

Who cares? The importance of interpersonal respect in employees' work values and organizational practices

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Niels van Quaquebeke, Sebastian Zenker & Tilman Eckloff

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Who cares? The importance of interpersonal respect in employees' work values and organizational practices

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Abstract

Two large online surveys were conducted among employees in Germany to explore the importance employees and organizations lay on aspects of interpersonal respect in relation to other work values. The first study ($N_1 = 589$) extracted a general ranking of work values, showing that issues of respect which involve supervisors are rated particularly high among employees. The second study ($N_2 = 373$) replicated the previous value ranking by and large. However, it is shown that the value priorities indicated by employees are not always matched by organizational practices. Especially respect issues which involve employees' supervisors diverge strongly negative. Consequences and potentials for change in organizations are discussed.

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Who cares? The importance of interpersonal respect in employees' work values and organizational practices

While leadership studies in the fifties already emphasized respectful leader behaviour towards employees as an essential antecedent of employee satisfaction and performance ("considerate leadership style" as described in Judge, Piccolo, & Ilies, 2004; Kerr, Schreisheim, Murphy, & Stogdill, 1974; Stogdill, 1950), recent research undertakings, initially stemming from social justice research, additionally highlight that interpersonal respect among members of a group can also evoke group beneficial behavior (De Cremer, 2003; Miller, 2001; Simon & Stürmer, 2003; Sleebos, Ellemers, & de Gilder, 2006; Tyler & Blader, 2000). In other words, interpersonal respect, be it between leaders and their subordinates or among colleagues, impacts outcome variables which are generally regarded beneficial for an organization and its performance.

In the present paper, we want to complement the previous findings and explore if interpersonal respect is also considered important by employees themselves. Naturally, most people would agree that respect is very important to them. Yet, how does the importance of interpersonal respect at the workplace score in comparison to other more classic work values, such as income, health or leisure issues? – all of these being issues which human resources departments also have to have an eye on when prioritizing aspects within organizational development schemes. Also, we will investigate to what degree actual organizational practices are aligned with employees' work value priorities.

By particularly focusing on employees' relative need for respect, we hope to underline that human resources strategies which aim at tackling issues of respect in organizations do not only generally have a large performance potential but they might also receive considerable backing by employees which would in return facilitate organizational change in that domain.

Background

Values are generally seen as intrinsic and enduring perspectives individuals hold throughout different stages of their lifetime (Bem, 1970; Jones & Gerard, 1967; Rokeach, 1973). They indicate "what a person consciously or subconsciously desires, wants, or seeks to attain" (Locke, 1976, p. 1304). Work values represent these sentiments in applied settings, signaling what people strongly care about at their work place. Following this definition (for a further discussion of different conceptions see Meglino & Ravlin, 1998), work values are somewhat similar to the valence term in expectancy models of motivation and are thus believed to have a substantial impact on the actual behavior shown at the workplace (e.g., Vroom, 1964). They encourage individuals to act in certain ways (Epstein, 1979;

Rokeach, 1973; Williams, 1979), affecting even such things as job choice (Judge & Bretz, 1992).

Whereas commonly work values are assessed as people's preferences for certain objects or outcomes, such as job security, level of payment and others, we sought to integrate interpersonal respect in this list of more or less classic work values. For this purpose we differentiated the phenomenon of respect along two lines which have been pointed out by previous theoretical (Darwall, 1977; Dillon, 2003) and empirical works (Simon & Stürmer, 2005; Tyler & Blader, 2000, 2003) alike. The first kind points towards the general acknowledgement of another human, an equal member of the same group, referred to as "recognition respect" or respect for persons. The second kind is directed at an acknowledgement of expertise or skill, referred to as "appraisal respect" or respect for work. These two kinds, although both named respect, are very different in their essence.

Recognition respect is very similar to the kind of respect the philosopher Kant proposed (2003). It follows a categorical imperative to respect other human beings by not only seeing them as means to an end but also as an end in themselves (see Hill, 1998). In an organization this respect may show in supervisors who do not only focus onto the performance aspect of their subordinates but are also compassionate or understanding in a time of a private crisis on behalf of the subordinate (Bass & Stogdill, 1990). They acknowledge that all humans deserve to be treated in the same way that one would want to be treated oneself. Its essence is thus unconditional. There is no question if it is deserved or not. It is not about a personal appreciation or favoring but about following a clear set of conventions, which give people equal rights - even though they are different. Research underlined this reasoning by confirming formal rules in justice issues as one of the antecedents of recognition respect (Tyler & Blader, 2000).

