



USING QUALITATIVE EPISTEMOLOGY TO UNDERSTAND EMPLOYEES' PERSPECTIVES ON TWO ATTITUDINAL VARIABLES

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Abstract

Participation in decision making (PDM) helps employees build skills in identifying, assessing, and evaluating decisions, and may encourage employees' initiative in modifying work processes, developing priorities, and allocating resources. These skills and abilities are among those identified by many researchers as contributing to enhance their commitment to the organization. This exploratory study surveyed the non-management professional staff in the Road Projects Department (RPD), Ministry of Works and Housing, Saudi Arabia. Its objective is mainly to gather as many preliminary insights as possible in preparation for a more extensive study in a later stage. The data clearly signified that majority of the respondents were unhappy and frustrated with the lack of participation in the decision making process in the RPD. Their stories and shared views portrayed considerable disillusionment with an organizational culture that is not truly participative. This climate inevitably affects their commitment to the organization.

Keywords: *Organizational commitment; Participation in decision making; Qualitative epistemology.*

INTRODUCTION

When employees believe in and trust their management it motivates and encourages employees' participation in decision making which improves employees' efforts, benefits their job satisfaction and commitment to work. All of these factors, in turn, contribute to a trustworthy manager-employee relationship. While the literature supports this premise, there is little empirical evidence that patterns of causal inference in the relationship are clearly understood particularly in the context of Saudi Arabia.

There is no consensus on the set of necessary and sufficient contingency factors that need to be considered for most types of organizational settings and decision making issues. In addition, little direction exists as to how one can productively diagnose factors that are repeatedly advanced as essential for consideration (Bernandi&Guptill, 2008;Razali, 2008; Razali, 2009; 2012).

Objectives and Scope of the Study

The purpose of this pilot study which is exploratory in nature is to investigate the



relationship between attitudes of non-management professional staff towards participation in decision making and their organizational commitment in the Saudi Arabia Road Projects Department (RPD). Also, it intends to analyze the extent to which organizational variables and individual/personality variables moderate or codetermine the participation-organizational commitment relationship.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The general management literature suggests that the current state of knowledge suggests that we are far from able to identify generic, pan-organizational principles of participative decision making. Knowledge is needed on how participative management can be applied in specific types of organizational environment. Thus, this study is important from the standpoint of management in Saudi Arabia and developing countries. It will add to the scant Saudi Arabian literature on management and organizational behavior. This study can also be viewed as a further development on the theory of participation. The results will provide evidence germane to existing literature on participation in the context of public organizations. The data base will be useful to further research on participation in a multiracial society, such as Saudi Arabia.

Theory

Numerous studies conclude that a situational or contingency approach to involving employees in decision making is more appropriate. The contingency approach to management does not begin with a premise that employee involvement in organizational decision making is either good or bad but rather that the situation and set of contingency factors impinging on a specific decision making issue should determine the nature of employee participation (Razali, 2008; Razali, 2009; Wickramasinghe et al, 2012; Kasemsap, 2013).

Organizational commitment has received considerable attention in the literature as an important employee-organization linkage in understanding employee behavior in organizations (Mowday et al., 1982; Razali, 2008). Organizational commitment is the strength with which an individual identifies with and is involved with an organization. The Organizational Commitment Questionnaire was developed by Porter, Steers, Mowday, & Boulian to measure organizational commitment (Mowday et al., 1982). Outcomes of organizational commitment have been reported in the literature to include job performance, tenure, absenteeism, tardiness, and turnover (Wolfe and Betz, 2004). The literature has indicated influential variables which act upon organizational commitment to include age, tenure on the job, educational level attained, and gender (Mowday et al., 1982). An important outgrowth of the human relations approach to organizational theory was a third school entitled human resources (Meyers, 1994; Razali, 1992). Raymond Miles is credited with a model to summarize the sequence of human outcomes associated with application of a human resources approach to organizational theory (Meyers, 1994). The model suggests participation of employees in decision making leads to an overall increase in quality of decision outcomes as subordinates exercise responsible self-direction in the accomplishment of decisions they helped to establish, which results in more satisfied



employees, improved performance, and reinforcement of creative decision making (Meyers, 1994). Human resource theory and its emphasis on the linkage between employee participation, organizational commitment, job satisfaction, and higher levels of performance have received high levels of acceptance and following over the last few decades (Meyers, 1994; Wong, et. al., 2006). Human resource theory provides a theoretical foundation of support to the participative or shared governance movement and represents a significant theoretical alternative to classical organizational management (Meyers, 1994; Wong et. al., 2006 and Sumrall et. al., 2008).

