

Research on the Influence of Differential Leadership on Employees' Work Engagement

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Abstract—Differential leadership is a new leadership theme which has been widely concerned by scholars at home and abroad in recent years, and its usefulness and mechanism need to be discussed more deeply. Work engagement is a concept widely concerned in the field of management practice and academic research, and it is an important way for organizations to improve performance and gain competitive advantage. From the perspective of insiders, this study attempts to explore the mechanism of differential leadership on employee work engagement. By using the methods of literature research and qualitative analysis, this paper finds out the positive influence of differential leadership on the work engagement of employees in the circle and the intermediary role of perceived organizational status, as well as the positive regulation of feeling trusted in the relationship between differential leadership and perceived organizational status.

Keywords—Differential leadership; Work engagement; Perceived organizational status; Feeling trusted

I. INTRODUCTION

The concept of work engagement was first proposed by Kahn and is defined as the physical, cognitive and emotional self-presentation of individuals when playing organizational roles. Work engagement is a concept widely concerned in the field of management practice and academic research, and it is an important way for organizations to improve performance and gain competitive advantage. Work engagement emphasizes the "optimal function" at work and is closely linked to happiness. As a positive and substantial work state, the positive impact of work input on the organization has been widely recognized. Other studies have shown that employees' work engagement has a significant positive impact on their task performance, extra job performance, active learning ability and innovation performance. It can be seen that employee work engagement is one of the important factors affecting the development of enterprises. How to stimulate the work engagement of employees by leaders and organizations needs to be further discussed by scholars.

As the manager and decision maker of an organization, leaders have a great influence on the behavior and attitude of employees. A survey of relevant literature on work engagement shows that leadership style is one of the important antecedent variables. A considerable number of scholars have discussed the influence of positive leadership styles on employees' work

engagement, including humble leadership, transformational leadership, authentic leadership, charismatic leadership, paternalistic leadership and spiritual leadership. Negative leadership behavior has received less attention. Currently, only a few studies on work engagement, such as authoritarian leadership, have been conducted. Chinese society presents a differential order pattern of self-centered and outward diffusion, which is significantly different from the group pattern of western society. As a cultural tradition, the pattern of differential order is not only reflected in the macro-social structure, but also in the middle-level organizational operation and micro-level interpersonal interaction. Differential leadership is a local leadership style developed on the basis of differential pattern theory. It is common in Chinese organizations. Compared with other leadership styles, it is more compatible with local culture. On the one hand, it is of unique cultural significance to explore the influence of differential leadership on employees' work engagement in the context of local enterprises; on the other hand, it is helpful to fill the gap in the empirical research on the relationship between them. Therefore, starting from the "differential leadership" and "insiders" with strong Chinese cultural characteristics, it is of great theoretical and practical significance to conduct an in-depth discussion on employee work engagement which is the first question to be discussed in this study.

Perceived organizational status reflects the individual's cognition of the prestige, influence and support of the organization. For employees who are insiders, with the improvement of organizational status perception, the motivation and ability of employees' perception to exert influence on the organization will be stronger, and the degree of work involvement will also be stronger. The second question to be discussed in this study is whether perceived organizational status mediates between differential leadership and employee work engagement. In an organization, subordinates feel trusted by leaders, which means that leaders are willing to take risks and responsibilities for subordinates to complete risky and important tasks, and share sensitive information with subordinates. When they realize that they are trusted by the leader, the trusted subordinates may be more willing to fulfill the leader's expectations, protect the leader's interests, and make extra efforts to complete the assigned tasks. If the employees do not feel the trust of the leaders, they will

correspondingly show worse work performance. The third question to be discussed in this study is whether feeling trusted moderates the relationship between differential leadership and employee work engagement.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW AND RESEARCH HYPOTHESIS

A. *Differential leadership and employee work engagement*

Differential leadership was first proposed by Zheng Boxun (1995). It means that a leader adopts different leadership styles for different subordinates and gives more favoured-preference to those subordinates. Its theoretical basis comes from the differential pattern theory put forward by the scholar Fei Xiaotong after 10 years of fieldwork in rural China. This theory points out that, under the national conditions of China, the affinity between people is divided in a differential order centering on themselves, which can be figuratively regarded as a concentric circle. People closer to the center of the circle are closer to themselves, and vice versa. At the same time, according to the intimacy of the relationship, there are different ways of interaction. The differential leader is accustomed to divide employees into insiders and outsiders, and is very partial to employees within the circle.

