Birds of a Feather: How New Employees' Similarity to Coworkers Affects Organizational Behavior and Productivity

Center for Advanced Human Resource Studies
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Abstract

Key Findings

• All similarity is not created equal. The types of similarities that new employees share with their work groups affect the efforts they make to form relationships with their coworkers and bosses.

• In general, newcomers are more likely to make more efforts to form relationships when they have obvious things in common with their work group – such as race, gender, or education level – rather than when they have more-subtle, deeper things in common, such as work ethics or moral values. In this regard, similarities that employees themselves perceive as important tend to be more relevant than similarities that an outside observer might consider important.

• When newcomers actively socialize with their new coworkers, they don’t necessarily gain a better understanding of their role within the organization; however, they do tend to perform more creatively and feel more loyal and supportive to their new employer.

Keywords

New employees, worker similarities, work environments, ethics, relationships, values, race, gender, education, socialization

Comments

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BIRDS OF A FEATHER: HOW NEW EMPLOYEES’ SIMILARITY TO COWORKERS AFFECTS ORGANIZATIONAL BEHAVIOR AND PRODUCTIVITY

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In recent years, organizations have been putting much time and thought into the onboarding processes they use to welcome new hires. And, as the workforce has become increasingly diverse, HR professionals have become aware of the need to adapt onboarding to include people of different ethnic and national backgrounds, age groups, abilities, sexual preferences, and other differences.

Many organizations have assumed that a broader variety of ethnic, experiential, and educational backgrounds among their employees will automatically lead to greater creativity and productivity. Researchers, however, have begun to examine more closely the mechanisms whereby employees’ personal characteristics can affect their organizations’ creativity and output.

In the case of new hires, this relationship could prove to be crucial. What are the attributes of new employees that are most conducive – and detrimental – to productive behaviors, such as creativity and loyalty to one’s employer? And how does workforce diversity relate to these behaviors?

In this study, the researchers chose to explore the social context in which new employees engage in proactive behaviors, such as socializing with coworkers, bonding with their supervisors, and seeking feedback from others (Ashford & Black, 1996; Gruman, Saks, & Zweig, 2006; Kim, Cable & Kim, 2005; Wanberg & Kammeyer-Mueller, 2000). The researchers wanted to determine whether newcomers who were similar to their coworkers were more likely to engage in these behaviors. They focused on perceived similarities, or those that the workers themselves considered important, rather than similarities based on traditional demographics, because they found that perceived similarities were more relevant to workers’ behavior in this context.

In addition, the researchers examined how these behaviors can lead to subsequent behaviors that can affect organizational productivity, such as employee citizenship and creativity (Gruman, Saks & Zweig, 2006; Kammeyer-Mueller & Wanberg, 2003). Their study helps tease apart the relationship between employees’ perceived similarities and these potentially productivity-enhancing behaviors.

For an in-depth discussion of this topic:
Study Questions

• When new employees perceive that they share surface-level similarities with their coworkers -- i.e. readily visible traits such as gender, race, and age -- will they begin to feel that they also share deeper-level similarities, such as attitudes, work style, and personality?

• Do newcomers who feel more similar to their new work group engage in more proactive socialization, such as seeking feedback from coworkers on projects or attempting to build new relationships with coworkers and supervisors?

• Do proactive behaviors help newcomers better adjust to their jobs, leading them to practice more citizenship behaviors, feel clearer about their jobs, or perform more creatively?

A model of work group diversity and proactive behavior

![Diagram of the model showing perceived surface similarity, perceived deep similarity, proactive adjustment behavior, and newcomer adjustment.]

Results

• When new employees felt they were similar to their coworkers on the surface, they tended to find they also were similar in deeper ways, such as in terms of work style and values.

• Surface-level similarities led to mixed results, in terms of proactive behaviors. Newcomers engaged in more general socializing with coworkers when they shared similar educational levels. However, new employees were less likely to seek feedback from a workgroup similar in age to themselves.

• In terms of building a relationship with one’s supervisor, some surface similarities were more conducive than others. Newcomers were more likely to try to bond if they were the same gender as their boss, but less likely if they were of the same age.

