Stealing the Limelight? Examining the Relationship Between New Librarians and Their Supervisors

Melissa N. Mallon *

Wichita State University Libraries, 1845 Fairmount Box 68, Wichita, KS 67260-0068, USA

A B S T R A C T

This study was conducted in order to determine how supervisor support relates to a new librarian's job satisfaction and organizational commitment. Factors examined include whether librarians in positions of power are reluctant to foster growth in beginning librarians and, if so, whether this reluctance is due to feelings of insecurity or fear of being outshone. This paper also examines the effect a supervisor's reluctance to offer advice and mentoring on the psychological state of new librarians. Suggestions for future research are discussed.

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For new librarians freshly out of graduate school or in the first several years of librarianship, beginning a new job can be daunting. This event can prove even more overwhelming without a support system in place to help guide librarians in their new professional environment. When librarians enter a new professional environment, they begin the process of making sense of the unfamiliar organizational culture (Simmons-Welburn & Welburn, 2003). The culture of a library, which is established long before the new librarian arrives, "may have both a positive and a negative effect on the staff and the workplace" (Schachter, 2005, p. 18). The manager or supervisor in an organization has the ability to influence whether or not the organizational culture is one that is accepting of new employees and their skills and ideas, or if the culture is one that creates barriers to change and diversity (Schachter, 2005).

This paper addresses three main research questions. First, are supervisors unwilling to foster growth in new librarians due to a fear of being outshone? Secondly, does lack of support from their supervisors negatively affect new librarians and their motivation to succeed? Finally, does the availability of mentoring in libraries and the level of supervisor involvement in any mentoring relationships affect employee job satisfaction?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Interpersonal interaction is a key component in the relationship between employees and their supervisors. This relationship is particularly important for librarians in their first professional library positions, which, for many, is also their first professional job of any kind. In order to succeed, employees must feel a certain level of trust in their supervisor: "The perception of the supervisor as supportive and respectful of subordinates' dignities in the interaction process will improve perceived interactional justice and positively influence subordinates' trust in supervisor" (Wat & Shaffer, 2005, p. 409). As discussed by Simmons-Welburn and Welburn (2003), the "psychological contract" that develops between an employer and an employee can affect the long-term career possibilities for a new librarian.

Perceived supervisor support can also have a more immediate impact on job satisfaction and employee commitment to their new organization. Dawley, Andrews, and Bucklew (2008) found that supervisor support is a significant predictor of affective commitment, or "the employee's state of emotional attachment to the organization" (p. 237). Likewise, Eisenberger, Stinglhamber, Vandenberghe, Sucharski, and Rhoades (2002) note that early on, employees develop beliefs about the degree to which their supervisors value their contributions and well-being, which affects their perception of overall organizational support. Since many employees see their immediate supervisor as embodying the parent institution or organization, it is necessary for the supervisor to convey a level of support that makes the new employees feel they are valued and respected members of the organization.

The relationship librarians develop with their supervisors can influence their success or failure not only within the organization, but within the profession as well. As Topper (2007) points out, a supervisor's adverse behavior toward an employee may trigger an even worse performance or attitude on the part of the employee. For most environments, "not only is a good supervisory climate satisfying in itself, but […] it appears to be a necessary precondition for librarians to experience satisfaction with the characteristics related to mastery of the job itself" (D'Elia, 1979, p. 300). Wat and Shaffer (2005) found that employees are more likely to perform better on behalf of the organization if they have a trusting relationship

* Tel.: +1 316 978 5077.
E-mail address: melissa.mallon@wichita.edu.

with their supervisor and are sufficiently motivated to engage in behavior that benefits the organization.

Taking on a mentoring role is one way a supervisor can support and motivate new librarians. Studies show that dissatisfaction with lack of mentoring opportunities and support for professional development can affect job satisfaction and motivation (Munde, 2010). In a study conducted by Hicks, Buckingham, and Law (2010), the authors found that "employees/protégés whose mentor was also their supervisor demonstrated higher affective commitment than employees/protégés with non-supervisor mentors" (p. 256). Supervisors as mentors can help a new librarian navigate the profession and provide information regarding the expectations for professional librarians. Since "a mentor is usually defined as an influential senior member of an organization" (Booth, 1996, p. 31), a supervisor is in a unique position to introduce a new employee to the organization. Mentoring can also positively impact new employees' affective commitment by helping them to adopt the organization's values, cope with career stress, and produce a positive work attitude (Payne & Huffman, 2005).

Risks have been identified when a supervisor or evaluator takes on the role of mentor (Booth, 1996; Hicks et al., 2010; Le Maistre, Boudreau, & Pare, 2006). In a case study of supervisory mentoring, Booth (1996) found that potential risks involved strain on the supervisor/subordinate relationship and a higher chance of the supervisor being replaced by the employee. Since the line between evaluator and mentor can easily become blurred, supervisory mentors must take care to balance the relationship by "gauging the proper distance from which to observe […] too far, and serious physical, psychological, or social damage can occur" (Le Maistre et al., 2006, p. 352). Supervisors can discuss these roles with employees in order to avoid miscommunication and find a solution that works for both parties.

