behaviors, supervisors’ effectiveness, and plant performance.

Our paper could potentially contribute to theory and practice by eliciting (i) specific supervisory leadership behaviors that are dominant in a manufacturing-union environment, and (ii) subordinates’ perceptions of supervisory leadership effectiveness in a manufacturing-union environment. Considering that unionized employees may have different mind-sets in evaluating their jobs, it would be interesting to find out which leadership behaviors they perceive as being effective. These findings could have significant ramifications for unionized employees’ levels of absenteeism, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment.

We are currently working on providing a detailed and relevant literature review for this paper. We are also examining the data using multiple regression analysis technique. We hope to complete this paper by the conference presentation dates.

REFERENCES


