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Freeing “workplace prisoners” in higher education: Configurations for collective knowledge building and educational value decisions

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ABSTRACT

“Workplace prisoners” are people who stay in their jobs despite feeling unmotivated, disengaged, and generally negative about their employer. These feelings come from a perceived inability to influence the organization. Consequently, they impede organizational progress and reduce organizational value. Workplace prisoners exist in higher education because competition in conjunction with continual policy and management changes develops an environment with conflicts and tensions. Intelligence and emotional recognition theory states that procedural justice creates trust, commitment, voluntary cooperation promoting institutional decision-making that leads to more perceived educational value. Using a fuzzy-set qualitative comparative analysis (fsQCA), this study specifies organizational justice and faculty engagement conditions that contribute to educational value. The results advance theory by demonstrating the importance of distributive justice for institutional decision-making and educational value when the comparison of individual outcomes is most salient with organizational outcomes.

1. Introduction

“Workplace prisoners” are people who stay in their jobs despite feeling unmotivated, disengaged, and generally negative about their employer (Weber, 2016). The workplace prisoners that stay generally feel powerless in influencing their organization. They also tend to be higher paid with typically longer tenures. Due to a lack of trust and commitment, workplace prisoners impede organizational progress that affects organizational value.

Workplace prisoners are prevalent in all industries, including higher education. Higher education is a diverse ecosystem with institutions of all sizes, price tags, and mission statements. The landscape is highly complex and competitive, and is continually changing to meet the demands of its multitude of stakeholders that range from students, faculty, administrators, donors, local businesses, and public officials (Hearn, Lewis, Kallsen, Holdsworth, & Jones, 2006; Suspitsyna, 2010). Competition in conjunction with continual policy and management overhaul creates an environment of conflict and tension (Dickeson, 2010).

Additionally, educational institutions face increasing tuition and fee standards due to decreasing governmental funding (Thelin, 2011). The economic events of the 2008 financial crisis highlighted higher education's need to generate revenue independently (Brown, Dimmock,

Kang, & Weisbenner, 2014). Although universities and profit-orientated objectives are not always as explicit or publicly acceptable, questions concerning educational value remain as institutional administrators balance tuition and class size increases with the challenges of entrance standards and levels of financial aid (Bok, 2003; Dickeson, 2010).

Furthermore, the quality of the decisions that lead to educational value is constantly under examination (Alexander, 2000). Creating educational value is iterative, and requires the building of collective knowledge (Battilana & Dorado, 2010) among stakeholders. More importantly, educational value requires trust, commitment, and voluntary cooperation (Korsgaard, Schweiger, & Sapienza, 1995) among faculty who are the conduits between the stakeholders and the institution. Unfortunately as “workplace prisoners”, faculty are not necessarily committed or cooperative, and can stymie collective decision-making. These unmotivated and disengaged faculty are unable to individually connect with and influence the direction of their institution.

The objective of this paper is to build on the relevant theory and research on employee motivation to identify the organizational justice and faculty engagement conditions and the configurations that support trust, commitment, and voluntary cooperation among faculty and higher education stakeholders. These conditions and configurations are the recipes for encouraging the faculty's motivation, productivity, and

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contributions, therefore freeing these workplace prisoners. The ramifications of this research are of interest to both practitioners and researchers because sharing knowledge is important in bringing together the multitude of stakeholders to support quality strategic and operational decisions that ultimately add to organizational value. The current study uses a fuzzy-set qualitative comparative analysis (fsQCA) to better understand the recipes that foster educational value.

The subsequent sections of the paper are as follows: [Section 2](#) is a review of the relevant theory, intelligence and emotional recognition, and the antecedent conditions. [Section 3](#) presents the method, and [Section 4](#) contains the results and a discussion. [Section 5](#) contains conclusions, limitations, and recommendations for future research.

2. Intelligence and emotional recognition theory

The intelligence and emotional recognition theory addresses individual recognition and organizational outcomes. The theory states that when individuals feel recognized for their intellectual and emotional worth, they demonstrate a willingness to act out the new role demanded of them as entrepreneurs, to voluntarily cooperate with work colleagues, and to give their all to their organization (Kim & Mauborgne, 1998). While businesses today claim that employees are their greatest assets, management must treat them with intellectual and emotional recognition throughout decision-making. When management recognizes individual employees' abilities and acumen, they are willing to share their collective knowledge. Further, this recognition inspires them to confirm the expectations on their abilities (Kim & Mauborgne, 1998).

While these processes can reveal management's willingness to trust employees and to seek out ideas, it can also signal the exact opposite. If management does not treat their employees as though their knowledge is valuable, then the employees will feel intellectual discontent. The extent of this discontent can lead to employees being angry; to not invest heart and soul into their actions; and to not share their knowledge, ideas, and expertise. Instead, employees will hoard their best thinking and creative ideas that prevent new insights. They will also engage in counterproductive activities such as organizational sabotage.

