

The Organizational Personality and Employee Performance

What's your organization's personality, and how is it affecting your employees' work?

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Organizations, like people, have personalities. Some personality traits, such as authoritarianism and conformity, apply to both people and organizations. Others, such as employee participation, are unique to organizations. Understanding your organization's personality can help you attain the results you want from your employees.

Five Organizational Personality Traits

Over 60 performance outcomes have been associated with five organizational traits. Thus, by adjusting one or more of these traits, you can change your employees' performance. Here are the five all-important traits and the performance outcomes they influence:

1. Authoritarianism encompasses three behaviors:

- aggression
- submission
- conventionalism

Organizations can be characterized as authoritarian if they have human resource (HR) practices scoring high on these three behaviors and non-authoritarian if they don't score high on all three.

Performance outcomes associated with authoritarianism include:

- employee motivation and commitment
- employee selection
- employee complaints such as grievances, unionization, regulatory agency complaints, and litigation
- implementation of incentive plans
- implementation of performance appraisals
- empowerment
- effectiveness of organizational change
- productivity and effectiveness
- organizational learning
- coaching
- employee need achievement
- employee creativity
- job enrichment programs
- absenteeism
- bullying
- employee turnover
- work stoppages
- quality
- workplace violence.

There is good reason to believe that employers can improve their authoritarian behavior. The theoretical literature shows that authoritarians don't realize they are authoritarian and, once made aware of it, are often willing to change their behavior.

2. Punitiveness is the extent to which employers punish employees. It is related to authoritarianism because authoritarians control people by punishing them. An employer inclined to control employees with HR practices that punish them is more likely to rate high on punitiveness, and also authoritarianism, than an employer who controls employees through non-punitive practices.

Performance outcomes associated with employer punitiveness include:

- empowerment
- performance appraisals
- turnover
- absenteeism
- unlearning old behaviors
- employee creativity
- organizational learning
- productivity.

3. Employee conformity is the extent to which employers move employees to the organization's norms—that is, standards of behavior.

Among the organizational performance outcomes associated with employee conformity are:

- organizational learning
- role conflict
- autonomy
- job satisfaction
- willingness to quit
- organizational change
- employee involvement.

4. Employee participation is the extent to which employees share in the decision-making process. In some organizations, employee participation is minimal, with employers simply telling employees what is occurring in the organization. At the other extreme are organizations in which employees sit on the board of directors and influence major organizational decisions.

Organizational performance outcomes affected by employee participation include the following:

- productivity
- organizational learning
- organizational change
- competitiveness
- employee stress (which is related to health care costs)
- job satisfaction and commitment
- employee creativity
- employee performance
- employees' sense of security
- implementation of gainsharing programs
- retaliation against whistle-blowers
- absenteeism
- turnover
- morale
- motivation
- safety
- decision-making.

5. Organizational socialization is the the extent to which employees are acculturated to the organization's norms, values, and behaviors. Just as authoritarianism and punitiveness are related, employee participation and organizational socialization are related. Research shows that when people are given input into decisions that affect them, they are more committed to those decisions. Thus, employees tend to be more committed to values and behaviors into which they have input. The more socialized employees are, the fewer bureaucratic mechanisms are needed to control them.

Performance outcomes linked to organizational socialization include:

- turnover
- discipline
- organizational stability

- retaliation against whistle-blowers
- productivity
- motivation
- bureaucratic control
- commitment and satisfaction
- performance
- employee stress.

Three Ways Organizations Gain Compliance

There are three types of organizations in terms of how they gain their employees' compliance:

1. Coercive organizations, such as prisons and custodial mental hospitals, are the most authoritarian, the most punitive, and the least participative. They also have the least socialized members. Such organizations gain compliance by force.

2. Normative organizations such as religious institutions and charities, are at the other extreme. They are the least authoritarian and punitive with the highest level of employee participation and organizational socialization. They gain compliance through common values.

3. Utilitarian, or remunerative, organizations lie between coercive and normative organizations. Utilitarian organizations, which include most businesses, use material rewards to gain their employees' compliance.

Five Ways to Determine Your Organization's Personality

There are five ways to determine where your organization stands in relation to other organizations on the five personality traits discussed above, particularly the trait of authoritarianism.

1. Check the law. If your practices violate American legal standards, then you need to adjust your organization's personality, at least on the issue of concern.

2. Compare your organization's personality with standard American conventions.

3. Check your organization against practices common in your industry.

4. Encourage feedback from employees to see how they view your organization's practices.

5. Use benchmarking to see how your organization stacks up to similar organizations.

It is especially useful to compare your organization's personality with another organization when considering a merger or acquisition. If an organization low on employee participation considers merging with an organization that is high on that trait, for example, it is less likely to have a successful merger than if the two organizations have a similar level of employee participation.

Listen to what your employees are saying through their words and actions. If there is a particular behavior or outcome you want to change, look at the personality traits that influence it. By optimizing your organizational personality, you can attain the outcomes you want. ■

Resources

Kilmann, Ralph, "Managing Your Organization's Culture," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 3, No. 2.

Knowlton, Lisa Wyatt, "Study Shows Gaps in Nonprofit Management—and How to Improve," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 19, No. 3.

Muehrcke, Jill, ed., *Personnel and Human Resources Development, Leadership Series*.

Muehrcke, Jill, "What's Your Personality Type?," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 14, No. 5.

Neck, Christopher & Robert Ashcraft, "Inner Leadership: Mental Strategies for Nonprofit Staff Members," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 18, No. 3.

These resources are available through the Society's Resource Center, 734-451-3582, www.snpo.org.

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