While studies show that supervisory mentoring has a positive outcome on an employee's affective commitment, the supervisor/employee relationship may become strained even when supervisors are not involved in the mentoring relationship. Hicks et al. (2010) point out that a supervisor may become jealous of the relationship an employee has with a mentor and begin to "view the mentoring relationship as a threat to his or her influence over the employee/protégé" (p. 262). Despite potential risks, supervisors are in a unique position to offer support and career-related mentoring to their employees because of their place within the organization.

As D'Elia (1979) found, a librarian's job satisfaction is strongly related to their organization's supervisory climate. However, despite a perceived mastery of this climate, some supervisors may unintentionally or unconsciously label an employee as a weak performer, thereby sabotaging their success in the position (Manzoni & Barsoux, 2002). Sabotage, lack of support, or even indifference from a supervisor results in a "dysfunctional boss–subordinate relationship" (Topper, 2007, p. 460) and can be magnified when employees do not understand the underlying causes of their supervisor's negativity. What then, can cause negativity or a lack of support shown by supervisors? One possibility is competition for management positions. Many businesses commonly see more people vying for fewer jobs at the top of the organization (Scott & Cook, 1983). Additionally, new librarians are often unable to advance to higher paid positions at their institutions unless their immediate supervisor leaves their job or recommends them for another position (Markgren, Dickinson, Leonard, & Vassiliadis, 2007).

One potential cause of supervisors' interference with the upward trajectory of new employees is jealousy. Marques (2009) asserts that if a new employee possesses the skills to "outshine" a superior, "he or she will not rest until the newcomer is gone, or has submitted to his or her leadership with appropriate inhibition toward shining outside of the set range" (p. 39). Jealously may be the supervisor's unconscious way of trying to protect his or her position of power, or a more conscious way of protecting the needs of the organization (Hicks et al., 2010).

Age can also play a factor in the relationship between supervisors and employees, especially concerning status and position within the organization. Scott and Cook (1983) argue that an age difference between supervisors and employees can influence trust in the relationship because of different values and needs between age groups. Likewise, a generational gap can contribute to rivalry and competition for status or promotions among employees spanning multiple generations (Markgren et al., 2007). While supervisors may resent new employees seeking to advance within the organization because of the time the supervisors have already given to the organization, Markgren et al. (2007) found that new librarians feel that there are few, if any, growth opportunities in their organizations.

The dysfunctional boss–subordinate relationship can manifest itself in other ways, including bullying or coercion on the part of the supervisor. Subtle bullying occurs when the supervisor "is successful in influencing the target individual(s) to act in some preconceived direction or manner, and at the same time, subordinate the focal individual(s) to a position of weakness or helplessness" (Ferris, Zinko, Brouer, Buckley, & Harvey, 2007, p. 198). Employees in their first professional positions, especially those who have had no introduction to office politics or organizational culture, may be inclined to submit to the bullying behavior because they have not been introduced to any other type of management style.

To aid in the transition to a new professional environment, some new librarians believe that first year employee training programs should focus on workplace socialization and managing relationships with supervisors and colleagues (Oud, 2008). Training can assist employees with navigating office politics and asking questions without coming across as weak or unprepared. This can save employees from being unintentionally labeled or categorized as failures since,

> it can be very difficult for an employee to regain credibility as everything that the employee does may be judged as negative. The supervisor should invest time and energy early to build and develop the relationship and try to avoid labeling an employee in the early stages of employment.
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> [(Chapman, 2009, p. 132)]

Supervisors that offer informal support and instruction on organizational culture can increase employees' job satisfaction and their commitment to the organization (Simmons-Welburn & Welburn, 2003). This support is critical to the new employee's socialization process within both the organization and the profession of librarianship.

As previous studies show, the interpersonal interaction between a supervisor and an employee can greatly influence the employee's job satisfaction and organizational commitment. When supervisor support is lacking due to competition, ageism, or absence of trust, a new employee's motivation to succeed can be compromised. The following study tested two major hypotheses. The first hypothesis stated that supervisors do not offer mentoring and professional development to support new librarians because they are afraid of being outshone. The second hypothesis stated that lack of support from their supervisors negatively affects new librarians and their motivation to succeed in the profession.

METHODOLOGY

PARTICIPANTS

Participants were 376 respondents from a random sampling population of over 5,000 librarians who subscribed to two popular electronic mailing lists. The mailing lists, ili-L (an information literacy instruction mailing list from the Association of College and Research Libraries) and PUB-LIB (a mailing list for public librarians hosted by WebJunction), were chosen in order to receive an even sampling of librarians from both public and academic libraries and in both supervisory and non-supervisory positions. Demographic information included is: age, number of years as a librarian, type of institution, position title, and supervisory or