Appraisal respect on the other hand points at an entirely different phenomenon. It is about the esteem one receives if one performs, if one masters a skill, or one accomplished things that set one positively apart from the rest (Darwall, 1977; Dillon, 2003). So, whereas recognition respect involves a message of equality, appraisal respect does just the opposite. It acknowledges positives differences and rewards them with status. This kind of respect does not draw itself from a general normative law instead it derives its legitimacy from the perceived object itself; it or its actions demand respect. Thus in an organizational setting appraisal respect might show itself in a supervisor who acknowledges work or performance, may it be through spoken recognition, a promotion, or a raise in salary. Similarly, employees who state that they work for a supervisor they deeply respect is usually a sign of appraisal respect. Whereas in empirical research recognition respect seems to be a result of formal rule following, appraisal respect seems to rely more on the informal treatment in justice

concerns (Tyler & Blader, 2000). It is about acknowledging differences apart from the formal system.

Although the antecedents and essences of recognition and appraisal respect are quite different, the consequences of both on individuals who receive either seem to be relatively similar. Both kinds of respect have shown to heighten individuals' self-esteem when received (Smith, Tyler, Huo, Ortiz, & Lind, 1998; Tyler & Blader, 2000). Moreover, people who were respected do not seem to be overly concerned with their own personal image but rather engage in efforts to improve their group's image if that is under threat (Branscombe, Spears, Ellemers, & Doosje, 2002). Be it recognition or appraisal respect, both have shown to evoke a heightened degree of group serving behavior either in individuals' in-role or extra-role organizational behavior (Simon & Stürmer, 2003, 2005; Tyler & Blader, 2000). This commitment towards one's group even upholds if the people receive a simultaneous message of disliking (Spears, Ellemers, & Doosje, 2005), a message of group exclusion (Simon & Stürmer, 2005), or negative performance evaluations (Simon & Stürmer, 2003). Other studies, stemming from leadership research, have additionally shown that a considerate leadership style – leader behavior which shows concern and respect for subordinates, by looking out for their welfare, and expressing appreciation and support (Bass & Stogdill, 1990) – enhances subordinates' job satisfaction, their motivation and their performance (Judge et al., 2004). Both kinds of respect, as different as they are, can thus in their consequences be regarded as highly pivotal for the organizational interplay. They seem to work like a social lubricant.

For the present paper, we will distinguish these two aspects of respect along the two predominant relationships which employees are involved in. The appraisal respect employees may get for their work (1) from their supervisors, and (2) from their colleagues, and the recognition respect they get as persons (3) from their supervisors, and (4) from their colleagues. Additionally, we suspect that working for or with someone one can respect may also be desirable to people, which led us to include two more facets: the appraisal respect that subordinates themselves feel towards (5) their supervisors, and (6) towards their colleagues¹.

While previous empirical studies mainly focused on the interplay between respect and outcome variables, we are solely interested in how desirable these aspects of

¹ The recognition respect that employees may or may not show towards their supervisors and colleagues cannot be integrated because as stated above it is a categorical issue and can not be answered with more or less important, e.g., one cannot say that being able to have colleagues one can respect as people is a desirable work value. One either respects people as humans or one does not.

interpersonal respect are considered by employees themselves. If our study can show that the different facets of respect are not only interrelated with beneficial outcomes for organizations (as shown by the previous works) but are additionally also highly desired by employees themselves, the previous findings would be triangulated, giving more arguments in support of human resources strategies which attempt to tackle these issues in organizational development processes.

Method

Procedure

Two samples were collected via online surveys. We cautiously conducted the surveys according to the recommendations given in the field (Birnbaum, 2004; Kraut et al., 2004). For one, the surveys were server-side programmed so that all people were able to participate in the questionnaire. By doing so we avoided common technical selection biases which tend to exclude people who do not meet special browser recommendations (e.g. Java Script). Moreover, we assigned each participant a cookie session id which made it almost impossible for inexperienced users to participate in the same survey from the same computer again.

