

Factors Affecting OSU Extension Agents' Perceptions of Organizational Justice and Job Satisfaction

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Abstract

This descriptive-correlational study investigated Ohio State University (O.S.U.) Extension county agents' perceptions of, and relationships between, organizational justice (including distributive, procedural, interactional, and systemic justice) and job satisfaction. The researchers used a census of O.S.U. Extension county agents and a mailed questionnaire to collect data, achieving a final response rate of 86%. The findings suggest that O.S.U. Extension county agents have a somewhat uncertain perception of organizational justice; agree with procedural and interactional justice; disagree with distributive and systemic justice; and are very satisfied with their employment. A low, positive association was found between O.S.U. Extension county agents' perceptions of organizational justice and current level of job satisfaction. Positive relationships were found between job satisfaction and interactional justice, procedural justice, and systemic justice. The findings suggest that O.S.U. Extension administration should investigate and strengthen reward structures and continue to offer opportunities for employees to be engaged in dialogue, decision-making, and the implementation of decision outcomes, when appropriate, while encouraging individual creativity in program development and implementation.

Introduction

Ohio State University (O.S.U.) Extension has been in existence for nearly 100 years, serving the needs of Ohio citizens through a variety of community-based educational programs focused in 4-H youth development, family and consumer sciences, agricultural and natural resources, and community development. In the current state of economic uncertainty and population shifts, rapid and complex change has been a constant for O.S.U. Extension similar to many other Cooperative Extension Systems.

A complicating factor in the management of O.S.U. Extension is the autonomy of individual employees in a large and complex system and their evolving roles and responsibilities, coupled with the flexibility afforded to supervisors when carrying out their administrative responsibilities. For the past several years, O.S.U. Extension has prepared for, and now faces, many challenges: Balancing budgets under extreme fiscal constraint;

addressing pay equity among individual employees; supporting employees balancing workloads and work/life issues; encouraging and assisting in the promotion and tenure review process; and supporting the tremendously complex and unique county agent position as they develop and implement innovative and unique educational programs. During such challenging times, it is only natural that Extension employees could find themselves questioning organizational decisions and how they are made, frequencies and effectiveness of communications between administrators and employees, and individual rewards and incentives. All of these potential employee reactions are addressed in the construct of organizational justice.

In perhaps the most simplistic terms, organizational justice involves peoples' perceptions of fairness in the organizational setting or workplace (Byrne & Cropanzano, 2001; Greenberg 1987). It is an evaluative

judgment by individuals of the fair treatment by others (Bazerman, 1993; Furby, 1986) and a fluid concept that involves actions, interactions, and perceptions of individuals and groups. Organizational justice in a broader sense also refers to individuals' and groups' perceptions of the fairness of treatment received from organizations, including their behavioral reactions to such perceptions (James, 1992).

Most recently, Beugre' (1998) stretched the definition of organizational justice to "the perceived fairness of the exchanges taking place in an organization, be they social or economic, and involving the individual in his or her relations with superiors, subordinates, peers, and the organization as a social system" (pp. *xiii*). Beugre' and Baron (2001) suggested that organizational justice be considered in relation to (a) the fairness of organizational rewards (distributive justice), (b) interaction with others in the organization (interactional justice), (c) formal organizational procedures utilized (procedural justice), and (d) the organization as a system (systemic justice).

While several authors have investigated the concept of organizational justice within for-profit organizations (Beugre', 1998; Beugre' & Baron, 2001; Lind & Tyler, 1988; Rahim, Magner, & Shapiro, 2000), minimal research has been conducted to investigate perceptions of organizational justice of Extension county agents. Kutilek (2002) investigated organizational justice as it relates to work/life guidelines within O.S.U Extension. Additionally, researchers have critically analyzed levels of job satisfaction in Extension organizations over the years (Boltes, Lippke, & Gregory, 1995; Bowen, Radhakrishna, & Keyser, 1994; Keffer, 1976; Mallilo, 1990; Miller, 1997; Nestor & Leary, 2000; Riggs & Beus, 1993). However, no study has been conducted that investigated relationships between current perceptions of organizational justice and levels of job satisfaction and selected personal, professional, and organizational characteristics of O.S.U. Extension county agents.

