A MODEL OF HOW MOTIVATING LANGUAGE MODERATES THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN JOB AUTONOMY AND WORKER OUTCOMES

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ABSTRACT

Many studies have been devoted to job autonomy research, and these studies have shown that job autonomy has a strong influence on many vital workplace outcomes. But there has also been a call for further model development to aid researchers' understanding of what moderators influence the job autonomy-worker outcome link. Specifically, there is a need for a model to better understand how leader communication interacts with worker job autonomy, along with the resultant effects on worker outcomes. To build this model, we employ motivating language, a well developed theory of leader communication. As a result, this paper presents a model of how motivating language moderates the relationship between job autonomy and worker outcomes, thus giving guidance in the workplace, particularly for effective management communication that facilitates critical organizational outcomes.

Keywords: motivating language, job autonomy, worker outcomes

INTRODUCTION

A large body of research has been devoted to job autonomy studies, and this research shows that job autonomy has a strong influence on many vital workplace outcomes, such as job satisfaction, performance, turnover, commitment, and absenteeism (Jackie Mayfield & Mayfield, 1998; Waldron, 1991). However, there has also been a call for further model development to aid researchers' understanding of what moderators influence the job autonomy-worker outcome link. One promising avenue for model development is to explore how leader communication moderates job autonomy's influence.
To fulfill this need, this paper presents a model of how motivating language (ML) moderates the relationship between job autonomy and key worker outcomes (Mayfield & Mayfield, 2009). The model can give guidance in the workplace, especially for the strategic and effective management communication that is the link to key results, such as employee performance, job satisfaction, innovation, and absenteeism (Conger, 1991; Jackie Mayfield & Mayfield, 2007). Conger (1991) believed that managing inspiration is becoming more important than authoritarianism. Strategic decision-making is not enough for leaders today; they should also have the skill to motivate the employees through the words they choose (Sullivan, 1988). The leader’s strategic use of speech effects employee outcomes and potentially customer relations. ML has been shown to have a significant support with many critical employee attitudes and behaviors (Jackie Mayfield & Mayfield, 2002). Yet the emphasis with which motivating language affects the leader-member relationship and the worker outcomes is not same in organizations with different levels of job autonomy.

Therein lies the goal of this paper: to identify how differential applications of motivating language can improve key employee outcomes in different job autonomy levels through a conceptual model. Hence, the rest of the paper is organized as follows: Section 2 presents provide an overview of job autonomy and how it affects worker outcomes; Section 3 discusses a leader communication model (motivating language) which is expected to influence the relationship between job autonomy and worker outcomes; Section 4 introduces selected worker outcomes and the link between job autonomy and these worker outcomes. Section 5 develops job autonomy, with motivating language as a moderator model; Section 5 concludes with a summary which includes future discussion and implications for research and practice.

**JOB AUTONOMY**

Job autonomy is a measure of employee behavioral latitude in a work situation (Gagné & Bhave, 2011). Specifically, Hackman and Oldham (1976) argued that job autonomy revealed the degree to which the job provides substantial freedom, independence, and discretion to the individual in scheduling the work and determining the procedures to be used in carrying it out. The same authors built the job characteristics model, which conceptualized that job autonomy motivates employees’ freedom and flexibility with the work schedules and work processes (Hackman & Oldham, 1976). According to these authors, employees feel more responsible and accountable for their work outcomes, so those attributes improve intrinsic motivation, job satisfaction performance, and employee retention (Hackman & Oldham, 1976).

In addition, Breaugh (Breaugh, 1985) separated job autonomy into several subcomponents, such as method autonomy, scheduling autonomy, and criterion autonomy. All of these components are associated with positive worker outcomes, which include work satisfaction, job commitment, absenteeism, and performance quality. Finally, Clark (2001) defined job autonomy as the ability to decide when, where, and how the job is to be done. Equally important, job autonomy has been positively linked with self-efficacy, flexibility, organizational commitment, and feelings of ownership (Morgeson, Delaney-Klinger, & Hemingway, 2005; Sharon & Axtell, 2001).

