Efficiency of Managers as Role Models: A Social Learning Theory Perspective

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This systematic literature review aimed to analyze and synthesize studies that indicated the importance of behavioral observation in the organizational context. Based on Social Learning Theory and by considering relevant recent findings and theories, the impact of managers as role models for employees is researched and analyzed. The importance of this topic is to determine ways that learning and enhancing performance in the workplace can be applied for people management development. The literature for theory was numerous, however studies on the particular topic were limited and not expanded in the organizational context. The key message of this review is that the impact of managers and leaders can be positive and progressive both for the employees and for the organization.

Keywords: social learning theory, role modeling management, developmental leadership, observational learning, behavioral learning

Introduction

Bandura's Social Learning Theory (1977) proposed that individuals learn by observing behaviors of others and by identifying their positive and negative consequences, they are led to imitation of these behaviors. Social learning, pressure of our peers, stimuli, and conditions in general form and shape our personality and behavior. According to Bandura (1986), imitation accounts for a significant percentage of our behavior and our actions and he supported the importance of observing, modelling, and copying the behaviors, attitudes, and emotional responses of others in our environment (McLeod, 2016). Bandura (1986) also added two important elements to the behaviorist learning theories of classical conditioning and operant conditioning; that between stimuli and responses there are mediating processes that occur and that the learning of behavior from our environment is enabled through observational learning. To better comprehend this theory and its input in organizational psychology development there are several constructs that need to be analyzed.

To begin with, the concept of social learning in organizations is a theory that could be significantly useful in the human resource management department, as within an organizational context, managers and supervisors entail the position of a role model for their subordinates. In Social Learning theory (Bandura, 1977) there are two or multiple parties: the observer or the imitator and the role-model. In society and from our childhood we are surrounded by many influential models, for instance parents, teachers at school, fictional characters, or movie stars. All of the above provide behaviors to observe and imitate, such as feminine or masculine attitudes, pro- or

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anti-social and others. From an early age, we learn to encode these behaviors and copy them in our own personality. To proceed to this copying of behavior, there has to be a reinforcement that will generate the imitation of the behavior. These reinforcements can be either positive or negative and internal or external (McLeod, 2016). Another aspect that is highly important in the workplace, is that an individual also learns from observing another individual's consequences from their behavior, most frequently the role-model's consequences. For instance, when an employee observes their manager to be rewarded for putting some extra effort there is high probability that the employee will put additional effort as well; this is known as vicarious reinforcement (Bandura, 1977). Another key concept to mention, is the identification process that was suggested by Social Learning Theory, which is similar to the Oedipus Complex, generated by Freud. There is a key difference in the identification process, which is that gender does not affect the imitation process, and that observation and imitation can occur to both same-sex and different-sex individuals. To conclude, identification is slightly different to imitation as well, that is due to the fact that one can imitate a single behavior, whereas one can identify multiple behaviors.

The final processes proposed by Bandura's Social Learning theory (1977), could be considered as a guide for observational learning and for behavioral imitation. Bandura (1986) refers to these four steps as mediational processes: Attention, Retention, Reproduction, and Motivation. Attention refers to the individual forming a mental representation of an observed behavior and its consequences. Attention is important as it is the procedure that aids the individual to identify which behavior is of major significance for them, in order to continue with the following processes. The retention process refers to the sustainability of the behavior for one person. It consists of how well an individual remembers a behavior that is going to be copied, and as social learning is not a fast process, this step is significant for the imitation process. Lastly, the Motivation process is the will to imitate and perform the behavior. The observer should determine whether the rewards outweigh the punishments, then the motivation to imitate the behavior will be higher. Hence, the Social Learning Theory suggests that to reinforce a desired result, individuals should have learned from an early age to observe and imitate the appropriate behavior that will generate their anticipated results.