In a more recent study Wickramasinghe et al (2012) examined the moderating effects of perceived organizational support (POS) on the relationship between participation in decision making (PDM) and affective commitment, and PDM and job satisfaction in lean production in Sri Lanka. They found that perceived organizational support (POS) moderates the relationship between PDM and affective commitment, and PDM and job satisfaction. Kasemsap (2013) conducted a study to establish a causal model of participation in decision making, career adaptability, affective commitment, and turnover intention of petrochemical plant employees in Thailand. The findings indicated that dimensions of participation in decision making, career adaptability, and affective commitment have mediated negative effect on turnover intention. Affective commitment fully mediates the relationships between participation in decision making and turnover intention and between career adaptability and turnover intention. Furthermore, participation in decision making is positively correlated with career adaptability.

METHODS

QUALITATIVE VERSUS QUANTITATIVE APPROACH

Considerable disagreement exists over the appropriateness of various methods and methodological stances for conducting research in the fields of social science. One debate of growing intensity centers on the distinction between quantitative and qualitative method (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). By quantitative method, researchers have come to mean techniques of randomized experiments, quasi-experiments, paper and pencil "objective" tests, multivariate statistical analyses, sample surveys, and the like.. In contrast, qualitative methods include ethnography, case studies, in-depth interviews, and participation observation. The qualitative aspects, as proposed by Glaser and Strauss's (1967) grounded theory has been inserted into this study.

THE RESEARCH SITE

The surveys were conducted at the Road Projects Department (RPD) headquarters office which is located in the office of Ministry of Public works and Housing in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. The RPD is the technological arm of the Government and serves as the main implementing agency for carrying out infrastructure projects for the whole country. It was formed with the objective of implementing infrastructure development, namely roads, water supplies, buildings, airports, ports and jetties to meet the needs of the nation.

DATA COLLECTION PROCEDURES

Through the assistance provided by the Head of Management Division, twenty-five non-



management professional staff in the Management Division of RPD voluntarily agreed to participate in the survey. They are professionals employed full time and do not fit the definition of either a top or middle manager. They do not hold managerial positions, such as head of a division or unit within the department. Basically, they are involved in the technical aspects of the work and not in the administrative side. After obtaining their names and addresses, a letter of invitation was sent to each respondent to attend a special meeting on a specific date. During the meeting the researchers explained in great length regarding the survey. Before the meeting was adjourned, each respondent was given a set of questionnaire with a pre-stamped envelope.

RESULTS

The results are categorized into several categories: a) general perceptions toward participation in decision making practices; b) relationship between participation in decision making and organizational commitment; and © factors affecting the decision-making process.

General Perceptions Toward Participation in Decision Making

When respondents were asked a general question, "What are your comments about the decision making process in the organization? " From the analysis, 17 (68%) expressed their dissatisfactions, 3 (12%) were moderately satisfied and 5 (20%) indicated high degree of satisfaction. Commenting on the present scenario of decision making processes in the department, one non-management professional bluntly indicated " we lack participatory management here!" Another strong remark supports the above view:

With the arrival of a new head in our division, there was great hope of improved staff participation in decision making. Unfortunately, the new regime has proven to be authoritarian in the extreme. This autocratic approach to the staff has resulted in "non-participation" in decision making, wide staff frustration, and the sharp decline in pride of jobs done well. Commitment of the majority of staff has gone down the drain!

One of the shared perceptions among these dissatisfied respondents is the on-going conflict between management and the non-management professional staff on matters of authority, control, and decision making prerogative. One person wrote:

Management does not want to let go their management influence in the decision making process. It's hard for them to sit there and listen to us. It's a kind of role reversal type situation. Although it may benefit employees like me, I believe especially first line managers have a hard time adjusting to that type of situation.