Thus, job autonomy has substantial support as a powerful individual motivator. For the motivational power of job autonomy, Spector (1986) tested over a hundred North American
samples for perceptions of job control, and found that job autonomy improved job satisfaction, commitment, involvement, performance, and general motivation. At the same time, he found that higher levels of job autonomy lowered physical health symptoms, emotional distress, role stress, absenteeism, turnover intentions, and actual turnover.

In addition, some research studies on job autonomy examined how operationalized autonomy, such as job design and participative management, which influence the performance and engagement of employees, are moderated by work place practices (Evans & Fischer, 1992). Furthermore, variation in job autonomy can be seen as an inevitable consequence of modern work and complex organizations of society (Au & Cheung, 2004).

**MOTIVATING LANGUAGE**

Motivating language (ML) is expected to influence the relationship between job autonomy and worker outcomes. Strategic leader communication is an important motivational influence for improved worker outcomes, such as job satisfaction, performance, turnover intentions, commitment, absenteeism, innovation, satisfaction with supervisor communication, and employee self-efficacy (Jackie Mayfield, Milton Mayfield, & Jerry Kopf, 1998b). Motivating language provides employees guidance on what should they do and how to do a better job, while recognizing their humanity. Moreover, high level use of ML makes employees feel more comfortable and confident in the work place, since they receive messages that their work is meaningful. Therefore, ML does not only improve performance, but also promotes job satisfaction, and is significantly related to turnover and absenteeism. It has been verified in numerous research studies that motivating language significantly increased employee performance, job satisfaction, retention, innovation, self-efficacy and absenteeism (W. Cascio, 2010; Jackie Mayfield & Mayfield, 2009).

ML refers to “strategic leader speech that positively affects employee progress towards … improved organizational outcomes”(Jackie Mayfield & Mayfield, 2009). It shows how leaders use combined speech skills with their subordinates to improve work performance, job satisfaction, and other indicators of organizational health(Jackie Mayfield & Mayfield, 2007). Unlike leader-member exchange (LMX), ML only explains subordinate perceptions of leader’s speech acts, but does not investigate subordinate communication (Jackie Mayfield, Milton Mayfield, & Jerry Kopf, 1998a).

Conger (Conger, 1991) classified language into two distinct skill categories. The first skill type is used to define “the purpose of the organization in a meaningful way”, which can be seen as the leader’s message. The second skill type is the ability to use “symbolic language to give emotional power to his or her message” (Conger, 1991). Relatedly, Sullivan (Sullivan, 1988), the initiator of motivating language theory, proposed that using all three linguistic speech acts enhance employee motivation. These three basic speech acts cover most forms of oral leader communication, and they are described in the following paragraphs.

First, direction-giving speech “increase a worker’s knowledge that his or her view of the world corresponds to the way the world really is.” (Jackie Mayfield & Mayfield, 2002) Direction-giving language provides workers with specifics on expected workplace performance outcomes,
and reduces task ambiguity and worker anxiety over workplace requirements. In turn, these improvements lead to increased employee working effort. This type of speech act embraces goal-setting theory (Jackie Mayfield & Mayfield, 2009). Second, leaders use empathetic language when they want to express caring about “a worker’s emotional well being through oral communication means.” (Jackie Mayfield & Mayfield, 2009) Empathetic speech is typically a human-bonding act that develops emotional ties between a leader and follower (Sullivan, 1988). Furthermore, empathetic language fosters human connectedness, which improves workers’ sense of self-worth and trust, and will increase employee loyalty and commitment (Jackie Mayfield & Mayfield, 2002; Sullivan, 1988). As a critical factor to measure leaders’ performance, employee commitment is established on trust. ML is a powerful tool to build and sustain mutual trust. Workers perform better when leaders show more caring and concern for them. Praise and communication are two examples of leader empathetic language.

The third type of ML, Meaning-making language, helps workers construct mental models of reality (Jackie Mayfield & Mayfield, 2002). With this type of speech, leaders convey the organization’s culture to the employees, so that the workers behave appropriately and consistently with the organization’s culture and context. For example, a boss may tell a direct report about when a social event is a “command performance”.

