

LATERAL SOCIAL INFLUENCES IN ORGANIZATIONS: COWORKER SUPPORT

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Abstract: *The need for relationships is a fundamental human need that, together with the need for autonomy and competence, determines the level of efficiency and performance of the individual at work. Interpersonal relationships create the social climate at the workplace; it has a significant influence on the psychological comfort of the employees, supporting them in carrying out their tasks and protecting them from the possible harmful effects of multiple or excessive demands. The relationships with co-workers that can be classified into two large categories: coworker support and coworker antagonism. In this paper we present a set of fundamental information about coworker support which can manifest as instrumental support (informational or behavioral) or affective support. It can influence employee's role perceptions, work attitudes and effectiveness, and organizational citizenship behaviors, but it can also induce negative phenomena such as counterproductive behaviors and certain forms of withdrawal. In modern organizations, coworker support can also manifest as a non-traditional form of mentoring based on “development networks” that are made up of sets of relationships with people who show interest and act so that an individual advance in his career, providing him with assistance in multiple and varied directions.*

Keywords: interpersonal relationships, coworker support, developmental network

1. Interpersonal relationships

Interpersonal relations are the main, fundamental form of manifestation of *social relations*. D. Cristea defines interpersonal relationships as follows: “those direct and reciprocal interactions between people, in which there is a conscious and direct psychological involvement” [1].

Interpersonal relationships are psychological, direct, conscious and reciprocal relationships, but they are not necessarily symmetrical from the point of view of the psychological structures involved, of their intensity and significance for each of those involved.

The psychological nature of the relationship results from the fact that those involved come with their own psychological structure (temperament, motivation,

affectivity, cognition, personality, character, experience, etc.). Through the interaction of the psychical structures a relational environment can be built, with varied characteristics in terms of the processes that take place inside it.

Within social groups of various sizes, systems of interpersonal relationships are built; they can be *positive* (open, stimulating, creative, tolerant, based on communication and support), *negative* (based on manipulation, aggressiveness, mistrust, competition) or *mixed*, in which both positive and negative relationships are manifested.

The conscious nature of the relationship requires that individuals pay attention to and be concerned with the existence, qualities and needs of the other and also

invest time and energy in building, preserving and improving the relationship.

The direct feature refers to the fact that these relationships are “face to face” and involve minimal perceptual contact between individuals. The existence of this minimal contact differentiates interpersonal relationships from other types of relationships that are mediated - they take place either through the telephone or the Internet, or through other people (such as hierarchical relationships, for example).

To the characteristics described above one can add *the ethical nature* of the relationship, that is its development in accordance with the ethical and moral principles accepted and promoted by the social framework in which it manifests itself, as well as *the formative nature* according to which each relationship has the ability to mirror the characteristics and behaviors of individuals who thus get to know each other better, having the chance to transform and shape themselves in accordance with the accepted social models. *Interpersonal relationships* are characterized by *repeated interactions, patterned over time* and, consequently, *enduring*. They are characterized by a sense of connection that can vary in intensity; as a rule, the stronger and the more emotionally charged it is, the closer the connection between the people involved in the relationship.

Workplace relationships refer to all relationships in which the employee involves while performing their work and thus include *superior-subordinate relationships, coworker relationships, workplace friendships, romantic relationships, relationships with customers/beneficiaries* [2].

2. Coworker Relationships

Coworker relationships refer to relationships between employees on the same hierarchical level, who do not have formal authority over each other. Three such types of relationships are described in the specialized literature [3]:

- a. *The informational relationship* - manifests itself at a superficial level where communication is reduced to the exchange of information related to tasks and responsibilities at work and the level of intimacy, self-disclosure and trust is low; through this type of relationship, exchange of information at the workplace, organizational socialization, and knowledge management take place while organizational networks are built;
- b. *The collegial relationship* - is characterized by a moderate level of trust, intimacy, emotional support and self-disclosure; the topics discussed in such a relationship are varied, being related to work but also to personal life, and the coworkers involved combine the roles of colleagues and friends; through this type of relationship, career development strategies are shared, work-related feedback is provided, recognition is given for professional achievements, friendships are created;
- c. *The special collegial relationship* (friendship at work) is characterized by a high level of trust, intimacy, self-disclosure, emotional support and friendship, and the communication between the people involved in this type of relationship contains practically topics from all fields of professional and personal life; this type of relationship provides a sense of interpersonal confirmation, personal feedback, and long-lasting friendship.