To increase response rate, lower the drop-out rate, and prevent a strong self selection bias we gave different motivators for both samples, such as feedback of the results and a lottery for gift vouchers. Furthermore, we also included a progress bar showing participants at all times how far they have already come in the survey. We assured at the beginning that the research would be conducted anonymously. At the end of the questionnaire people were able to decide if they wanted to have their data analyzed for scientific purposes or if they would prefer to be deleted from the data pool. In any case we provided people who were interested in the results with an opportunity to sign up in a different database so that names and emails could not be linked to any data entries in the survey. Finally, we conducted a pretesting in our labs in which we tested the layout on different browsers and different screen resolutions to assure that the survey would look and behave the same way on all systems. With all measures taken to prevent common shortcomings of online research we are confident that our samples are of a quality that lets us have faith in the data – at least to the extent that we would have it for classic paper and pencil studies, too.

Samples

Study 1

When recruiting the participants for the first sample we followed a multi-site-multi-entry strategy to prevent strong sampling biases. Participants were recruited via various public media websites from diverse backgrounds. The entry was either a banner, a teaser box, or a short article on the objective of the survey. 589 participants completed the survey and met the requirements introduced in the above procedure. The sample's mean for age lay around 38 years ($SD = 11.2$). Women made up 45 % of the sample. The total employment time in life spread around 15 years ($SD = 12.6$). The various educational degrees were well-balanced. Academically educated employees made up around 55% of the sample. 56% of all participants have completed a vocational training. 58 % indicated that they have previously had a position in which they supervised other employees. 36% of the sample have children.

Study 2

Participants for the second sample were collected half a year later via direct mailings in various companies and organizations out of different branches. Here, 318 participants completed the survey and met the requirements introduced in the above procedure. The sample's mean for age lay around 37 years ($SD = 10.9$). Women made up 55 % of the sample. The total employment time in life spread around 14 years ($SD = 11.3$). Academically educated employees are represented quite strongly in this sample, making up for around 71% of the sample. 42% of all participants have completed a vocational training. 42 % indicated that they have currently a position in which they supervise other employees. 34% of the sample have children.

Measures

We started with the following list of work values which encompassed more or less classical aspects of work values usually investigated in companies (such as the original IBM survey later used by Hofstede, 1991; or typical values assessed by consultancies Mason, 1994): (1) having high job security, (2) having a high income, (3) having good career opportunities, (4) working in a job that is valued by society, (5) having enough leisure time besides the job, (6) working on interesting tasks on the job, (7) being able to work independently, (8) working on tasks which require a high sense responsibility, (9) having a lot of direct contact with other people, (10) being able to help others through the job, (11) working in a job that is useful for society, (12) having the feeling to contribute something meaningful, (13) working in a healthy work environment.

Further we added the six respect facets as items to be ranked among the other work values: (14) working for a supervisor who appreciates my work, (15) working with colleagues who appreciate my work, (16) working with colleagues who treat me with respect, (17) working for a supervisor who treats me with respect, (18) working for a supervisor I can respect, (19) working with colleagues I can respect.

In both studies participants were asked to indicate how important they consider personally each value in a work setting on a scale from 1 “*not important*” to 5 “*very important*”. The list of values was randomised for each participant so that item context effects as outlined by Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee and Podsakoff (2003) were prevented.

Additionally, in Study 2, we used the same items to assess work practices in organizations. Here, we asked in how *far each practice can be found in participants’ current organization, from 1 “not at all” to 5 “very much”*

Results

Although the samples for the two studies were collected independently the work value rankings among both are highly congruent ($r_s = .97, p < .001$). The replication of the value rank structure as such over both studies (Table 1 in the Appendix) leaves us confident to interpret the individual ranks in more depth.

The respect facets, which we were the most interested in, show comparatively high ranks. It is evident that employees’ supervisors take a prominent role in the ranking. Not only do employees in both studies care highly about the recognition respect that they receive as persons (rank 2 respective 3) but also about the appraisal respect represented in the appreciation of one’s work (rank 4 res. 5). Working for a supervisor one can respect scores in the midfield of our values here (rank 8 res. 7). Having a supervisor one can respect seems less relevant to employees than their supervisors’ behaviour towards them. Yet, it still outscores work values such as high income (rank 14 res. 15), career opportunities (rank 15 res. 14), or leisure time besides the duties of the job (rank 19 in both).

