

Australian Public Sector Employees' Commitment to Organisational Change

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Abstract

This study aims to clarify the role of Australian public sector employees' commitment to organisational change. Three components of commitment to organisational change (affective, normative, and continuance commitment to organisational change) were hypothesised to mediate the relationship between organisational climate and behavioural support for organisational change. Study 1 reports data collected during 2003 from a Queensland government department (N = 342) while Study 2 reports data collected during 2003, from a South Australian government agency (N = 54). Hierarchical regression analyses were conducted with each component of commitment to organisational change initially regressed on positive and negative work climate. Subsequently, behavioural support for organisational change was regressed on both commitment to organisational change (three components) and organisational climate (two components). In Study 1, both positive and negative work climate were able to account for significant unique variance in components of commitment to organisational change. All three components of commitment to organisational change were significant predictors of behavioural support for organisational change. However, in Study 2, only positive work climate was found to significantly predict both affective and continuance commitment to organisational change components, while only affective and normative commitment to organisational change significantly predicted behavioural support for organisational change.

Introduction

Over the last two decades, the Australian public sector has undergone substantial change in both internal management processes and methods of service delivery. Changes to management processes have included: emphasising achievement of performance targets, accurate costing of services to clients and customers, capital use charges, greater responsibility and accountability, and the introduction of flexible work practices. Changes to aspects of service delivery have included: a movement to providing internet-based services, the contracting of service delivery to the

private sector, and a greater emphasis on client and customer satisfaction (ABS, 2002).

Swales (2004) argued that creating a highly committed workforce is still the highest priority in the field of human resource management. Hence, it is hardly surprising that commitment is receiving greater attention in relation to research into organisational change. Herscovitch and Meyer (2002) have recently applied Meyer and Allen's (1997) Three-Component Model of organisational commitment to the area of organisational change. Herscovitch and Meyer's study addressed several important issues in relation to commitment to organisational change. They were able to demonstrate that the three components of commitment to organisational change were separate but related constructs, that commitment to organisational change accounted for a unique slice of the variance in self-reported behavioural support for change, that there were different relationships between components of commitment to organisational change and change-related behaviours, and that interaction between the components of commitment to organisational change were important and able to improve prediction of change-related behaviours.

These results have provided additional support for utilising a multidimensional framework to understand employees' commitment to organisational change which extends the general model of workplace commitment developed by Meyer and Herscovitch (2001). This study will examine the link between employees' perceptions of their workplace climate, their commitment to organisational change (based on the three-component model), and their behavioural support for change.

Conceptual model

The conceptual model that was tested in these studies is shown in Figure 1. In order to better understand the organisational factors in the public sector that influence commitment to organisational change, public sector employees' perceptions of their organisational climate were included. This model uses a measure of organisational climate specifically developed for the

Queensland Public Service that is part of the Queensland Public Agency Staff Survey (QPASS: Hart, Griffin, Wearing, & Cooper, 1996).

In the original development of the QPASS, scales were designed to cover a range of organisational issues that are common to most organisations (Schuler, Dowling, Smart, & Huber, 1992). The 10 scales assess perceptions about eight positive aspects – workplace morale, supportive leadership, participative decision-making, role clarity, professional interaction, appraisal and recognition, professional growth, and goal congruence – and two negative aspects of the work environment – workplace distress and excessive work demands (Hart et al., 1996).

Aims and Hypotheses

This study aims to clarify the role of Australian employees' commitment to organizational change within the public sector, and the relationship between the various components of commitment to organisational change and behavioural support for change. It was hypothesised that positive work climate would be the strongest predictor of both affective and normative commitment to organisational change, while negative work climate would be the strongest predictor of continuance commitment to organisational change. It was also predicted that affective and normative commitment to organisational change would both predict unique variance in behavioural support for change, while continuance commitment to organisational change would not account for any unique variance in behavioural support for change. Finally, affective and normative commitment to organisational change would fully mediate the relationships between positive and negative work climate, and behavioural support for change.

Method

Participants

The data used in the first study comes from a Queensland government department (N = 342) with offices across Queensland, while the data used in the second study comes from a South Australian government agency (N = 54). In study 1, 50.3% of participants were from females while 37% of

participants were females in study 2. Response rates were 45% for study 1 and 58% for study 2 which are considered adequate for organisational surveys (Babbie, 1990; Roth & BeVier, 1998).