It is frustrating to discover that, despite the merits of the participative management concept, they have been in a vortex of managerial resistance to the very concept. One respondent's comments were so comprehensive and perceptive that they merit reporting here. While being positive about the ideological shift toward participative management in the Department, he also highlights some concerns:



I am delighted by the fact that this department is moving more towards involving employees at various levels in the decision making process. However, I would like to add here that I am of the opinion that the cry for participation at all levels should be analyzed and appraised carefully. To be sure, any thinking manager should recognize that he must listen to the staff at all levels, be sensitive to the attitudes and needs of the staff, and at the same time have enough common sense to sort and implement suggestions which are feasible and compatible with overall goals of the department. These goals must be recognized by the total staff as service goals. I do not believe that the welfare of any individual should be in any way ignored or trampled upon, but I do think there should be a middle ground of rationality where decision making privileges are coupled with a strong sense of responsibility. I think it is most desirable that the total staff to have input into the decision making process. As there are generally conflicting sets of interests, as well as opposing philosophies, this may take some doing. This participation can be accomplished through cooperative committees, task forces, etc., and individual votes at times. However, I do not believe that every decision requires total participation. It is neither practical nor advantageous. Change is inevitable, compelling and necessary. Diversities in a staff add to its problems, but a mingling of ideas, with a mutual respect and, yes, even kindness should be the means to the end in this decision making process. Somewhere there is a happy medium of exchange, but it must be build on trust, understanding and responsibility.

In summary, there was a substantial majority of non-management professionals who were very pessimistic about the climate of the organization. They believed that lack of trust and tension between managers and non-managerial professional staff were prevailing throughout the organization. Another group of non-management professionals considered that the days of portraying the character of employees as passive recipients of instructions and orders were waning in the organization. From their perspectives, employees in the Road Projects Department were becoming more involved as active participants in their unit's decision making process.

Relationship Between Participation in Decision Making and Organizational Commitment

To search for the related contingent variables two questions were asked. One question asked: "Do you believe that an opportunity to involve yourself in the decision-making process increases your commitment to the organization? Why? or Why not?" (The respondents were asked to list the factors without ranking them in order). Although all of the respondents shared the perception that a participative decision making process improves employee commitment to the organization, they also indicated that other significant factors must not be ignored. For the purpose of this analysis, only the factors highlighted by at least fifty percent (50%) of the respondents are reported here, as shown in Table 1.



Table 1: Variables that affect employees' organizational commitment

Variables	Percentage (%) & Frequency of Responses
Salary	100 % (25)
OPPORTUNITY FOR career advancement	92 % (23)
Opportunity for innovation	72 % (18)

All of the respondents felt strongly that they were not getting the *salary* they deserved. Once salary falls from a reasonable level, it seems to become an important factor in diminishing one's commitment to the organization, even when the working atmosphere is more democratic or participative. Bluntly, one non-management professional wrote, "I will leave this public organization soon if the salary package does not improve, and I am seriously looking for better offers in the private sectors." Supporting this position, one professional staff-member explained that "salary is the main reason for low commitment because professional staff like me in the public sector always compare what their counterparts in the private sector earn and realize that they are worse off." Another non-management professional, who works as a training specialist, suggested that "limited career promotion or advancement was another factor that can affect employee commitment to the organization." In most public organizations in Saudi Arabia, the job is characterized by a limited chances of advancement. This low opportunity for advancement in the career "affects individual aspirations, self-esteem and commitment to the organization." Another respondent felt that "people who feel stuck in his or her career ladder often disengage and become less committed." In summary, although all the respondents perceived that participation in decision making is instrumental in enhancing employees' commitment to the organization, it is not the only factor that must be considered.

Factors Affecting the Desire to Participate in Decision Making

Another question asked was, "What are the factors that can enhance and inhibit your willingness to participate in the decision making process?. The principle used in analyzing the previous questions was applied here, where only factors highlighted by at least fifty percent (50 %) of the respondents are discussed. The compelling structural and individual variables revealed by the exploratory survey are set forth in Table 2.