There are two types of research results on the attitudes, behaviors and performance of differential leadership towards employees in academia. One is that the differential leadership will have a positive impact on the attitude and behavior of both the employees in the circle and the employees outside the circle. Yuan Ling (2016) believes that the differential leadership can not only motivate the employees in the circle to improve their work efficiency. At the same time, it can motivate employees outside the circle to become their own leaders, which is a kind of motivational leadership style. It is pointed out that differential leadership will have a positive impact on employees' innovative behavior. The other is that the differential treatment of leaders will have a negative effect on the attitude and behavior of outsiders. Tao Houyong (2016) pointed out that the differential order leadership will stimulate the subordinates in the circle to produce beneficial social behavior, but as the injured party of the leaders' biased treatment, the leadership's differential order behavior will divide the beneficial social behavior of outsiders. To restrain the beneficial social behavior of employees outside the circle; Based on the circle theory and under the guidance of the social exchange theory, Ruan Jingxian (2018) analyzes the mechanism between the differential leadership and the suggestions of insiders and outsiders. The preference of differential leadership will cause employees in the circle to have emotional trust and cognitive trust, resulting in motivation and behavior to advise, but their unfair treatment of employees outside the circle suppresses their advisory behavior. However, scholars generally believe that the management style of differential leadership will have different effects on employees inside and outside the circle. This paper discusses the influence mechanism of differential leadership and work engagement from the perspective of the circle.

Work engagement is a work-related work state full of positive and lasting emotions and motivation, including three dimensions of concentration, dedication and vitality. Work engagement reflects the individual's perception of the

importance of the current job and the most intuitive expression of individual's contribution to the organization. Highly engaged employees are always fully engaged in their work, thus contributing to the development and progress of the enterprise. Cole (2012) found that psychological security, psychological significance and psychological effectiveness experienced by individuals in work are important psychological factors affecting their work engagement. Sun Jianmin (2015) pointed out that work resources play a significant role in promoting work engagement. While reducing psychological and physiological losses of employees, work resources can also promote employees to achieve work goals, meet their psychological needs and promote personal learning, growth and development. There is no doubt that as the direct manager of employees, leaders' personality and attitude towards employees will inevitably have a significant impact on their psychological feelings and work engagement.

In the atmosphere of humanitarianism, leaders treat different subordinates differently, which is a kind of leadership style that gives more biased treatment to preferred subordinates, mainly reflected in three aspects: communication and care, tolerance and trust, promotion and reward. For insiders, leaders will provide more communication, care, tolerance and promotion opportunities, etc. In terms of communication and care, they have more interactions with leaders, and they exchange opinions and ideas frequently, so that they can get timely feedback, care and care from leaders. In terms of tolerance and trust, more authorization and less control can be obtained, which is helpful to improve work autonomy. In terms of promotion and reward, more training and education opportunities can be obtained, that is, more work resources can be provided to provide employees with more opportunities for personal growth and development. Due to circle employees feel treated groups, in return, inspire their dedication and sense of responsibility to the work, will be for the sake of in leadership and business point of view, the willing to in order to enhance the competitive ability of enterprises, improve enterprise performance and reduce the distance between leadership and work harder, make more work into positive working behavior, etc. Based on the above analysis, this paper proposes the following hypothesis:

H1: differential leadership has a positive impact on employees' work engagement within the circle.

B. *Mediating role of perceived organizational status*

Perceived organizational status reflects the individual's cognition of the prestige, influence and support of the organization. Yin Kui (2013) summarized the organizational status perception into two aspects: one is inter-organizational status perception, that is, the individual's cognition of comparing the organization with other organizations in influence, reputation, treatment and other aspects; The second is the perception of status in the organization, that is, the perception of one's own status and value in the organization. Zhou Jiantao et al. (2012) believe that perceived organizational status reflects the individual's cognition of the influence, prestige and support of the organization. With the improvement of perceived organizational status, the motivation and ability of

individual perception to change the organization become stronger.