According to P.M. Sias [4] coworker relationships have four important functions both for the individuals involved and for the organization. The functions are the following:

- a. Mentorship
- b. Exchange of information
- c. Exercising power, control and influence
- d. Social support

According to D.S. Chiaburu and D.A. Harrison, interactions between colleagues are the basis of lateral influence relationships and vary in terms of “*valence*, *content*, and *severity*, and... *social intensity* of the task environment” [5]. These interactions can take two main forms:

- a) *coworker support*: positively valenced coworker influence manifested as “the provision of desirable resources to a focal employee, including task-directed helping ... coworker mentoring ... and friendliness or positive affect...” [6]
- b) *coworker antagonism*: negatively valenced coworker influence manifested as “the enactment of unwelcome, undesirable or disdained behaviors towards the focal employee, such as incivility ... social undermining ... and interpersonal abuse” [7].

Social support refers to verbal and nonverbal communication between a receiver and a sender that reduces the uncertainty about a situation, person, or relationship and increases the perception of control over one’s life. It can be offered both formally and informally.

The research in the field refers to three primary types of social support:

- a) *instrumental support*: it consists of *behavioral support*, which refers to the provision of services and material assistance, being the most tangible form of help, and of *informational support*, which involves the provision of useful, correct and timely information and advice;
- b) *emotional support*: involves offering consolation or emotional release to a colleague, helping him or her overcome difficult professional or personal moments; this type of support generates expressive relationships at the workplace and its effects go beyond the level of dyadic relationships, because the employee who feels emotionally supported by colleagues will in turn support others,

generating over time a reinforcing cycle that will manifest itself as job satisfaction and commitment to the organization [8].

Coworker support influences *role perceptions* in organizations. The social role is the set of behaviors expected by others from a person who holds a certain position in a social group. Coworkers can provide the informational and behavioral support for some of the activities a person performs at work and discourage him/her for others, thus shaping their belief system and behaviors related to the role they hold. In this way, collegial support reduces *role ambiguity*, thus reducing the tension generated by the uncertainty and the unpredictability associated with the outcomes of one’s behavior and the possible reactions of others to these outcomes. It also reduces the frequency and intensity of *role conflict* and of *role overload* through the information that can facilitate task prioritizing and through emotional support for those who feel overwhelmed by role demands.

Coworker support influences *individual work attitudes* such as job satisfaction, job involvement, and organizational commitment, because a pleasant social environment at the workplace provides support in carrying out tasks, accelerates identification with one’s own role and creates loyalty to the workplace.

Coworker support can influence *individual effectiveness* by influencing its positive elements such as task performance because it facilitates social transactions between colleagues who thus support each other through information and actions that help them achieve their goals and develop their skills. Another significant effect is manifested on *organizational citizenship behaviors* because employees tend to respond to the actions of others in accordance with the norm of reciprocity, and, therefore, in a positive work climate, employees tend to engage in positive interactions to a greater extent than in negative interactions. If perpetuated over

time, the effects of this type of behavior influence the entire organization.

On the other hand, *coworker support* can also intensify negative phenomena within the organization. For example, employees can obtain from colleagues information about how much and how others work in the organization, a fact that can be followed by certain forms of *withdrawal* (psychological detachment, effort reduction, absenteeism, intention to quit and turnover) or by *counterproductive behaviors* (deviant, anti-social, uncivil, and socially undermining behaviors) [9][10].

