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Prosocial Behaviors: Their Motivations and Impacts on Organizational Culture

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Abstract

According to the International Corrupt Perceptions Index 2017, more than six billion people are living in countries that are plagued by corruption (International Corrupt Perceptions Index, 2017). In an altruistic model of leadership, leaders act with the express intent of helping other people (Johnson, 2015). Within this model, good works manifest themselves as prosocial behaviors or “voluntary behavior(s) intended to benefit another and consisting of actions that benefit others or society” (Schminke, Arnaud, & Taylor, 2014, p. 730). These prosocial behaviors can create collaborative and inspirational environments (Axelsson & Axelsson, 2009), facilitate collectivism (Clarkson, 2014), and contribute to the long-term sustainability of an organization (Furnham, Treglown, Hyde, & Trickey, 2016). Leaders can nurture an altruistic environment in their organizations by motivating employees to participate in prosocial behaviors (Mallén, Chiva, Alegre, & Guinot, 2014). This article introduces the altruistic approach to leadership, explores prosocial behaviors, examines motivations for prosocial behaviors, and investigates how leaders can nurture benevolent cultures in their organizations by encouraging employees to demonstrate altruism and prosocial behaviors. Specifically, this article explores the impacts of prosocial behaviors on organizational culture.

Introduction

According to the International Corrupt Perceptions Index 2017, more than six billion people are living in countries that are plagued by corruption (International Corrupt Perceptions Index, 2017). In an altruistic model of leadership, leaders act with the express intent of helping other people (Johnson, 2015). Within this model, good works manifest themselves as prosocial behaviors, which are “voluntary behavior(s) intended to benefit another and consisting of actions that benefit others or society” (Schminke et al., 2014, p. 730). These prosocial behaviors can create collaborative and inspirational environments (Axelsson & Axelsson, 2009), facilitate collectivism (Clarkson, 2014), and contribute to the long-term sustainability of an organization (Furnham et al., 2016). Leaders can nurture an altruistic environment in their organizations by motivating employees to participate in prosocial behaviors (Mallén et al., 2014).

This article introduces the altruistic approach to leadership, explores prosocial behaviors, examines motivations for prosocial behaviors, and investigates how leaders can nurture

benevolent cultures in their organizations by encouraging employees to demonstrate altruism and prosocial behaviors. Specifically, this article explores the impacts of prosocial behaviors on organizational culture.

Altruism

Egoism involves acting in one's own self-interest (Avolio & Locke, 2002). In contrast, utilitarianism involves maximizing positive benefits for all of society (Furnham et al., 2016). Altruism presents yet another perspective, one that benefits any person or group other than the acting individual (Furnham et al., 2016). Altruism has been defined as "an ethical doctrine where the moral value of an individual's actions depends solely on the impact on other individuals, regardless of the consequences on the individual itself" (Furnham et al., 2016, p. 359). It has been found to contribute to the success and sustainability of organizations (Furnham et al., 2016), communities (Kjeldsen & Andersen, 2012), and society at large (Kjeldsen & Andersen, 2012; Weng, Fox, Hessenthaler, Stodola, & Davison, 2015). Also, it has the potential to facilitate cooperation, build trust, encourage the exchange of information, and improve internal communication in organizations (Mallén et al., 2014). Therefore, it is important for leaders to understand the concept of altruism and recognize its potential effects and impacts so they can capitalize on it to foster organizational sustainability.

Understanding Altruism

The concept of altruism has been studied extensively by researchers in psychology, sociobiology, political science, economics, and business (Singh & Krishnan, 2007). According to this literature, altruism involves "putting others' objectives before one's own" (Singh & Krishnan, 2007, p. 263), transcending and sacrificing individual interests for a common purpose (Axelsson & Axelsson, 2009), and demonstrating unselfish concern for others via constructive service (Reed, Vidaver-Cohen, & Colwell, 2011). In practice, this involves five basic tenets:

1. ***Providing benefits to other people or society at large*** (Avolio & Locke, 2002; Axelsson & Axelsson, 2009; Coetzer, Bussin, & Geldenhuys, 2017).
2. ***Seeking outcomes that provide the greatest benefit to others and acting toward that end*** (MacAskill, 2017).
3. ***Acting morally*** (Batson, 2008).
4. ***Acting in a voluntary and intentional manner without expectation of reward or benefit*** (Mallén et al., 2014).
5. ***Demonstrating selfless attitudes or self-sacrificial behaviors*** (Coetzer et al., 2017; Curry, Smith, & Robinson, 2009; Singh & Krishnan, 2007).