When looking at the same respect facets for employees’ colleagues, we find that these are ranked in the same order to each other as those for the supervisor only that they always score about 4 ranks lower than the corresponding supervisor related facets. Altogether, it seems that the supervisor takes a more prominent role in employees’ work values than their colleagues do.

Apart from the respect facets Table 2 in the Appendix also shows that directly task related aspects such as working on an interesting tasks (rank 1 in both), contributing something meaningful (rank 5 res. 4) or being able to work independently (rank 3 res. 2)

score rather highly compared to other aspects such as career opportunities, income, leisure time besides the job, and the status in society.

When comparing employees' work value ranking with the organizational work practice ranking in the second study (Table 2 in the Appendix), we find that these correspond to a certain extent ($r_s = .59, p < .05$), indicating that priorities in employees' work values and organizational work practices are generally not too far apart. Facets of respect involving colleagues, for example, occupy rather similar ranks in organizational practices and employees' rankings, indicating that personal and organizational priorities seem to match here. Additionally, we can observe that most work values and their analogous practices are correlated on an individual level, too.

Yet, apart from the congruence between work values and practices, some divergences constitute the lack of congruence indices in our analyses. We can note, for example, that all aspects which involve employees' supervisors show a negative divergence. This indicates that supervisor related aspects in organizations are generally not prioritized as highly as employees personally would like to see it.

Aside from the supervisor related respect facets we find that the issue of health at the work place diverges negative from the importance that employees would personally assign to it, too. Although it was already not rated that highly in the value ranks (rank 7 res. 9), it is apparently prioritized even lower in organizations (rank 16) so that the discrepancy results are highest here. Additionally, this value-practice pair is the only one that does not show any significant relationship, underlining that individual preferences on this issue are not at all reflected by the organizations these individuals work for. On the other end of the divergences, we can observe that values which employees did not emphasise in their personal value rankings, such as direct contact with other people or working on tasks which require a lot of responsibility, seem to occupy a comparatively high emphasises in organizational practices.

Discussion

Both studies produced a value ranking that is by and large congruent. That values are relatively stable within a society has been noted before (Rokeach, 1973) and is, although the degree of congruence is very high, by itself not very surprising. Interesting is that the different facets of respect are clearly an issue within employees' personal value rankings. They occupy high positions in the rankings. Generally, there is a higher concern about respect issues which involve people's supervisor than those which involve people's colleagues. Within the respect facets the aspect of recognition respect seems to play the most prominent role. At the same time, the appraisal respect as indicated by appreciation of

one's work is also of high but not as high concern. Out of the three respect facet measurements the appraisal respect which people can accord to their supervisors or colleagues is of least interest. Although it scores in the midfield of the measured values, it seems that employees foremost care about how they are being treated and not so much if they work for or with people that they can respect.

That respect in combination with supervisors is an issue within organizations is additionally emphasized by the comparison of individual values with the practices found in organizations. All three respect facets involving supervisors diverged highly between values and practices, indicating that the behaviour of supervisors towards their subordinates seems to be somewhat of a blind spot within organizational priorities. This is not to say that they do not receive any attention in the organizational development process but the emphasis probably does not lie on the quality of the relationship supervisors have with their subordinates. Considering previous results on the impact of respect (De Cremer, 2003; Miller, 2001; Simon & Stürmer, 2003; Tyler & Blader, 2000), particularly the impact leader figures have on organizational outcomes (Judge et al., 2004; Yukl, 2002), it seems that this is a potentially worrisome blind spot as performance and employee satisfaction might be lost here. Or to frame it differently, it is also encouraging to see how much potential still lies idle and awaits awakening.

Somewhat off the topic of respect and unexpected is the high divergence that we additionally encountered for health issues at the work place. Although already not ranked high in employees work values, it is a bit troublesome to see that health issues at work hardly seem to be prioritized by German organizations. At this point we may only speculate that this is the case because organizations have not yet reacted upon the stressors that mark modern days' work (Robinson & Smallman, 2006; Sparks, Faragher, & Cooper, 2001).