Coworker support can also manifest itself as a modern form of mentoring. P.M. Sias [11] believes that in modern organizations the classic mentoring relationship between a younger protégé and a more senior and experienced mentor can be replaced by less traditional and more accessible alternatives. An employee can build relationships from all three types described above forming in this way a “development network” made up of a set of relationships with people who show interest and act for him to advance in his career [12] by providing him assistance in his career development through provision of resources either instrumental – support in promotion committees, advice on career strategies, etc. – or personal development – socialization, social support, learning, etc. [13] K.E. Kram and L.A. Isabella believe that in the modern society (especially after the Covid-19 pandemic, we would add) we must expect a “increasing variance in what we call “developmental network diversity”: the range of social systems (e.g., community, employment, school) from which individuals draw mentoring support. Further, given the changing nature of work itself, we expect to find increasing variance in the amount of communication, emotional closeness, and level of reciprocity experienced in developmental relationships today – “developmental relationship strength”. These two dimensions - developmental network diversity and developmental relationship strength - form the basis of the typology of developmental

networks that we introduce. [...] By focusing on these two dimensions and, more generally, by integrating social network research with prior mentoring research, we extend the mentoring literature beyond its traditional dyadic focus to emphasize the importance of multiple developmental relationships. We call this new approach to mentoring at work a “developmental network perspective” [14]. There is much current research that analyzes the effects of coworker support on variables related to employee behaviors and attitudes at work.

For example, in the study on a group of flight attendants, N. Talebzadeh and O.M. Karatepe [15] found that the relationship between coworker social support, job satisfaction, and in-role performance was totally mediated by work engagement, while the relationship between coworker social support, creative performance and extra-role performance was partially mediated by employees’ work engagement. I.I. Pelin and C. Osoian [16] identified a significant positive relationship between coworkers’ support and interpersonal organizational citizenship behavior (OCB-I), but not between coworkers’ support and task performance.

R. Kmiecik [17] showed that coworker support had a protective effect against voluntary turnover intentions in the case of a sample of IT specialists, but the effect was not direct; it was fully mediated by affective organizational commitment.

The results of two studies carried out by L.R. Norling and W.J. Chopik on a group of working adults indicated that “coworker support was associated with a more positive work environment, less work-life conflict, more work-life enhancement, lower burnout, higher job satisfaction, and lower turnover intentions. More positive work environments and reduced burnout mediated the associations between coworker support and each outcome for the majority of cases” [18].

In the study made by H. Sigursteinsdottir and F.B. Karlsdottir, social support

correlated moderately but positively with employee job satisfaction and weakly but negatively with bullying at work [19].

H. Wang and T. Tang [20] showed that coworker support diminishes the negative effects of daily abusive supervision on employee's daily negative emotions.

M. E. Zeijen, P. Petrou and A.B. Bakker [21] works on developing a dyadic model of workplace interactions to highlight how employees support each other on a daily basis. Based on multilevel analyses carried out on 123 dyads, these authors find that the support offered to a colleague relates positively to the supporter's engagement and this relationship becomes even stronger when the support is offered to a receiver with a sufficiently high level of commitment. Also, the provider will continue to provide support if the receiver, in their turn, provides support. These results indicate that the assumptions of social exchange theory regarding employees' workplace behaviors can be identified in their daily interactions.

3. Conclusion

Starting from a systematic literature review, A. D. Fadhira and J. Suyono [22] propose a set of future research directions of this concept, including the following:

- analysis of the influence that the presence of individualistic employees has on the support provided by or to coworkers;
- identifying the most significant variables involved in understanding the concept (including mediating or moderating variables) and building explanatory models;
- assessment of the impact of organizational culture on coworker support;
- analysis of the effects of coworker support in different industry sectors.

Social support at work is dependent on the quality of relationships that employees have with their coworkers: the greater the social dimensions of jobs or occupations, the greater its importance. It ensures the reduction of the level of general stress and anxiety in the workplace and builds an environment in which employees can develop personally and professionally.

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