According to social exchange theory, interpersonal relationship building in the workplace is an exchange process, in which people exchange both material and spiritual contents. People need not only material satisfaction from daily communication activities, but also psychological and emotional respect and recognition. When people receive corresponding treatment in the workplace, they usually give the same or similar treatment or behavior based on the principle of reciprocity. When employees receive economic and social support from the organization, they will feel a sense of obligation to repay the organization, and repay the organization by completing work tasks and goals, fulfilling organizational role expectations and maintaining good interpersonal relationships. In the same way, they may reward the organization by putting in the work and decide how much they put in the work according to their perceived sense of trust. This theory highlights the connotation of motivation and initiative of work engagement and links the generation and results of work engagement.

With the enhancement of perceived organizational status, the motivation and ability of individuals to perceive the influence on the organization are also stronger. On the one hand, employees in the circle have a good relationship with leaders, and it is easier to get more support and help, thus forming a higher sense of organizational status. On the other hand, when the employees to recognize him in the loop, will realize the discrimination with outsiders, organization status reflects the perception to the rights of the employees in return for leadership, employees have a duty to actively work with performance, for the development of the organization to work harder, which conform to the principle of reciprocity in social exchange theory. Based on the above analysis, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H2: perceived organizational status mediates differential leadership and employee engagement.

C. The moderating effect of feeling trusted

Existing scholars have studied trust deeply, but there is little discussion about feeling trusted. Trust relationship often exists because of potential risks or uncertainties of one or both parties, and trust is manifested by the willingness of leaders to take risks and the belief that the trusted can still complete the work as expected in the absence of supervision and control. Trust comes from interpersonal interaction, between the truster and the trusted. Although truster and trustee are often mentioned together, trust and being trusted are two separate concepts. From the perspective of employees, the sense of trust emphasizes that trust needs to be perceived to further affect the behavior of the trusted, and discusses employees' perception of the boss's willingness to take risks for their own weaknesses. Truster and trustee may have different views on their trust relationship, which will have different influences on their attitude, behavior and performance.

In a trusting relationship, trust and being trusted are often related, but not necessarily equivalent. Leaders trust employees, but employees don't necessarily know it. Only when employees

perceive that they are trusted will their behavior be affected. For insiders, differential leadership will give more communication, care, tolerance and so on, which is a reflection of trust. Compared with outsiders, insiders are undoubtedly more trusted. However, for different employees, the sense of trust and the understanding of trust are different. The higher the sense of trust, the more important subordinates will feel to their leaders, and the easier they will get more support and respect, thus forming a higher sense of organizational status. Since the perception of organizational status is based on employees' perceptual knowledge, it refers to the organization members' judgment of their relative position in the organization from the perspective of individual self-feelings, and more often refers to the individual's perception of informal status in the organization. If employees feel low sense of trust, it will naturally lead to their weak perception of organizational status, which will have a negative impact on their work involvement. Based on the above analysis, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H3: Feeling trusted positively moderates the relationship between the differential leadership and the perceived organizational status. The higher the feeling trusted, the stronger the influence of the differential leadership on the perceived organizational status. Conversely, the lower the feeling trusted, the weaker.

III. CONCLUSION

Through literature review and theoretical analysis, this study proposes that differential leadership can positively affect the degree of work engagement of employees within the circle. Meanwhile, relying on social exchange theory, it proves that employees' organizational status perception plays an intermediary role in the relationship between differential leadership and employees within the circle. In addition, it is found that employees' feeling trusted can regulate the relationship between differential leaders' perception of employees' status, so as to regulate their influence on work engagement.

This article has the important practice enlightenment to the domestic enterprise leader to the staff management; First of all, leaders should pay attention to the individual perception of employees, enhance the sense of belonging of employees, so that employees have positive emotions to make more investment in work. Secondly, while taking care of employees within the circle, leaders should also take into account the feelings of employees outside the circle. They can establish the transformation mechanism within the circle and outside the circle, so as to make them mobile. At the same time, they will continue to explore and find out the management skills suitable for the enterprise in practice.

There are still some shortcomings in the research process. Firstly, this paper does not make an in-depth exploration of the influence of differential leadership on the differential treatment of employees outside and inside the circle. Secondly, this paper only proves the impact of leadership discrimination on employees from the theoretical level, without empirical test. Third, this study does not divide work engagement into more detailed dimensions. Therefore, future research can adopt the empirical method to explore the specific role and differences of

differential leadership in employees' work engagement from the perspectives of insiders and outsiders.

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