In this systematic literature review, the Social Learning Theory will be applied in the organizational psychology context in relation to relevant studies that conclude to the rationale of this systematic literature review. As there is little research that connects the two aspects of Social Learning Theory and the efficiency of managers, supervisors, and leaders in general as role models, it is important to summarize and analyze the most recent studies' findings. It is important to highlight that in this analysis managers and supervisors are often mentioned as leaders, ethical leaders, or role models. The main objective is to review and comprehend the social learning theory in relation to the efficiency of managers as role models, and then by synthesizing the results of numerous studies support the rationale that leaders and managers that demand specific results from their subordinates and employees, they could conscientiously act as role-models and reinforce the anticipated behaviors and results from the observers, in this case their employees.

Methodology

The particular systematic literature review aims to analyze and correlate the leaders' role with the employee performance in the workplace. While considering the analysis of the SLT by Bandura (1977), the following studies examine the most recent theory analyses and through this review we aim to link the recent theories and most appropriate findings to support that leaders can generate the appropriate job performance through their

employees' observational learning. Moreover, the idea behind this model is that in the case that a leader or a manager desires their employees to be working in an efficient and specific way, then the leader or the manager themselves should adopt the particular behavior that would produce the expected results and performance. In other words, if a supervisor desired their subordinates to be stressed and deliver results in a very short notice, this wouldn't be effective if the supervisor itself had adopted a more relaxed approach in the workplace. Thus, the following findings aim to support and to be used as a basis for this review's main objective and to answer the following issues: whether job performance can be affected by the manager's behavior, whether employees' behavior and attitudes can be altered if their leader's behavior is changed, and whether employees and subordinates tend to imitate their supervisor's rewarded behaviors and attitudes.

Sample

The main source of articles and studies was the search engine Google Scholar, and the online library of the American College of Greece (library.acg.edu). The main search methods and keywords were "Social Learning Theory and management", "social learning and supervisors/managers/leaders", "social learning organizational perspective", "social learning and ethical leadership", "managers as role-models for employees", and other relevant themes. The main exclusion and, respectively, inclusion criteria were the year of publication, as a key element of this systematic review was the recentness of the studies in order to be relevant to the current correlation of the theory with manager's efficiency as a role-model and to the employee performance with behavior imitation. Hence, the aim was that sole studies from 2015 and later on would be used in this review. Nevertheless, due to the fact that the theory originated in the late 70s and due to the limited availability relevant to this review's theories, several studies had to be used, which were conducted in the past two decades. Additionally, several articles and books from the late 90s were also used.

Furthermore, another exclusion criterion was the irrelevance of some articles that were selected in the primary stage. For instance, there were some articles retrieved that included studies regarding self-management through the Social Learning Theory and another that analyzed the SLT perspective and environmental management, which were inappropriate for the research questions.

Results

For this systematic literature review, several articles were studied and analyzed in order to correlate the major objective of this study. The most significant and relevant findings will be stated and analyzed in this section.

Major Findings

Cai, Li, and Guan (2016) studied the influence of employee organization relationship on managers' knowledge-sharing behaviour. This study was based on SLT and on social cognitive reinforcement theory. Moreover, as mentioned above, individuals learn to behave in expected and appropriate ways within their social environment. Cai et al. (2016) correlated the basis of the SLT with other studies that suggest ways to improve team performance through knowledge sharing and promoting managers' knowledge, experience, and attitudes. Bartol and Srivastava (2002) found that rewards are a considerable reinforcement for an employee in order to share and copy the manager's approach and attitude in the workplace, and in a more in-depth research, Bock, Zmud, Kim, and Lee (2005) supported that material rewards were not sufficient to encourage behavior imitation.

It has been studied that organizations can reinforce managers' behavior through two different processes: the cognitive process and the reinforcing of the cognitive process. These are supported by Grusec (1992), who

explained the cognitive process as the organization assembling the managers' behavior by example or instructions and the latter consists of providing extrinsic incentives to reinforce the behavioral learning. This theory assumes that organizations can generate the managers' behavior through these cognitive processes, based on SLT, which also suggests that leaders and managers could shape the employees' behavior considering the appropriate contributions, rewards, and reinforcements (Zhang et al., 2014).