Individual/personality variables

All respondents shared perceptions that *attitudes of superiors* toward PDM were rather negative in the Road Projects Department and this factor affects the desire of the lower staff to participate in decision making process. They perceived management as having simply introduced the concept of participative management because it was mandated by



politicians or higher officials in the Saudi Public Service; but, in actual day-to-day operations, they are paying only lip-service to participation. Their answers also illustrated that management had an attitude of looking down on the employees. .

Table 2: Variables that affect employees' willingness to participate in decision making process

Variables	Percentage (%) & Frequency of Responses
a. Individual/Personality Variables	
i. Attitudes of superiors toward participation	96 % (24)
b. Organizational Variables	
i. Communication process	88 % (22)
ii. Career advancement opportunities	80 % (20)
iii. Conflict/ Ambiguous superiors' expectations	72 % (20)
iv. Reward system	72 % (18)
v. Salary	72 % (18)

Their answers also illustrated that management had an attitude of looking down on the employees. For them, this attitude was antithetical to the true spirit of participation in decision making. It is ironic that the very management which introduced and implemented the participative concept in the organization is perceived by the employees as more interested in protecting territories and prerogatives than in advocating and demonstrating openness and commitment to a participative culture. One non-management professional staff-member wrote:

Something I'll never understand is that they allowed employees to participate in the decision making process, but there isn't a single professional staff at my level on any steering committees which decide whether your solution or resolution should be adopted. I don't understand, and they're saying we can work on the problem and give suggestions, but we have no say in the end. For example if I were to work on a certain problem of a particular project for six months, my recommendation could be erased in one meeting with the steering committee. And it just doesn't seem right that there isn't a couple of professional staff at my level on these steering committees. We are being look down upon. The management attitude toward us is disgusting!





Moreover, in the midst of bureaucratic tendencies, employees shared a view portraying themselves as victims of some managers who strive to take credit for preemptive use of employee ideas. Managers were perceived as not eager to give credit or acknowledge what are distinctly employees' ideas.

A *sense of competency* is also regarded by the majority of respondents as an important determinant for staff participation in the decision making process. If the staff-member has a high competency level, and his or her competency is highly relevant to the issues covered by a decision making unit, then he or she will be more inclined to participate. A respondent described his position relative to this factor by saying that "when I am being requested to participate in the decision making process not related to issues or areas beyond my knowledge and skills, by all means I try to turn down the requests because my philosophy is that when I participate, I want to contribute in all positive and constructive ways." In the same vein, another non-management professional staff wrote that:

In almost every corner of the organization you encounter a very energetic employee who wants to participate in the affairs of the organization but I don't want to embarrass myself by giving ideas and suggestions on issues in which I don't have an iota of knowledge or skills.

Organizational variables

The respondents who wrote elaborately on this question discussed in detail the *communication process* as a major organizational variable inhibiting their desire to participate. Their problems with management center on a) listening and b) one-way communication. One non-management professional stated that "management, particularly the upper management is out of touch with the day-to-day realities of the participative process, particularly at the division level." Another problem related to communication process that hampers the employee motivation to participate is the "one-way flow of authority from above." One respondent indicated his frustration with the tendency of management to make decisions and impose them on the employees below, leaving no choice but to comply. Another respondent argued that everything that we do, it's communicated from upstairs." Sharing another perception's of the communication problem, a computer analyst explained that "basically it is the file that speaks and this does not encourage people to participate and share their ideas."

The situation is made worse by unresponsiveness, as another staff-member observed:

Communication goes up and never comes back down. It goes up in two weeks and it takes six months to come back. Even then, they don't direct it to the people that input it; they direct it to the Head of Division or project leader. We get letters from upper management that says, respond to this. You have two weeks to respond to it. Okay, you respond in two weeks. Six months, and you don't hear a damn word. This kills your desire to be active participants in any decision making process because management are not doing their part.

Lack of career advancement opportunities was considered by the majority of respondents as





another organizational inhibiting variable that affects their willingness to participate in decision making. One non-management professional said that, "there is no point to crack your brain and contribute your ideas in decision making under limited opportunities for career advancement.