Questionnaires

Organisational climate was assessed using 50 items from the QPASS (Hart, et al., 1996). The QPASS authors cited Cronbach alphas ranging from .88 for Appraisal and Recognition, to .73 for Goal Congruence (Hart et al.). Factor loadings for individual items were also provided, with most items having loading values > .7. The 10 organisational climate (OC) scales as defined by Hart et al. are: *Workplace Morale, Workplace Distress, Supportive Leadership, Participative Decision-Making, Role Clarity, Professional Interaction, Appraisal and Recognition, Professional Growth, Goal Congruence, and Excessive Work Demands*.

The *Commitment to Organisational Change* scale (Herscovitch & Meyer, 2002) consisted of eighteen items: six assessing affective commitment (e.g., "I believe in the value of this change"), six assessing continuance commitment (e.g., "I have no choice but to go along with this change"), and six assessing normative commitment (e.g., "I would feel guilty about opposing this change").

The *Behavioural Support for Change* scale (Herscovitch & Meyer, 2002) was used to assess employees' behavioural support for a specified change initiative. The single item scale was presented as a 101 point, behavioural continuum labeled (from left to right) active resistance, passive resistance, compliance, cooperation, and championing. A written description of each of the anchors was provided.

Procedure

The data for Study 1 were gathered by a consultancy team from the Centre for Organisational Research and Evaluation at the University of Southern Queensland (USQ). The data for study 2 were collected by one of the researchers as part of a postgraduate psychology degree. Participants completed the questionnaire during work hours and all completed questionnaires were returned to USQ for data entry.

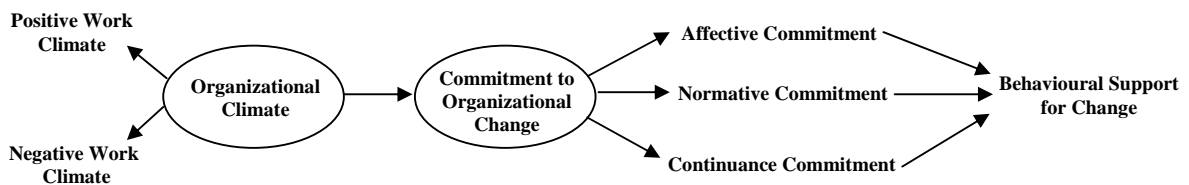


Figure 1: Conceptual model for Studies 1 and 2

Results

In order to assess the dimensionality of organisational climate, the combined data from the 10 subscales in both studies were subjected to Principal Axis factor analysis (PAF) using SPSS. Principal axis factoring revealed the presence of two factors with eigenvalues exceeding 1, explaining 61.12% and 13.42% of the variance respectively. The first factor was defined by the organisational climate variables with a positive valence (Workplace Morale, Supportive Leadership, Participative Decision Making, Role Clarity, Professional Interaction, Appraisal & Recognition, Professional Growth, and Goal Congruence), while the second factor was defined by the organisational climate variables with a negative valence (Workplace Distress and Excessive Work Demands). Therefore, the factors were labeled Positive and Negative Work Climate respectively. The correlation between the two factors was $-.34$.

To test the hypotheses that Positive Work Climate would be the strongest predictor of both Affective and Normative Commitment to Organisational Change, and Negative Work Climate would be the strongest predictor of Continuance Commitment to Organisational Change, six standard multiple regressions were conducted with each of the commitment to organisational change scales regressed on Positive and Negative Work Climate for each of the studies. Positive Work Climate contributed significantly to the prediction of all three DVs (Affective, Normative, and Continuance Commitment to Organisational Change) in Study 1 ($\beta = .31, p < .001, \beta = .18, p < .01$, and $\beta = -.28, p < .001$ respectively), and to the prediction of Affective and Continuance Commitment to Organisational Change in Study 2 ($\beta = .28, p < .05$, and $\beta = -.50, p < .001$ respectively). While Negative Work Climate contributed significantly to the prediction of Continuance Commitment to Organisational Change in Study 1 ($\beta = .18, p < .01$), it was a weaker predictor than Positive Work Climate. The overall contributions of Positive and Negative Work Climate to the prediction of Affective, Normative, and Continuance Commitment to Organisational Change in Study 1 were significant with R^2 values of .12, .03, and .15 respectively. For Study 2, the R^2 values were similar (.14, .02, and .31 respectively), although the R^2 value for Normative Commitment to Organisational Change was not significant.