Purpose and Objectives

The purpose of this research was to describe O.S.U. Extension county agents' perceptions of organizational justice and job satisfaction. Additionally, the research explored relationships between agents' perceptions of

organizational justice and job satisfaction. More specifically, the purpose of this study was to: (1) Describe the perceptions of organizational justice held by O.S.U. Extension county agents; (2) describe the current level of job satisfaction of O.S.U. Extension county agents; and (3) explore relationships between agents' perceptions of organizational justice and level of job satisfaction

Methodology

Utilizing descriptive-correlational research methodology, the researchers developed a mailed questionnaire, consisting of four sections, to collect data. Section I: 35 items adapted from Beugre's (1998) organizational justice instrument, including individual constructs of distributive, interactional, procedural, and systemic justice; each employed a 5-point Likert-type scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree); Section II: 14 items measured on a 5-point Likert-type scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) that comprised Warner's (1973) job satisfaction instrument. Two additional sections, one measuring initiation and participation of continuing professional education and another collecting demographic data, were included. Summated scores were used to obtain descriptive statistics: means, medians and standard deviations.

The organizational justice scale used for this study was originally developed by Beugre' and Baron (1997) to measure distributive, procedural, interactional, and systemic justice. The original scale was developed from a "pilot study of sixty-one participants, and then in a main study including a sample of 232 employees" (Beugre', 1998; pg. 94). The pilot study used a scale that included 75 items, which was reduced to 41 for follow-up with the larger sample. Using factor analysis with the data collected, the four factors of distributive (ten items), procedural (five items), interactional (ten items) and systemic justice (ten items) were developed (Beugre', 1998). For this study, the researchers modified some language to reflect the support team concept when conducting performance evaluations, rather than a single supervisor as is reflected in the original instrument.

The researchers conducted a pilot test with 18 members of the Ohio Extension Agents Association to establish reliability of the

instrument. Using pilot test data, the researchers calculated Cronbach's Alpha to measure the respective constructs' internal reliabilities as indicators of the instrument's reliability; resulting individual construct reliabilities ranged from .87 to .95. The population for the study was a census of all O.S.U. Extension county agents employed as of February 1, 2002 with one or more of the following program area responsibilities: (1) 4-H Youth Development; (2) Family & Consumer Sciences; (3) Agriculture & Natural Resources; or (4) Community Development. There were 284 O.S.U. Extension county agents in the population. A final response rate of 86% (246 respondents) was achieved following two follow-up reminders and one additional mailing to non-respondents.

Findings

Selected Demographics

O.S.U. Extension county agents responding to this survey have worked for the organization an average of 13 years (*SD* = 9) and were 45 years of age (*SD* = 9). A large number (144 out of 245) of respondents worked for a business or organization other than the Cooperative Extension Service for an average of 10 years (*SD* = 10) prior to their current employment with Ohio State University Extension. Respondents were 55% female and 45% male with an overwhelming majority

(89%) having a Masters degree as their highest completed degree. A modest number (43%) of respondents had completed their highest degree in Education, followed by Agriculture (20%), and Home Economics (19%).

Organizational Justice and Job Satisfaction

Respondents had an overall mean score of 3.08 (*SD* .71) for their perception of organizational justice (Table 1) with mean scores for individual constructs of distributive, procedural, interactional systematic justice ranging from 2.49 to 3.61. Respondents had a rather high level of job satisfaction with a mean of 4.13 (*SD* .64) on a five-point scale.

A low, positive association (Davis, 1971) was found between O.S.U. Extension county agents' perceptions of organizational justice and current level of job satisfaction (Table 2). Overall, a positive relationship was found between organizational justice (.199) and job satisfaction. Additionally, positive relationships were found between job satisfaction and interactional justice (.235); procedural justice (.155); and systemic justice (.215). Using Cohen's effect size suggestions (.5 = large; .3 = medium; .1 = small), the researchers would suggest that the relationships between organizational justice (including individual constructs) and job satisfaction are small.