In short, altruism involves doing what is right and acting selflessly and solely in the interests of others. However, it is not sufficient for leaders to simply understand altruism. They must also recognize its potential impacts and be prepared to apply them for the benefit of their organizations or businesses.

Potential Impacts of Altruism

In our volatile, uncertain, and complex world, leaders must be cognizant of factors that can impact the viability and sustainability of their organizations. Altruism has proven to improve

overall organizational effectiveness, encourage corporate social responsibility, and facilitate higher employee job satisfaction (Furnham et al., 2016; Kjeldsen & Andersen, 2012). More importantly, Mallén et al. (2014) found altruistic behavior to be the strongest and most reliable predictor of operational success, including organizational performance. Therefore, altruism has the potential to not only enhance how an organization operates, but also increase employee retention rates, positively impact the entity's bottom line, and improve its long-term outlook.

Conversely, Guttentag (2009) warned of a shadow side to altruism, which is typically manifested as unrecognized or unintended consequences. For example, volunteer tourism is an altruistic activity where individuals utilize their vacation time and travel far distances to perform charitable good works for those in need and the less fortunate. Guttentag (2009) found that, while many of the volunteers were motivated, in part by altruism, the outcomes of their efforts were not entirely beneficial. Some negative impacts developed, including disruptions to local economies, poor work products, the introduction of cultural changes, and a callous disregard for the personal preferences of the local populations and the ultimate recipients of the altruistic acts. Therefore, portions of what was originally intended as an altruistic act of service became, at best, a nuisance. At worst, it became a burden on those whom the action was intended to benefit.

On an individual level, Furnham et al. (2016) found many positive characteristics correlating with altruism, including:

1. ***Interpersonal Sensitivity***: Trust, straightforwardness, compliance, modesty, and tender-mindedness.
2. ***Sociability***: Establishing and maintaining meaningful and effective relationships in the workplace.
3. ***Inquisitiveness***: Openness and a learning approach.

Furnham et al. (2016) suggested that managers seeking to build an altruistic culture in their organizations be mindful of these traits and take them into account as it relates to employee recruitment or other hiring activities.

However, Furnham et al. (2016) noted several characteristics associated with altruism, specifically those with misguided or hidden agendas, which have the potential to impact the organization negatively. For example, Furnham et al. (2016) notes that dependent individuals are typically driven by an eagerness to please. Therefore, they may also be highly altruistic. However, because of their dependent natures, these individuals may create unexpected negative impacts on the organization. For example, they are less likely to act independently and support subordinates. Similarly, Furnham et al. (2016) noted that some individuals can be led to demonstrate false altruism (or altruistic behaviors with insincere motivations). These types of individuals have the potential to disrupt employee collaboration in the work environment. Therefore, they reflect weaknesses associated with altruism.

Consequently, while altruism has been found to be the most reliable predictor of operational success, leaders must also recognize and account for its potential negative impacts on their organizations. Nevertheless, the potential, positive consequences of altruism provide sufficient incentive for leaders to not only understand altruism but also appreciate how to facilitate it in their organizations and cultivate organizational success and sustainability.

