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Mentoring in family businesses: Toward an understanding of commitment outcomes

Andrew J. Dhaenens*, Laura E. Marler, James M. Vardaman, James J. Chrisman

Department of Management & Information Systems, Mississippi State University, P.O. Box 9581, MS 39762, United States

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ABSTRACT

Drawing from the mentoring and organizational commitment literatures, this paper addresses the relationship between mentoring and organizational commitment within the family business context. While there is a clear connection between mentoring and organizational commitment in the broader literature, the relationship takes on added complexity in family businesses. In this paper, we develop arguments and offer propositions suggesting that mentoring in family firms results in different commitment outcomes depending on the familial status of the members in the mentoring dyad. While mentoring is most often linked to affective commitment, our propositions extend theory by suggesting that the unique mentoring relationships present in family firms can foster normative and continuance commitment in many circumstances. Propositions regarding mentoring and the various facets of organizational commitment are presented. Implications for theory and human resource management are also discussed.

Organizational commitment is a core consideration of human resource management as committed employees are more satisfied, better performers, better organizational citizens, and less likely to leave the organization (e.g., Allen, Bryant, & Vardaman, 2010; Allen & Meyer, 1996; Meyer, Stanley, Herscovitch, & Topolnytsky, 2002). Organizational commitment is the psychological link between employees and their organization that is characterized by a strong acceptance and support of an organization's goals and values, a willingness to exert considerable effort on the organization's behalf, and a strong desire to maintain membership in the organization (Meyer & Allen, 1991; Mowday, Steers, & Porter, 1979). Widely conceptualized in three-components, commitment refers to an employee's sense of desire (affective), obligation (normative), and need to remain a part of an organization (continuance). Organizations that foster organizational commitment greatly reduce voluntary turnover and better control their human resource costs (e.g., Allen & Shanock, 2013; Jaros, 1997; Meyer & Allen, 1991).

Research suggests that an important way organizations foster commitment among employees is through mentoring (e.g. Donaldson, Ensher, & Grant-Vallone, 2000; Payne & Huffman, 2005; Scandura, 1997). Mentoring occurs when a more experienced, senior employee (mentor) takes an active interest in supporting and encouraging a less experienced junior employee (protégé) by providing direction and feedback regarding career plans and personal development (Allen, Eby, Poteet, Lentz, & Lima, 2004; Eby, Allen, Evans, Ng, & Dubois, 2008; Kram, 1988; Ragins & Kram, 2007). Mentors provide support to their protégés in two forms: career-related and psychosocial (Higgins & Kram, 2001). Career-related support functions include sponsorship, coaching, exposure, visibility, protection, and challenging work assignments (e.g., Allen et al., 2004; Ghosh & Reio, 2013; Holt, Markova, Dhaenens, Marler, & Heilmann, 2016; Kram, 1988). Psychosocial support functions enhance an employee's sense of competence, identity, and effectiveness through acceptance, confirmation, counseling, friendship, and role modeling (e.g., Dougherty & Dreher, 2007;

* Corresponding author.
E-mail addresses: ajd341@msstate.edu (A.J. Dhaenens), lmarler@business.msstate.edu (L.E. Marler), jvardaman@business.msstate.edu (J.M. Vardaman), jchrisman@business.msstate.edu (J.J. Chrisman).

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Dreher & Ash, 1990; Kram, 1988; Russell & Adams, 1997). Collectively, mentoring support helps protégés obtain promotions, earn better compensation, and be more satisfied with their jobs and careers (Allen et al., 2004). In exchange for these benefits, research suggests that protégés reciprocate by demonstrating commitment to their organization (Allen & Shanock, 2013; Ensher, Thomas, & Murphy, 2001; Mullen, 1994). However, little is known about the ways in which mentoring influences commitment in family firms. In particular, the differential impact of mentoring relationships on family and non-family employees remains unexplored.