Table 1

O.S.U. Extension County Agents' (N=246) Perceptions of Organizational Justice and Job Satisfaction

Construct	Median	Mean	SD
Distributive Justice	2.40	2.49	.91
Interactional Justice	3.60	3.51	.85
Procedural Justice	3.70	3.61	.83
Systemic Justice	2.90	2.94	.81
Organizational Justice	3.14	3.08	.71
Job Satisfaction	4.21	4.13	.64

Table 2

Relationships between O.S.U. Extension County Agents' (N=246) Perceptions of Organizational Justice and Job Satisfaction

Construct	Job Satisfaction	Davis Convention
Organizational Justice	.199	Low
Distributive Justice	.066	Negligible
Interactional Justice	.235	Low
Procedural Justice	.155	Low
Systemic Justice	.215	Low

Conclusions and Implications

The numerous, rapid changes that have occurred within O.S.U. Extension have had direct impacts on county agents, and have ultimately impacted Extension volunteers and program participants. As O.S.U. Extension experiences continual change and it seeks to address the many challenges that such a large organization encounters, it is important and necessary to understand perceptions of organizational justice and current levels of employees' job satisfaction. Based on these perceptions, organizational leaders must ensure that employee needs are being met thus, potentially, ensuring their long-term commitment to the organization.

Distributive Justice

Distributive justice refers to the distribution of decision outcomes broadly defined; however, the researchers believe that respondents focused predominantly upon the distribution of salaries or other financial outcomes since this section's initial question was related to salary. Thus, considering Ohio's current fiscal crisis and, more specifically, the financial outlook for O.S.U. Extension, the researchers were not surprised by the respondents' low perceptions of distributive justice. In 2001, all O.S.U. Extension employees received a minimal salary increase (~\$395) intended to cover additional parking and medical benefits expenses. Other than financial rewards of salary, O.S.U. Extension administrators struggle to identify meaningful rewards of merit for Extension county agents due, in part, to the tremendous size, scope and diversity of the organization. The researchers further suspect that the perception exists within the organization that Extension administrators determine salary increases based more upon an egalitarian philosophy rather than individual performance. The organization establishes a baseline salary increase with everything above being merit; unfortunately, the percentage above the baseline is minimal in most cases.

O.S.U. Extension administrators have attempted to offer additional financial incentives to county agents by funding continuing professional education activities and travel, paying professional dues, and establishing competitive grant programs supporting innovative program development and agent specialization. However, the researchers suggest

that the respondents did not consider this additional financial support for professional and program development as offsetting perceived inequities in salary. Furthermore, in the months preceding data collection, the innovative grants program was eliminated, and travel and professional development budgets reduced due to the organizations financial outlook.

Interactional Justice

Respondents' relatively positive perceptions of interactional justice may be expected in an organizational culture where high levels of interaction are evident at various levels. During the past five years, O.S.U. Extension administrators increased efforts to foster communication in the organization by soliciting and considering county agents' direct input into statewide issues affecting them locally. Additionally, county Extension agents may be more frequently and/or extensively participating in electronic communications or face-to-face meetings, viewing and participating in satellite updates, reading communiqués from administrators or program area leaders, or participating in any number of active task forces, teams, or committees that are contributing to organizational decisions.

Procedural Justice

While individuals may perceive the actual rewards that are distributed as unfair, they may perceive the procedures used to determine those distributions as fair (Greenberg, 1996). Although O.S.U. Extension county agents did not perceive the distribution of rewards as fair, they did perceive the procedures used as relatively fair. Within O.S.U. Extension, there have been increased efforts to communicate better the procedural and policy information by creating an Extension administration Web site, and through direct verbal and written communications. Therefore, employees have not only had more opportunities to read, reflect upon, and better understand how decisions have been made, but have also been provided increased opportunities to ask questions and seek clarifications. Finally, in some cases, Extension county agents are directly involved in the development of new policies and procedures.

Greenberg (1993) noted that it is somewhat difficult to separate interactional and procedural justice as they are closely related. During the past several years, O.S.U. Extension

administrators have placed increased emphases on engaging employees from all program areas and positions in meaningful roles related to the organization's future. These efforts have resulted in a recognized increase in the numbers of county Extension agents serving on statewide task forces, organizational committees, or leadership teams providing managerial input and direction to specific programmatic and/or organizational issues. Serving on one of several committees or task forces offers county Extension agents opportunities to not only have a voice in the process of decision-making, but also to have direct input into potential or real outcomes that result in new policies, procedures and guidelines. However, while respondents may perceive that they are provided opportunities for input into decisions affecting them, the researchers would argue those respondents' perceptions of both interactional and procedural justice should have been even more positive considering the emphasis placed on engaging Extension county agents in task forces, committees, and teams. They would question whether respondents' relatively positive perceptions of both interactional and procedural justice are indicative of O.S.U. Extension's "clan culture" described by Berrio (1999).