2.1. The role of organizational justice

While intelligence and emotional recognition occur at the individual level, it is organizational justice that explains why knowledge workers may or may not cooperate and collaborate with one another (Kim & Mauborgne, 1998). The concept of organizational justice explains how the dynamics and fairness of decision-making exert a powerful influence on human cognition and behavior (Thibaut & Walker, 1975). Employees care a great deal about the procedures and outcome distribution of decisions; and they will react strongly to the presence or absence of fairness in these processes (Colquitt, Conlon, Wesson, Porter, & Ng, 2001). Organizational justice generally focuses on the antecedents and consequences of two types of subjective perceptions: (1) procedural justice – the fairness of the procedures that determine outcome distributions or allocations; and (2) distributive justice – the fairness of outcome distributions or allocations.

According to Kim and Mauborgne (1998), the antecedent condition to intelligence and emotional recognition is procedural justice. Procedural justice allows the legal process to bind the social fabric by encouraging the continuation of productive exchange relations between individuals. This concept uses the property of being fair as an important requisite of any model of decision-making (Leventhal, 1976). The research finds that the perceptions of procedural justice positively enhance outcome satisfaction even when individuals receive unfavorable decisions (Brockner & Wiesenfeld, 1996). Procedural justice augments legitimacy, and through legitimacy comes the employee's behavioral compliance, sportsmanship, and courtesy (Tyler, 1990). In addition to the legal profession, other knowledge intensive professions use

procedural justice to examine social and work settings with diverse contexts, such as for-profit organizations (Greenberg, 1987a, 1987b) and education (Tyler & Caine, 1981). Procedural justice extends to organizational outcomes, such as organizational commitment (McFarlin & Sweeney, 1992) and customer satisfaction (Simons & Roberson, 2003), with the premise that individual performance contributes to organizational goals (Colquitt et al., 2001).

2.2. Enhancing the scope of the intellectual and emotional recognition theory

While procedural justice examines the process of fairness, distributive justice addresses the fairness of outcomes, such as pay and promotion decisions, job security, workplace retaliation, and voluntary commitment to the organization, (Luo, 2007). If bias is present in decisions on outcome distributions or allocation, its effects can create unfairness that indicates the organization does not value or respect the employee (Lind & Tyler, 1988; Tyler, 1989). Furthermore, bias in the allocation process can yield unfair outcomes that result in the denial of organizational rewards to which the individual feels entitled (Parker & Kohlmeier, 2005). Similar to procedural justice, distributive justice is a normative force that affects each employee's motives for repeated exchanges. A perceived lack of respect and the denial of entitled rewards can lead to less than desirable behavioral actions; such as employees working against each other's interests; dysfunctional strategic decision-making; and a number of negative outcomes that include low job satisfaction, high turnover, and poor organizational performance (Johnson, Korsgaard, & Sapienza, 2002).

McFarlin and Sweeney (1992) examine the effects of organizational justice on individual and organizational outcomes. They find that procedural justice is a strong predictor of organizational outcomes whereas distributive justice is a strong predictor of individual outcomes. In higher education, the institution expects the faculty to achieve professional goals that enhance both their personal reputations and the institution's reputation. These individual and organizational perspectives provide a unique context and opportunity to examine and extend the intellectual and emotional recognition theory.

Enhancing the scope of the intellectual and emotional recognition theory means that the institution can use the elements of procedural justice *and* distributive justice to support trust, commitment, and voluntary cooperation among faculty and the higher education stakeholders to create educational value. This study takes a configurational approach, the fsQCA, to develop causal recipes that improve the quality of strategic and operational decisions that lead to educational value in higher education institutions. A configurational approach allows for more precise theory testing and development because this research involves understanding how different conditions combine, and whether there is only one combination or several different combinations of conditions (or causal recipes) capable of generating the same outcome (Woodside, 2013). Once these combinations are identified, it is possible to identify the contexts that enable or disable specific causes (Ragin, 2008).

2.3. Antecedent and outcome conditions

The measure of procedural justice in this study focuses on the annual cycle of the performance evaluation process in higher education. This is the formal process that determines promotion and tenure. Because procedural justice reflects the perceived fairness in processes that then determine distributive outcomes, this study also includes the antecedent condition of distributive justice. In the measure of distributive justice, the faculty judge if the decisions for promotions and raises are fair regardless of the person or the compensation. The faculty judge the fairness of the outcome of the procedures for promotions and raises by referencing pay, other rewards, and educational value. The procedural justice and distributive justice for this process set the tone,

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