Social exchange theory (SET) underpins much of the mentoring literature (e.g., Ensher et al., 2001; Payne & Huffman, 2005; Settoon, Bennett, & Liden, 1996; Young & Perrewe, 2000). Social exchange theory argues that trusting, loyal, and mutual relationships develop over time through negotiated rules and norms of reciprocity (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). As such, SET further emphasizes that an organization is a social system in which actors receive favorable treatment in exchange for met obligations (Blau, 1964; Gouldner, 1960; Homans, 1958). Mentoring social exchanges take on particular complexity within the family firm context. It is recognized that family firms are unique due to the integration of family and business life (Habbershon & Williams, 1999). The intersection of family and business creates intricate interactions where the relationship between mentoring and organizational commitment takes on additional importance. The differential status of family and non-family employees in such firms complicates social exchanges, and research suggests non-family employees may even face bifurcation bias in human resource (HR) practices through unequal treatment in promotions, performance evaluations, and compensation (Verbeke & Kano, 2012). Although research suggests that family firms are often characterized by generalized exchange systems, where benefits are afforded indirectly through long-term success (Barnett, Long, & Marler, 2012; Long & Mathews, 2011), non-family employees are often subjected to unfair treatment without receiving the long-term benefits available to family members (Barnett & Kellermanns, 2006; Dyer, 2006).

Although non-family employees play a crucial role in the success of family firms (Chrisman, Chua, & Litz, 2003; Chua, Chrisman, & Sharma, 2003), they are often denied opportunities for advancement owing to the preference given to family members (e.g., Chrisman, Memili, & Misra, 2014; Jaskiewicz, Uhlenbruck, Balkin, & Reay, 2013). Consequently, family members often dominate executive positions in family firms, while non-family managers conduct day-to-day operations (Gersick, Davis, Hampton, & Lansberg, 1997). As a result of this unfair treatment and bifurcation bias, non-family employees often perceive themselves as members of an out-group who are treated as "second class citizens" compared to family members (Dyer, 2006, p. 264; see also, Barnett & Kellermanns, 2006). This perception of out-group status can result in reduced organizational commitment among non-family employees (Masterson, Lewis, Goldman, & Taylor, 2000). Alternatively, family members also vary in their perceptions of entitlement, which can lead them to perceive they are being held to unfair standards in comparison to non-family employees (Lansberg, 1989; Van der Heyden, Blondel, & Carlock, 2005) or that they are not required to reciprocate when treated in an altruistic manner by family owners (Schulze, Lubatkin, Dino, & Buchholtz, 2001). With the inherent differences between the roles and positions occupied by family and non-family employees, the mentoring support provided by (and to) each group should differ, and therefore have varying effects on commitment. Given the uniqueness of mentoring relationships in family firms, SET offers utility in examining mentoring and organizational commitment in the family firm context.

Drawing on insights from SET (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005), this paper redresses the paucity of attention devoted to mentoring in the family firm context by conceptualizing the effects of mentoring on organizational commitment. In so doing, the paper highlights how mentoring provided by family and non-family mentors results in various levels of affective, normative, and continuance commitment for family and non-family protégés. Based on the idea that mentoring results in different organizational commitment outcomes depending on the familial status of mentors and the protégés, we develop propositions on mentoring dyads in family firms. For example, our theorizing suggests that non-family employees mentored by family members will exhibit higher levels of affective commitment, whereas family members mentored by non-family mentors may exhibit stronger levels of continuance commitment. This paper contributes to the literature by integrating mentoring and organizational commitment research with extant family firm literature and bringing human resource implications of this synthesis to the fore.

1. Theoretical background and development

1.1. Social exchange theory

Social exchange theory is considered to be one of the most influential paradigms in management research (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). According to SET, organizations are social systems developed through repeated interactions in which actors receive favorable treatment in exchange for met obligations (Blau, 1964; Gouldner, 1960; Homans, 1958). In turn, repeated exchanges create an overarching system of negotiated rules and norms of reciprocity that govern future interactions (Coleman, 1986; Emerson, 1976; Granovetter, 1985). When these negotiated rules and norms of reciprocity are followed by actors in social exchanges, trusting, loyal, and reciprocal relationships should develop (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). While relationships are often observed at the individual-level, repeated exchanges also help form the basis of rules and norms at the collective-level of the social system.

In this regard, SET suggests that exchanges lie on a continuum between two distinct forms: restricted and generalized exchanges (Ekeh, 1974; Gillmore, 1987). In restricted exchanges, individuals are motivated by direct reciprocity from which short-term, quid pro quo returns are expected (Barnett et al., 2012; Gillmore, 1987; Long & Mathews, 2011). In mentoring, for example, mentors often expect better work or loyalty from protégés in exchange for the time and effort they have invested. Conversely, generalized exchanges are based on indirect reciprocity where individuals do not expect an immediate or equal return, but receive benefits derived from group cohesion and contributions to the overall health of an organization (Gillmore, 1987; Long & Mathews, 2011; Molm, Collett, & Schaefer, 2007). Hence, mentors are rewarded for being good organizational citizens and contributing to the long-term

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