Systemic Justice

The rather low perception of systemic justice may be the result of the many, conflicting subsystems that produce and distribute potentially inaccurate and inconsistent information (Beugre', 1998) within the O.S.U. Extension structure. Organizations are social systems in which individuals have "norms, values, shared beliefs, and paradigms of what is right and what is wrong, what is legitimate and what is not and how things are done" (Bennis, 1989, p. 30). In a large and complex organization such as O.S.U. Extension, informal and formal groups and subsystems may be sending simultaneous yet conflicting or incongruent messages that could either support or undermine the image that a specific individual has about the organization (Thompson & Luthans, 1990). Individuals who comprise these groups and subsystems essentially determine, based on past experiences, other individuals' perceptions of how the organization operates in terms of what is communicated and how it is communicated.

The fact that respondents had a relatively low perception of systemic justice should be reason for concern for O.S.U. Extension administrators. Respondents may have perceived that organizational decision-makers do not have complete or accurate information and are thus not consistent in applying decision outcomes. This overall negative perception of the fairness of the system could be detrimental to the organization in both retaining current county agents and attracting quality candidates for vacant positions. Current Extension county agents may not provide a very positive overall picture of the organization based on their perceived treatment.

Job Satisfaction

The relatively high level of job satisfaction of O.S.U. Extension county agents may be explained by the work roles of the individuals. Vroom (1964) suggested that individuals' job satisfaction is directly related to the extent their jobs provide them with rewarding outcomes such as pay, variety of stimulation, consideration from their supervisor, opportunity for promotion, interaction with co-workers, opportunity to influence decisions that will directly influence them, and control over their pace of work. Working for O.S.U. Extension offers employees interaction with co-workers, a variety of types of stimulation, opportunity to influence decisions, and control over their pace of work.

O.S.U. Extension county agents have many opportunities to interact with peers through formal and informal networks. County agents have formal mentors that are assigned when starting in the job, have informal mentors who they have identified, and participate within a network that they often self-identify with based on personal interests, similar county program, or geographic location. Informal or formal mentoring and networking opportunities allow for high levels of communication between employees. Additionally, many county agents participate on subject matter teams, committees, or task forces that allow them to interact with peers and establish professional relationships that further offer opportunities for ongoing communication about program development, implementation, and evaluation.

O.S.U. Extension county agents have unique opportunities within their county to engage in a variety of programs on a regular

basis, work with diverse populations, and see directly the impact they are having on clientele. Extension county agents may work with very traditional types of programs (small family farms, resident camping, or nutrition education) one day; and, the very next day be engaged in program development efforts focusing on more non-traditional programs issues, grant writing to support after-school programs, teaching financial management courses, or assisting with attracting large business to improve economic conditions of the community. County agents taking advantage of the vast opportunities in their communities are likely more satisfied as new and innovative programs stimulate their creative thinking and challenge them professionally (Vroom, 1964).

There are many opportunities for O.S.U. Extension county agents to be actively involved in decisions that directly affect their everyday work responsibilities. Extension county agents are directly involved in decision-making processes through their responsibilities as county chair or co-chair, supervising program assistants, volunteers or other employees, and through their leadership positions in professional associations. It is very common for county agents to be invited to be a member of a task force or committee that will potentially impact their future responsibilities. Participation in each of these committees or task forces allow county agents to provide input and recommendations on potential impact that future decisions might have, therefore influencing how or if decisions are made. Furthermore, the autonomy offered O.S.U. Extension allows county agents' to make their own decisions in terms of daily tasks and projects.