To test the second hypothesis that only Affective and Normative Commitment to Organisational Change would predict unique variance in Behavioural Support for Change, two hierarchical regressions were

conducted with Behavioural Support for Change regressed on the three commitment to organisational change scales for each of the two studies. The correlations between the three commitment to organisational change scales ranged from .39 to $-.44$ in Study 1 and from .22 to $-.53$ in Study 2. Therefore, we were justified in expecting that we would find unique variance being predicted by Affective and Normative Commitment to Organisational Change. The pattern of correlations between the three commitment to organisational change scales will be discussed further in the discussion section. A full correlation matrix is available from the first author.

The third hypothesis was also assessed by entering Positive and Negative Work Climate into the regressions at the second step, after the three commitment to organisational change scales were entered. This allowed the unique contribution of Positive and Negative Work Climate to be assessed after controlling for the contribution of the three commitment to organisational change scales thus testing whether the relationships between Positive and Negative Work Climate and Behavioural Support for Change are fully mediated by Affective and Normative Commitment to Organisational Change. The results of these analyses are presented in Tables 1 and 2.

The results confirmed that Affective and Normative Commitment to Organisational Change both predicted unique variance in Behavioural Support for Change ($\beta = .36, p < .001$ and $\beta = .63, p < .001$ for Affective Commitment to Organisational Change while $\beta = .22, p < .001$ and $\beta = .33, p < .01$ for Normative Commitment to Organisational Change in Studies 1 and 2 respectively). Continuance Commitment to Organisational Change also predicted unique variance in Behavioural Support for Change ($\beta = -.24, p < .001$ in Study 1). The R^2 values for Studies 1 and 2 were .36 and .55 respectively. In Study 1, Positive Work Climate contributed significantly to the prediction of Behavioural Support for Change after controlling for Affective, Normative, and Continuance Commitment to Organisational Change ($\beta = .21, p < .001$), thus showing that commitment to organisational change partially mediated the relationship between Positive Work Climate and Behavioural Support for Change, but only in one of the studies. The relationship between Negative Work Climate and Behavioural Support for Change was entirely explained by their associations with Continuance Commitment to Organisational Change, which fully mediated the relationship. The change in R^2 when both Positive and Negative Work Climate were entered was .03 in Study 1 and .02 in Study 2.

Table 1: Hierarchical multiple regression with Behavioural Support for Change regressed on Affective, Normative, and Continuance Commitment to Organisation Change (at step 1) and Positive & Negative Work Climate (at step 2) for Study 1 (N = 342).

Variable	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	β	<i>t</i>
Step 1				
1. Affective Commitment to Org. Change	.29	.05	.36	6.44***
2. Normative Commitment to Org. Change	.22	.05	.22	4.50***
3. Continuance Commitment to Org. Change	-.18	.04	-.24	-4.63***
$R^2 = .36$, Adj. $R^2 = .36$, $F(3,338) = 64.06$, $p < .001$				
Step 2				
4. Positive Work Climate	3.03	.73	.21	4.15***
5. Negative Work Climate	1.03	.74	.07	1.39
R^2 Change = .03, F Change(2,336) = 8.61, $p < .001$				

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Table 2: Hierarchical multiple regression with Behavioural Support for Change regressed on Affective, Normative, and Continuance Commitment to Organisation Change (at step 1) and Positive & Negative Work Climate (at step 2) for Study 2 (N = 54).