• When new employees socialized more with their coworkers and were more proactive about bonding with their bosses, they tended to exhibit more organizational-citizenship behaviors, such as going “above and beyond” their official job descriptions and taking on extra tasks for the good of the organization, and generally supporting and defending their employers.

• New employees who proactively bonded with their supervisors also tended to have better creative performance.

• However, new employees who were proactive about socializing and building relationships did not understand their role in the organization any better than those who were not. The only condition under which newcomers were clearer about their role was when they shared a deep-level similarity in work style with their coworkers.
Taking the Initiative

A great deal of research indicates that new hires who take proactive steps to socialize with their colleagues tend to adjust relatively quickly to their new work environment (Ashford, Blatt & VanderWalle, 2003; Bauer, Bodner, Erdogan, Truxillo & Tucker, 2007; Miller & Jablin, 1991). However, few researchers have examined the social conditions that tend to foster proactivity.

In this study, the researchers focused on proactive behaviors rather than newcomers’ attempts to just “fit in.” Proactivity would seem to indicate that the employees are taking the initiative to go beyond the call of duty. While socially proactive newcomers can be rewarded by social acceptance, the researchers note that they also risk seeming ignorant or unintelligent, taxing their coworkers’ patience, or receiving the cold shoulder from the work group (Miller & Jablin, 1991).

Common Ground

Established research shows that workers who are similar to each other have a much easier time forming relationships than those who are dissimilar (Byrne, 1971; Tajfel & Turner, 1986; Williams, Parker & Turner, 2007). The researchers note that “perceived similarity,” or an employee’s feeling that she is similar to her coworkers, is much more relevant to organizational socialization than is “count-based” or demographic similarity (typically a similarity that is observed by others). This may be because the employee herself is deciding which attributes are most important for judging whether she is similar to her colleagues.

The researchers controlled their results for attributes such as extroversion, openness and neuroticism, as they noted that some individuals are naturally more disposed to being proactive (Ashford & Black, 1996; Wanberg & Kammeyer-Mueller, 2000; Chan & Schmitt, 2000). They also controlled for job interdependence, as an employee required by his job description to interact with others would naturally exhibit more proactivity.

An unexpected finding was that, when new employees differed from their work group and supervisors in age, they were more likely to seek feedback. The researchers speculate that the newcomers may have seen greater age in their colleagues as an indication of advanced experience and knowledge, and so sought out older individuals as mentors.

Future Research

This study focused on new employees’ attempts to proactively adjust to their new coworkers and environment. It did not account for the work groups’ actions and attitudes to welcome and support the newcomers. The researchers speculate that new employees who are seen as “similar” to the group may be more welcomed than those who appear dissimilar. However, new employees who are younger may receive more support.

In addition, future research could examine how supportive coworkers can speed the adjustment process for a new employee. Newcomers who feel welcomed and supported may be more comfortable engaging in proactive behaviors, which could in turn enhance creativity.
Takeaway

- While a new employee’s proactive behavior can indicate a desire to take the initiative in getting to know coworkers, it may also indicate potential misfit within the group. Managers should be aware that proactive behaviors could — in certain cases -- be a sign of misfit with the group.

- A new employee who engages in proactive socialization may well be proactive in terms of creativity, innovation, and productivity. So, while an organization cannot control the proactive behaviors of its employees, it can advise managers to reward and support proactive behavior in newcomers.

Data Source

The study’s sample came from the graduating student body from a large public university in the southeastern United States. Those who completed all phases of the study were compensated $20.

Three surveys were taken: The first, sent to 2,432 and returned by 785 students, assessed personality and demographic information. The second survey was taken four months later and was returned by 282 individuals; it assessed perceived similarity and proactive behaviors. The third survey, taken three months later and answered by 190 respondents, was identical in content to the second survey. Of these, the final usable sample was of 111 individuals (24.6% nonwhite and 75.4 white, 65% female and 35% male, with an average age of 23.4 and a median age of 22).

To gauge respondents’ feelings of similarity to their coworkers, they were asked, on a scale of 1 (“no one is similar to me”) to 5 (“everyone is like me”) with regard to age, education, gender, and race/ethnicity. They were also questioned about their similarity to colleagues in terms of working style, career goals and priorities.

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References


