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Coworker Influence

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Umbrella Summary

Coworker Influence

A Summary of Workforce Research Evidence Relevant to the Child Welfare Field

What is coworker influence?

Coworkers are the individuals in an organization that regularly work with a given employee, often performing similar tasks or collaborating in some way. Coworkers are typically in a similar hierarchical position in the organizational structure, differentiating them from subordinates, supervisors, or managers. Coworker influence is about how coworkers impact a given employee's work experiences. There are two facets of coworker influence—coworker support and coworker antagonism (Chiaburu & Harrison, 2008). Coworker support is a positive influence, including desirable actions and behaviors. More specifically, there are two types of coworker support—instrumental and affective (Chiaburu & Harrison, 2008). Instrumental support is provided through information or behavioral means, whereas affective support is provided through emotional means. Instrumental support can take the form of helping with a task or problem, and emotional support can include positive emotions such as friendliness or encouragement (Chiaburu & Harrison, 2008). Coworker antagonism is the negative side of influence, involving undesirable actions and behaviors, such as incivility and social undermining (Chiaburu & Harrison, 2008).

There is no primary measure for assessing all dimensions of coworker influence. Instead, there are a variety of measures that assess different types of influence, sometimes using different labels. Examples of items assessing instrumental support include “gives me helpful feedback about my job performance” (Aryee & Luk, 1996) and “provides me with work-related information” (Liaw, Chi, & Chuang, 2010). Affective support measures include items such as “provides me with encouragement” (Bacharach, Bamberger, & Biron, 2010) and “we talk about the good things in our work” (Zellars & Perrewé, 2001). Finally, antagonism measures include items such as “gives me incorrect or misleading information” and “belittles me or my ideas” (Duffy, Ganster, & Pagon, 2002).

Why is coworker influence important?

Coworker Support

Coworker influence is important because it is associated with many job attitudes, stress indicators, and behaviors. More specifically, coworker support is moderately associated with job satisfaction and organizational commitment (Chiaburu & Harrison, 2008; Mathieu, Eschleman, & Cheng, 2018; Ng & Sorensen, 2008). It is also moderately associated with thriving

at work, which means feeling energized and experiencing continual growth (Kleine, Rudolph, & Zacher, 2019).

With respect to stress indicators, coworker support is moderately associated with various types of role stress (i.e., role conflict, role overload, and role ambiguity; Chiaburu & Harrison, 2008; Mathieu et al., 2018) and with burnout (Halbesleben, 2006; Mathieu et al., 2018). Coworker support is most strongly connected with role ambiguity, such that employees with coworker support are less likely to be unclear about their job expectations and responsibilities (Chiaburu & Harrison, 2008; Mathieu et al., 2018;).

In terms of behavior, coworker support is moderately associated with task performance and modestly associated with citizenship behaviors, which are discretionary extra-role behaviors, such as such as volunteering, helping others, and making suggestions for improvement, that benefit the group and organization (Chiaburu & Harrison, 2008). However, there is a stronger connection between coworker support and one specific type of citizenship behavior—behaviors that are focused on creating or adapting to change (e.g., solving problems, creating improvements in processes or services, or effectively coping with changing demands; Chiaburu, Lorinkova, & Van Dyne, 2013). That relationship is further strengthened when coworker support is specific, versus just general or generic (i.e., just being generally supportive; Chiaburu et al., 2013). Finally, though coworker support is moderately associated with turnover intentions (Chiaburu & Harrison, 2008; Kim & Kao, 2014; Mathieu et al., 2018; Ng & Sorensen, 2008), it is only modestly associated with actual turnover (Chiaburu & Harrison, 2008; Rubenstein, Eberly, Lee, & Mitchell, 2018).

Looking across the various connections, it has been established that affective support is more strongly tied to job attitudes, whereas instrumental support is more strongly tied to employee effectiveness (i.e., task performance and citizenship behaviors; Chiaburu & Harrison, 2008). In addition, many of the connections are stronger in jobs that involve a lot of interpersonal interaction (Chiaburu & Harrison, 2008) or customer service (Ng & Sorensen, 2008). Finally, contrary to some common beliefs about the prominent importance of leaders, many of the comparative findings show that coworker support is either equally or more strongly connected to employee outcomes than leadership support (Chiaburu & Harrison, 2008).

Coworker Antagonism

Less is known about the negative side of coworker influence, but what is known is consistent with the findings for coworker support. Coworker antagonism is moderately associated with lower job satisfaction, lower organizational commitment, and greater intentions to quit (Chiaburu & Harrison, 2008). Similarly, coworker antagonism is associated with fewer citizenship behaviors, more counterproductive work behaviors, and poorer task performance (Chiaburu & Harrison, 2008). These connections are more pronounced when the antagonism is more severe (e.g., harassment and interpersonal abuse, versus incivility or social undermining; Chiaburu & Harrison, 2008).

Overall

Considering all the evidence, the strongest findings are such that when employees have coworker support, they are more likely to (a) engage in change-oriented citizenship behaviors (especially when the support is specific, rather than generic), (b) experience job satisfaction (especially in jobs that involve a lot of social interaction), (c) feel energized and experience growth, and (d) be more clear about their job expectations and responsibilities. It is important to note that research on coworker influence thus far has focused on assessing factors that are merely associated with coworker influence, not on testing strategies for improving it or on examining whether improving it affects outcomes like job satisfaction. It is therefore not appropriate to conclude that coworker support causes these outcomes, but they are nonetheless moderately strong connections. Research is needed to explore strategies to boost coworker support (and reduce coworker antagonism) and examine the effect of such changes on employee outcomes. These four outcomes may show the most promise for coworker influence.

QIC-WD Takeaways

- ▶ There are two facets of coworker influence—coworker support and coworker antagonism—and two types of coworker support—instrumental and affective support.
- ▶ Coworker support is moderately associated with job satisfaction, organizational commitment, thriving at work, role stress, burnout, task performance, citizenship behaviors, and intentions to quit.
- ▶ Coworker support is only modestly associated with turnover.
- ▶ Affective support is more strongly tied to job attitudes, whereas instrumental support is more strongly tied to employee effectiveness.
- ▶ The connections between coworker support and many employee outcomes are stronger in jobs that involve a lot of interpersonal interaction.
- ▶ Coworker antagonism is moderately associated with job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and intentions to quit, citizenship behaviors, and counterproductive work behaviors.
- ▶ The strongest findings are such that when employees have coworker support, they are more likely to (a) engage in change-oriented citizenship behaviors (especially when the support is specific, rather than generic), (b) experience job satisfaction (especially in jobs that involve a lot of social interaction), (c) feel energized and experience growth, and (d) be more clear about their job expectations and responsibilities.
- ▶ Research is needed to explore strategies to boost coworker support (and reduce coworker antagonism) and examine the effect of such changes on employee outcomes.
- ▶ There is no primary measure for assessing all dimensions of coworker influence.

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