Sullivan’s conceptualization was operationalized by Mayfield et al. (1995) who developed a scale to evaluate the use of ML by leaders. This scale measured the leader’s oral communication quality with subordinates. It also assessed how the leaders use various speech acts to motivate workers (Jackie Mayfield, Mayfield, & Kopf, 1995). The ML scale assessment showed a highly reliable and valid instrument where effective speech acts assert a positive and measureable impact on employees’ job satisfaction (Sharbrough, 2006).

Importantly, ML plays a role in worker outcomes based on three assumptions. First, ML encompasses most cases of leader-employee discourse (Jackie Mayfield & Mayfield, 2009). In this study, ML should take effect in both high and low levels of job autonomy. Second, leaders must “walk the talk.” Their actions should be perceived as congruent with words, otherwise, ML will be ineffective (Jackie Mayfield, 2009). Research has shown that leader communication only drives better worker performance and job satisfaction through appropriate leader behavior (Mayfield & Mayfield, 2009). The third assumption is that if the leaders use all three types of speech acts strategically and effectively, they will more likely achieve the desired worker outcomes (Jackie Mayfield, 2009). If leaders use all these three types of ML synergistically, then ML will optimize its positive impact on worker results. Still, there should be different verbal communication foci in organizations with different levels of job autonomy.

SELECTED WORKER OUTCOMES

ML plays a crucial role in organizations since it links leader communication with key worker outcomes (Jackie Mayfield et al., 1998a). Based on the literature review, we chose job performance, employee affective organizational commitment, and job satisfaction as the most important worker outcomes which relate to job autonomy and ML in this study. These selected worker outcomes not only indicate the profitability of the organization, but also show the quality of work life, which is a crucial issue for an organization’s long-term welfare (W. Cascio, 2010).
Effective leader ML use can improve desirable worker outcomes, including performance, job satisfaction and retention (Hsu, Hsu, Huan, Leona, & Li, 2003). Structural equation modeling indicated that there was an approximate 5% increase in worker intent to stay with a 10% increase in ML (Jackie Mayfield & Mayfield, 2007). Extant studies also showed that a 10% increase in the use of ML leads to a 10% increase in job satisfaction and a 2% increase in performance (Jackie Mayfield et al., 1998a). Leader communication also influences worker innovation (M. Mayfield & Mayfield, 2004). For every 10% increase in leader motivating language, there will be an expected 2.7% increase in worker innovation, which is shown in Mayfield’s (M. Mayfield & Mayfield, 2004) structural equation model.

Strategic use of ML improves communication satisfaction (CS) perceived by employees, which in turn, may enhance their commitment to an organization (Sharbrough, 2006). CS is an organizational outcome which is associated with the use of ML (Hughes, 1993; Jeckie Mayfield & Mayfield, 1995). It has been explained that satisfaction with information “encourages a sense of belonging and identification with the values and objectives of the organization.” (Jackie Mayfield & Mayfield, 2009) The results of Sharbrough et al. (2006)’s research showed that “a given amount of increase in ML use by supervisors resulted in a corresponding 35% improvement in perceived supervisory communication competence, a 40% enhancement in subordinates’ CS, a 45% boost in perceived leader effectiveness, and an increase of 12% in job satisfaction” (Sharbrough, 2006).

**MODEL DEVELOPMENT**

As previously discussed, there are three types of ML. These three strategic forms of speech play various roles in different levels of job autonomy. With high levels of job autonomy, employees have more freedom and discretion space to complete their work. In this type of organizational setting, employees feel less pressure and behave more creatively than in organizations with low level of job autonomy (M. Mayfield & Mayfield, 2004). But the disadvantage is that some followers may tend to lack direction or affective organizational commitment. Therefore, direction-giving language is more suitable in these kinds of organizational setting. In these circumstances, leaders should let subordinates know what they are expected to do, make and show them the “path”, and coordinate with them to implement the work. By clarifying tasks, goals, vision, and rewards, employees will become more engaged in their work. As a result, we put forth the following proposition.