The Extension county agent position is very autonomous, allowing individuals to make key decisions that affect the development, implementation, and evaluation of educational programs. While the agent must work with a number of stakeholders when developing programs, it remains up to the individual agent to determine their degree of participation, level of responsibility they want to accept, and manner they choose to complete their tasks. Usually, supervisors do not require county agents to work at a pre-determined pace or to develop or participate in a minimum number of programs each year. Essentially, the pace at which employees work or accomplish program

goals is determined by the individual county agent.

Relationship between Organizational Justice and Job Satisfaction

As Extension county agents' perceptions of organizational justice became more positive, their levels of job satisfaction increased. Although perceiving rewards as unfair, O.S.U. Extension county agents gain satisfaction from other sources, including the manner in which policies are developed and the level of communication and involvement they perceived. Several studies have confirmed the impact of justice on job satisfaction. Specifically, Folger and Konovsky (1989) found that positive perceptions of distributive and procedural justice led to satisfaction. Additionally, researchers have noted the importance and impact of procedural justice on satisfaction (Alexander & Ruderman, 1987; Lind & Tyler, 1988). The findings of this research suggest that Extension county agents derive at least some satisfaction from interaction (e.g. opportunity for voice, participation in decision-making, timely feedback) and procedures (e.g., how policies, procedures, and rules are put into place) that are in place in the organization. In terms of systemic justice, the job satisfaction of Extension county agents increased, as they perceived the overall organization, including its structures and processes, to be fair.

The culture that exists within O.S.U. Extension is one that supports interaction, communication, consensus, commitment and loyalty. Berrio (1999) found that O.S.U. Extension, like a large majority of higher education institutions, is a "clan culture". The clan culture is viewed as a friendly place to work, where individuals share a lot of themselves with each other through interaction at various levels and in various forms. Within the clan culture, there exists a high level of commitment among employees; tradition and loyalty are important; and an emphasis on individual development, morale, teamwork, participation, and consensus. Similar to other large organizations, there also exist other, less dominant cultures including hierarchy, market, and adhocracy cultures.

Recommendations

(1) Recognizing that O.S.U. Extension is not able to compensate, salary-wise, at a level that is considered fair by employees, administrators, including county chairs, should identify additional methods to reward employees. Administrators should consider additional financial support for travel to professional conferences, meetings, or workshops; support in the form of start-up money for program development; new technologies or equipment for individual agents; one-time monetary rewards for outstanding program development; increased stipends for agents' assuming additional roles or responsibilities due to county vacancies; and additional vacation or flextime options.

(2) O.S.U. Extension should concentrate on rewarding individual achievements and accomplishments rather than developing a system that rewards all Extension county agents equally, regardless of their accomplishments (Beugre', 1998). There should not be salary adjustments or monetary rewards based on longevity of employment, rather they should be based on impact of programs and for positive risk-taking, new partnership development, program growth, scholarly and creative works, and stakeholder feedback;

(3) O.S.U. Extension should assist new Extension county agents in developing ongoing formal and informal networks within the organization so that they may better understand the complexity of the organization, including communication patterns, expectations, and policies and procedures. This initiative should include the purposeful selection of mentors who possess a positive outlook on the organization's future, who are people orientated, who have excellent communication and conflict-management skills, and who are resourceful.

(4) O.S.U. Extension must critically analyze the support team concept and how it is implemented in each district. Administrators must recognize and adjust for significant differences, and require consistent implementation of the support team concept to help insure support for Extension county agents. Strengthening the support team concept and developing a consistent approach in all districts should be based on the eight constructs developed by Fourman, Ludwig, and Stitzlein (1994) and investigated by Zoller and Safrit (1999): (a) Personal and interpersonal skills; (b)

program promotion and public relations; (c) program implementation and teaching; (d) chair and support team responsibilities; (e) program planning and development; (f) professional growth; (g) program evaluation; and (h) faculty research and scholarly activities. Zoller and Safrit found that the majority of the mean scores for support of the eight constructs were less than those for importance, potentially indicating that Extension county agents are not receiving the level of support they would like.

(5) O.S.U. Extension should form a task force, including county, district, and state representatives, to review and revise Extension county agent performance evaluation procedures. The performance evaluation process should be consistent across the organization and county situations for Extension county agent positions (faculty, and administrative and professional) based on their overall responsibilities as this would help ensure fairness in the process (Beugre', 1998).

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