Besides depicting management as the villain, non-management professionals also portray themselves as victims of an organizational scene that is saturated with *conflicting/ambiguous superiors' expectations*. This is another major factor that destroys their interest to participate in a decision making unit. As one respondent asked "If you don't have a clear sense of direction, how can you participate in making decisions?" Another non-management professional explained his frustration when confronted with conflicting expectations from superiors:

Many times, I found a lot of conflicting instructions in my assignments from my superiors. On other occasions, my work assignments and priorities change in midstream. This created anxiety-stress, tension, and jeopardized my eagerness to participate.

Another respondent reported on the experience with conflicting expectations from the superior:

Many times, I am just confused about my superiors' expectation of me. On one side they are concerned about the quality and on the other they stress quantity. For me this confusion is an unmitigated evil! And this pushed me into a situation where I have low levels of trust, liking, and respect for those superiors. And I tend to have a continued sense of futility and am severely demoralized to get involved in any decision process.

Non-managerial professionals also indicated that the *reward system* in the organization could enhance the employees' willingness to participate in the decision making process. As one respondent wrote, "the reward policy in this organization continues to be unsatisfactory and does not applaud people who are actively involved in contributing ideas in decision making". One professional staff-member suggested that, "in order to encourage people to participate constructively in the decision making process, there should be either substantial monetary rewards or psychological rewards such as plaques, certificates, recognition luncheon or a banquet."

Managerial Implications

Thus, in an effort to improve performance and productivity, the managers in Saudi Arabiapublic service should seek to expand their conceptions of authority to include a sense of shared fate and responsibilities through a participative mode of operation in achieving a common good. However, when undertaking participation, managers in Saudi Arabia and elsewhere must remember that people can get slide into a situation where they are given freedom they cannot handle. Managers who are interested in using participation as an organizational tool must remember that true participation is not the absence of structure



letting employees go off and do whatever they want but rather a clear framework that enables people to work within established boundaries in an autonomous and creative way.

There is also a need for a strong, clear educational effort by practitioners in both public and private sectors in Saudi Arabia to integrate participative management into their training programs. The Institute of Public Administration (IPA) of Saudi Arabia and other training agencies should also move into this direction and developed a collective effort to organize simple, standard and local-based programs of such skill development for the managers.

Also, it was shown that various organizational and individual/personality factors positively affect the relationship between participation and commitment. For the practicing managers who have the zeal and desire to implement participative management, it may be beneficial to recognize this relationship and the factors they may have overlooked or may not have been aware of, and to incorporate them in their strategy of implementing participative management.

However, it is important for the managers to recognize that PDM is only one of the factors that affects commitment. From this initial exploratory survey it is clear that there are some other factors (salary, opportunities for innovation, opportunities for career advancement) that also contribute toward enhancing commitment among employees. Razali (2008) suggests that those institutional structures such as who works with whom, who dominates with whom, and how members of occupational groups come in contact with one another are some important determinants of organizational behavior of both men and women.

Upon recognizing and accepting that participation is a right and may very well lead to positive organizational outcomes, top management would do well to incorporate the element of participative management in the department's "philosophy" statements. Various writers, such as Kanter (1983), Halal and Brown (1981), Razali (2008; 2009), Sumrall (2008), Bernandi and Guptill (2008); Kasemsap (2013) have suggested that the development of such clear and public statements of organizational values would be the first step in organizational change toward a more effective pattern of participative management.

CONCLUSIONS

The above analysis provides preliminary insights into a distinct community of non-management professional staff who are not enjoying their working life due to lack of participation in the decision making processes in the Saudi Arabia Road Projects Department. They are also frustrated by top management's waning support for participative approach in the decision making process. Other distressful issues/problems are communication dysfunction, low level of competency, limited opportunities for career advancement, lack of encouragement for innovation, an unsatisfactory reward system, low salary, and confusion over superiors' expectations. What results is a climate of paranoid and distrust among non-management professional staff, which inevitably affects their commitment to the organization.



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