**Proposition 1:** In high level job autonomy contexts, direction-giving language will be a prevalent form of motivating language used to increase employee performance, affective organizational commitment, and job satisfaction.

On the other hand, employees in organizations with low levels of job autonomy are hypothesized to have higher working pressure (Prottas & Thompson, 2006). In these contexts, employee creativity and work freedom is suppressed, which in turn weakens their affective commitment and performance. Recognition and reinforcement of intrinsic motivation are critical issues in this type of organization. Empathetic language helps reduce tension and dissatisfaction of the workers in these organizations. By providing consideration to subordinate needs, concern for their welfare, and creating a friendly working environment, employees tend to feel less stressed.
and affectively commit more to their job, therefore, improving job satisfaction, affective organizational commitment, and performance (Yukl, 1981).

**Proposition 2:** In low level job autonomy contexts, empathetic language will be the prevalent form of motivating language used to increase employee performance, affective organizational commitment and job satisfaction.

Meaning-making language is appropriate for both high and low levels of job autonomy. It is intuitively associated with sense-making and the unwritten rules of organizational culture (Sharbrough, 2006). Schuler (1979) found that work place performance will be improved with the reduction of role conflict and role ambiguity within an organization (Sullivan, 1988). Meaning-making language helps workers keep schemas that are congruent with each unique organizational culture. A number of studies have shown that lack of person-organization fit leads to such negative outcomes as turnover and inhibited career advancement (W. F. Cascio & Boudreau, 2010).

**Proposition 3:** In all levels of job autonomy, Meaning-making language will be the prevalent form of motivating language used to increase employee performance, affective organizational commitment, and job satisfaction.

**Figure 1 Conceptual Model of the Relationship between Job Autonomy and Worker Outcomes**

**CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS**

ML works most efficiently and beneficially when it is strategically integrated with leader behavior, organizational objectives, and the organizational environment (Jackie Mayfield et al., 2010).
The three strategic forms of leader speech play various roles in different levels of job autonomy.

As a result, this paper presents the model of how the motivating language moderates the relationship between job autonomy and worker outcomes, which can give a guidance in the workplace, especially for the management communication. Managers can choose different types of communication strategies and speech acts to communicate with employees in diverse levels of job autonomy to improve worker outcomes.

This model can be tested by conducting a survey in both high and low job autonomy organizations. The survey will include all of the three ML components to test their moderating influence on the relationship between job autonomy and selected worker outcomes (employee job performance, employee affective organizational commitment, and job satisfaction). In order to increase the generalizability of the research, the survey also will be conducted in different countries with different cultures, such as the United States, China, and Mexico.

There are some practical implications of this study. People can put this model into practice. In organizations with higher level of job autonomy, training can focus on enhancing managers’ directing-giving and meaning-making language skill. By doing this kind of training, managers will increase their capability to provide workers with specifics on expected workplace performance outcomes. On the other hand, in low level job autonomy organizations, training should pay more attention to empathetic language to foster human connectedness, and improve employee loyalty and commitment. Moreover, the training outcome might be even better if the organization will offer corresponding rewards.

This paper has some limitations. First, we only built a conceptual model to show the relationship between job autonomy and worker outcomes, and how the ML moderates this relationship, but did not conduct quantitative analysis to support the propositions. Second, e-communication is becoming increasing popular, which is different from the traditional face to face communication. This study focuses on the face to face communication. The results may be different in an e-communication setting. Third, culture plays a crucial role in international research in this area. Cultural factors may effect the relationship between job autonomy and worker outcomes as well. Hence, the recommendation for cross-cultural research.

Therefore, future research in this field may analyze this moderating relationship in e-communication. Moreover, researchers may consider cultural factors to see how these factors influence the moderator roles of ML, and whether they will change the relationship between job autonomy and worker outcomes.

In conclusion, strategic leader communication has been shown to have a positive direct impact on critical employee outcomes which advance organizational goals and quality of work life as well. Similarly, job autonomy has been revealed to have a powerful effect on these outcomes. Logically, motivating language should also serve as a beneficial moderator in the diverse job autonomy configurations which can consequently improve employee performance, affective organizational commitment, and job satisfaction.
References