When looking at the data on an individual level, it is interesting to observe that all values corresponded with the analogous work practice to a certain degree. This may either indicate that people chose a job according to their values (Judge & Bretz, 1992), or it may indicate that people's values are somewhat shaped by the practice they encounter every day. Either way, the priorities of an organization can also be found within the individuals working for it. If issues of respect are not emphasised by the organization, it is likely that they either attract or shape employees the same way. Naturally, due to the cross sectional design of the studies, it needs to be noted that a clear causal resolution on this issue cannot be made here. A certain degree of the observed correlations might also be due to common method variance (Podsakoff et al., 2003) and thus overestimate the correlations. A future study which can address these shortcomings, possibly by employing some implicit measurements of work values, thus certainly seems desirable. This way, one could potentially account for social desirability, an aspect which may confound responses on

values (Pryor, 1983). Moreover, one could gain additional valuable insights when investigating the relationship between explicit versus implicit respect values.

Respect issues, in particular those involving employees' supervisors, are certainly a fascinating topic to shed further light upon. They contribute to organizational success but are also highly desired by employees. We believe that this field has a great potential for applied advancement, possibly overcoming the notion that showing respect is a weakness that successful managers do not show.

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Table 1

Descriptive Statistics for Work Values in Study 1 and 2

Work Values	Study 1			Study 2			Rank Difference
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Rank	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Rank	
working on interesting tasks on the job	4.50	.64	1	4.63	.52	1	0
working for a supervisor who treats me with respect	4.41	.71	2	4.34	.69	3	1
being able to work independently	4.38	.73	3	4.41	.64	2	1
working for a supervisor who appreciates my work	4.30	.75	4	4.31	.69	5	1
having the feeling to contribute something meaningful	4.26	.76	5	4.33	.76	4	1
working with colleagues who treat me with respect	4.23	.70	6	4.27	.65	6	0
working in a healthy work environment	4.11	.83	7	4.13	.76	9	2
working for a supervisor I can respect	3.94	.94	8	4.26	.72	7	1
working on tasks which require a high sense of responsibility	3.90	.82	9	4.10	.76	10	1
working with colleagues who appreciate my work	3.89	.81	10	4.04	.65	11	1
having high job security	3.82	.97	11	3.95	.85	12	1
working with colleagues I can respect	3.77	.84	12	4.15	.63	8	4
having a lot of direct contact with other people	3.61	.97	13	3.81	.90	13	0
having a high income	3.46	.83	14	3.67	.76	15	1
having good career opportunities	3.45	.86	15	3.77	.87	14	1
working in a job that is useful for society	3.28	.98	16	3.49	.96	16	0
working in a job that is accepted and valued by society	3.17	.97	17	3.31	.93	18	1
being able to help others through my job	3.15	1.00	18	3.41	.96	17	1
having enough leisure time besides the job	3.12	.96	19	3.29	.91	19	0

Note. $N_1 = 589$, $N_2 = 318$; All indications were made on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (not important) to 5 (very important)

Table 2

Descriptive Statistics for Work Practices and Correlations with the corresponding Work Values in Study 2

Work practice	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Rank	Difference in ranks between Work Value and Work Practice in Study 2	Correlation with corresponding Work Value
working in a healthy work environment	3.30	1.06	16	-7	.06
working for a supervisor who appreciates my work	3.62	1.16	11	-6	.28***
working for a supervisor who treats me with respect	3.77	1.14	8	-5	.25***
working for a supervisor I can respect	3.57	1.19	12	-5	.26***
having good career opportunities	2.62	1.14	18	-4	.30***
having the feeling to contribute something meaningful	3.78	1.02	7	-3	.21***
having high job security	3.35	1.29	15	-3	.28***
working on interesting tasks on the job	4.12	.90	3	-2	.20**
being able to work independently	4.10	.88	4	-2	.50***
having a high income	2.78	1.08	17	-2	.29***
having enough leisure time besides the job	2.48	1.13	19	0	.27***
working with colleagues who treat me with respect	4.06	.77	5	1	.26***
working with colleagues who appreciate my work	3.77	.78	9	2	.22***
working with colleagues I can respect	4.01	.75	6	2	.25***
being able to help others through my job	3.42	1.27	14	3	.52***
working in a job that is accepted and valued by society	3.53	1.02	13	5	.15*
working in a job that is useful for society	3.66	1.14	10	6	.41***
working on tasks which require a high sense responsibility	4.18	.91	2	8	.36***
having a lot of direct contact with other people	4.24	.91	1	12	.46***

Note. $N_2 = 318$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$; All indications were made on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (not at all / not important) to 5 (very much / very important)




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2006
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