Variable	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	β	<i>t</i>
Step 1				
1. Affective Commitment to Org. Change	.54	.10	.63	5.33***
2. Normative Commitment to Org. Change	.32	.10	.33	3.10**
3. Continuance Commitment to Org. Change	.02	.08	.03	.26
$R^2 = .55$, Adj. $R^2 = .52$, $F(3,45) = 18.51$, $p < .001$				
Step 2				
4. Positive Work Climate	3.17	2.40	.16	1.32
5. Negative Work Climate	-.10	1.78	-.01	-.06
R^2 Change = .02, F Change(2,43) = .92, <i>ns</i>				

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Discussion

The results for Studies 1 and 2 do not provide a totally consistent picture of the role of Australian employees' commitment to organizational change within the public sector. Study 1 demonstrated that Positive Work Climate contributed significantly to the prediction of all three components (Affective, Normative, and Continuance) of commitment to organisational change, while Positive Work Climate only predicted Affective and Continuance Commitment to Organisational Change in Study 2. In a similar vein, Negative Work Climate only significantly predicted Continuance Commitment to Organisational Change in Study 2. It was expected that Positive Work Climate would predict Affective and Normative Commitment to Organisational Change in both studies and that

Negative Work Climate would predict Continuance Commitment to Organisational Change in both studies.

Meyer et al. (2002) had demonstrated that positive aspects of the workplace would be positively related to affective and normative commitment and negatively related to continuance commitment and this finding was replicated in these studies. However, the current studies extended Meyer et al.'s (2002) research by identifying distinct dimensions underlying perceptions of the work environment and demonstrating that positive aspects of the work environment are the major factor in explaining differences in scores on the commitment to organisational change measures. Negative Work Climate explained little if anything of the variance in commitment to organisational change scores.

These studies also extended Meyer et al.'s (2002) research by confirming that both Affective and Normative Commitment to Organisational Change

accounted for unique variance in Behavioural Support for Change within the public sector. While these were both positive predictors, we discovered that Continuance Commitment to Organisational Change was a negative predictor of Behavioural Support for Change in Study 1. Our correlations between Affective and Normative Commitment to Organisational Change ($r = .39$ in Study 1 and $r = .11$ in Study 2) were smaller than the correlations reported by Herscovitch and Meyer (2002; $r = .57$ for Study 2 and $r = .48$ for Study 3). We also found sizable negative correlations between Affective and Continuance Commitment to Organisational Change ($r = -.44$ in Study 1 and $r = -.53$ in Study 1) which were greater than the correlations reported by Herscovitch and Meyer (2002; $r = -.26$ for Study 2 and $r = -.21$ for Study 3). While the pattern of intercorrelations between the three commitment to organisational change scales was similar across our two studies, the correlations differed in size from those reported by Herscovitch and Meyer (using identical scales) and are at odds with the results of the extensive meta-analyses that have included the three components of organisational commitment. In particular, Cooper-Hakim and Viswesvaran (2005) concluded that affective and normative organisational commitment have substantial overlap which failed to appear in our studies. Cooper-Hakim and Viswesvaran also concluded that continuance commitment was only weakly (and negatively) related to measures of work performance whereas our results suggest a stronger role for Continuance Commitment to Organisational Change.

The third hypothesis proposed that the relationships between both Positive and Negative Work Climate and Behavioural Support for Change would be fully mediated by the three commitment to organisational change scales (as illustrated in Figure 1). In Study 1 we found that Positive Work Climate was a significant contributor to the prediction of Behavioural Support for Change even after controlling for Affective, Normative, and Continuance Commitment to Organisational Change. This result suggests that commitment to organisational change is only a partial mediator. The change in R^2 when both Positive and Negative Work Climate were entered was 3% in Study 1 and 2% in Study 2, which are relatively small unique contributions when compared with the variance in Behavioural Support for Change accounted for by the commitment to organisational change variables (33% in Study 1 and 55% in Study 2).

Conclusion

A positive working environment is one that aligns all elements of workforce planning, performance management, and business strategies with organisational objectives. We found that this kind of

work environment plays a key role in predicting variation in scores on the three components of commitment to organisational change. Employees' levels of affective and normative commitment to organisational change are key factors in predicting employees' behavioural support for change within the public sector, while it is possible that interactions between components of commitment to organisational change may improve this prediction. Peter Shergold (5 August, 2004) described the challenge facing public sector leaders as "responding proactively to government and leading their organisations through the times of change ahead". Public sector managers who are themselves committed to creating a positive working environment may be the key to achieving the "holy grail" of employee commitment to a continuous process of change.

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