Prosocial Behavior

Prosocial behavior, also known as organizational citizenship behavior (Mitonga-Monga & Cilliers, 2016), can be defined as acts that are beneficial to other people (Kjeldsen & Andersen, 2012). They are typically manifested in daily activities, including charitable donations, community service, teamwork behavior in the workplace, and participation in research or medical trials (Meier, 2006). According to Mallén et al. (2014), leaders who demonstrate altruism toward their employees encourage prosocial behaviors in and between individual team members. Furthermore, Clarkson (2014) argued that prosocial behaviors encourage and facilitate collectivism in an organization. Ultimately, that collectivism promotes additional prosocial behaviors. Therefore, altruistic leaders have the potential to demonstrate prosocial behaviors. This can help develop collectivism in an organization. This collectivism facilitates an altruistic culture in the organization and contributes to the enterprises' long-term sustainability. To nurture an altruistic culture that will contribute to organizational viability, leaders must understand how to motivate prosocial behaviors and cultivate collectivism in team members.

Mitonga-Monga and Cilliers (2016) identified five prosocial behaviors in the workplace:

1. ***Altruistic Helping***: Employees who are willing to assist coworkers with heavy workloads, support them in times of personal challenges, and orient new employees to the organization (Mitonga-Monga & Cilliers, 2016).
2. ***Conscientiousness***: Employees who exceed the minimum requirements of diligence, efficiency, accuracy, and commitment in their job roles (Mitonga-Monga & Cilliers, 2016).
3. ***Courtesy***: Employees who seek to avoid potential personality conflicts and ensure the rights of associates are respected and maintained (Mitonga-Monga & Cilliers, 2016).
4. ***Sportsmanship***: Employees who work to maintain strong relationships with coworkers (Mitonga-Monga & Cilliers, 2016).
5. ***Civic Virtue***: Employees who demonstrate organizational commitment by going above and beyond their job roles by participating in voluntary meetings, attending social functions, and seeking out organizational communications (Mitonga-Monga & Cilliers, 2016).

To nurture altruistic cultures in their organizations, leaders must identify employees and candidates who reflect the prosocial behaviors of altruistic helping, conscientiousness, courtesy, sportsmanship, and civic virtue. They must then be intentional about motivating those employees to exhibit these behaviors in their departments.

Motivations to Prosocial Behaviors

Prosocial motivation is the desire to positively influence both other people (Castanheira, Chambel, Lopes, & Oliveira-Cruz, 2016; Kjeldsen & Andersen, 2012) and society (Kjeldsen & Andersen, 2012). The motivation to demonstrate prosocial behaviors can be influenced by contextual factors, including external cues, internal drivers, and hidden agendas.

Extrinsic Motivations and Rewards: Extrinsic motivations for prosocial behaviors range from organizational benefits to personal rewards. For example, Cho and Perry (2008) found that setting an organizational goal can serve as sufficient motivation for an individual to demonstrate prosocial behaviors. Similarly, improved organizational performance and

learning (Mallén et al., 2014), individual follower motivation (Reed et al., 2011), and increased employee performance (Reed et al., 2011) are also prosocial behavior motivations with significant organizational benefits.

On an individual level, some leaders have demonstrated prosocial behaviors to enhance their managerial performance ratings (Mallén et al., 2014). Others have utilized the behaviors to improve how followers perceived their leadership effectiveness (Moss & Barbuto, 2010) and “raise attributions of charisma among followers” (Singh & Krishnan, 2007, p. 271). Similarly, researchers attribute motivations for prosocial behaviors to personal reputation (Malik, 2015), self-esteem (Moss & Barbuto, 2010), presenting positive personal traits (Meier, 2006), family influences (Malik, 2015), aspirations for mental and physical well-being (Weng et al., 2015), and individual job satisfaction (Kjeldsen & Andersen, 2012).

As it relates to material or financial rewards, the literature is contradictory. For example, Luchtenberg, Maeckelberghe, Locock, Powell, and Verhagen (2015) found that a financial award was effective at motivating young people toward a prosocial behavior (i.e., participating in a clinical trial). In contrast, Warneken and Tomasello (2009, p. 1787) concluded that “material awards served to diminish” intrinsic motivation in young children, who they identify as having a natural tendency to altruism and prosocial behavior (i.e., participating in a helping behavior).