To better comprehend the efficiency of managers in the role of behavior generator and the example for imitation, there is need to expand the role theory by Joshi and Fast (2013). Hence, the role theory suggests that individuals have an inner compulsion to accomplish other's expectations, more particularly in the organizational context it is suggested that in-role and extra role inputs are the ones that shape managers' roles within a company. Additionally, Filstad (2004) stated that role models can be perceived as having multiple functions from an organizational perspective, and they can be perceived as evidence that achievements are possible to make, that advancement, rewards, and enhanced performance are feasible. Shaw, Dineen, Fang, and Vellela (2009) extended this finding and contributed to the theory by suggesting that when an employer demands from a manager to fulfill a task, or as mentioned a "high-level contribution" in the organization, a manager should ensure that each task is completed with all quality standards, while also improving the employees and team performance with all relevant requisites. This suggests that a manager that can adopt a behavior like the aforementioned would be an ideal role model for their team, and social learning would be efficient.

Hanna, V. L. Crittenden, and W. F. Crittenden (2013) conducted a study that was on the basis of the primary theory of SLT, indicating that behavior is a result of both the individual and the situation around it. Hanna et al. (2013) also supported the four-step procedure that Bandura proposed, which allows individuals, or in this case employees to identify the behaviors they wish to copy and begin the intrinsic processes that lead to acquiring an attitude or a behavior. Another characteristic of this theory in relation to management as the means for role modeling behaviors, is that there is the need to differentiate role modeling from mentoring. In the case of role modeling, the model might not be aware of the observation, whereas in the case of mentoring and coaching, the mentor is fully aware of its influence on the mentee and of being observed (Papa et al., 2000). It is important to consider that during modeling and observational learning, there is a possibility that neither of the parties are consciously aware of the behavioral and knowledge exchange.

Lastly, another study has found that supervisors are often perceived as interpersonal sources in all domains (Louis, 1980; Louis, Posner, & Powell, 1993; Miller & Jablin, 1991) and they are often looked upon for non-job-related information, such as vicarious observations and experimentation (Ostroff & Kozlowski, 1993). Weaver, Trevino, and Agle (2005) have concluded that to achieve leadership by implementing exemplary and paradigmatic behavior, the ideal role models are direct supervisors and coworkers. Overall, all these studies have contributed with their findings in the final consequence of this review's objective. That is, those role models are necessary in the workplace, and in order to achieve an equitable employee and organization relation, the appropriate and developmental behaviors should be exhibited by leaders and managers and should be observed, copied, and imitated by employees.

Discussion

Critical Analysis

Taking in consideration Albert Bandura's theory of Social Learning, and its four steps of implementing the SLT, organizations are given a manual guide to enhance and extract from its employees' behaviors and attitudes

that they desire. This is a concept that can be used as a tool by organizational psychologists and HR individuals, that if applied it should generate anticipated results and guided performance outcomes. It is important to consider that this concept should be applied with regard to several prerequisites, for instance respecting ethical and moral rules, and ensure that employees are treated respectfully. Our social environment plays a major role in our personal and professional life, making the impact of our peers and our surroundings significant. This systematic review aimed to support the idea that whether leaders, employers, managers, or supervisors demand from their employees and their team to work in a goal-oriented environment and with determined behavior, they, themselves ought to behave in a respective way. This way the role of the managers and higher-level employees becomes more impactful and responsible, that influences the performance of a large group of the workforce. Similarly, this suggests that if leaders guide their employees with a vision and they behave with a team-spirit, the results would be similar to this attitude.

Nonetheless, it is crucial to consider that human behavior is a quite complex construct that is not determined by solely our social environment or our role models (e.g., parents, teachers, employers). Human behavior is shaped by several factors throughout our lives, by combining our nature and our nurture characteristics and the incentives in our social environment. Our behavior cannot be completely explained by our actions and our attitudes, it can constantly change and be affected by various aspects of our habits and everyday stimuli.

Future Research

Some suggestions for future research would be to consider some individual psychological traits, for instance our mediation of trusting others (Wu, Hsu, & Yeh, 2009), our eagerness to be influenced and guided and our tendency to rebelliousness. Other inducements for future researchers would be to study the different types of leadership, for instance transformational leadership or the dark triad types of leadership and management and the effects of SLT in each condition.

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