Therefore, both material and noneconomic drivers can externally motivate prosocial behaviors. However, Cho and Perry (2012, p. 384) determined “intrinsic motivation may be more effective than extrinsic motivation.” As such, leaders must be aware of the potential intrinsic motivators for prosocial behaviors.

Intrinsic Motivations and Benefits. Intrinsic motivations to prosocial behaviors primarily stem from an individual’s desire to help other people, including promoting the well-being of others (Meier, 2006), relieving the pain of others (Ramsey, 2015), and assisting others (Batson, Duncan, Ackerman, Buckley, & Birch, 1981; Jansen, 2009; Luchtenberg et al., 2015; Malik, 2015; Warneken & Tomasello, 2008). Barasch, Levine, Berman, and Small (2014) concluded that emotion can serve as a motivating factor for prosocial behavior. Batson (2010) and Weng et al. (2015) concurred; they attributed prosocial behaviors to the emotions of empathy and compassion.

In addition to feelings of empathy and compassion, individuals may be driven to prosocial behavior due to:

1. ***Personal Fulfillment.*** Specifically, “individuals are intrinsically motivated when they seek enjoyment, interest, satisfaction of curiosity, self-expression, or personal challenge in the work” (Cho & Perry, 2012, p. 384)
2. ***Religious Expression.*** Out of moral duty or to benefit society (Luchtenberget et al., 2015; Malik, 2015)

Therefore, individuals are driven to exhibit prosocial behaviors to help others, for personal fulfillment, or out of religious, moral, or civic duties. However, extrinsic rewards have the potential to suppress intrinsic motivation (Cho & Perry, 2008). They may also produce ulterior motives with nonaltruistic intentions.

Ulterior Motives: The practicality of altruism has been widely debated as to whether an individual's actions can be fully altruistic. An ulterior motive example is an actor who receives a benefit in the form of pleasure or buffeted self-esteem as a result of a selfless deed (Batson, 2008; Moss & Barbuto, 2010). While “young children are naturally altruistic” (Warneken & Tomasello, 2009, p. 456), as humans age they become more aware of the inherent benefits associated with prosocial behaviors and the potential of ulterior motives (Heyman, Barner, Heumann, & Schenck, 2014; Warneken & Tomasello, 2009). That is why it becomes more difficult to discern prosocial behavior from selfish behavior and the altruistic individual from the opportunistic.

Ultimately, “social perceivers expect others to be guided by self-interest” (Crichter & Dunning, 2011). Berman et al. (2015) noted there is social pressure to be humble about prosocial behaviors and that people discount prosocial behaviors that produce benefits or gains for the actor. As such, individuals are more receptive and responsive to actors demonstrating altruistic prosocial behaviors as opposed to those experiencing the potential benefits of those same actions (Heyman et al., 2014). Therefore, while encouraging prosocial behaviors is central to cultivating an altruistic organizational culture, leaders must also realize that actors may be operating with ulterior motives. Even the most altruistic, prosocial behavior may be viewed by others with skepticism. That is why it is important for leaders to cultivate collectivism and build a culture that supports, respects, and appreciates prosocial behaviors.

Cultivating Collectivism to Create a Benevolent Culture

To capitalize on the opportunities presented by an altruistic organizational culture, leaders must maximize prosocial behaviors to cultivate collectivism. Collectivism involves benefitting a group and ensuring the ultimate welfare of the complete group (Batson, 2008). Researchers have identified conditions conducive to collective cultures. They include:

1. Establishing a higher-purpose vision (Coetzer et al., 2017)
2. Encouraging employees to act in a way that produces overall benefits and not individual advantages (Clarkson, 2014)
3. Fostering a group identity (Batson, 2008)
4. Motivating subordinates to relinquish professional territories in deference to inter-professional collaboration (Axelsson & Axelsson, 2009).

According to Clarkson (2014), leaders may facilitate collectivism by establishing organizational social norms where leaders teach members that prosocial behaviors are essential to the overall operation of the group. Leaders can apply these tactics to establish conditions that facilitate a collectivistic approach and encourage prosocial behaviors in their organizations. Several leadership styles are conducive to encouraging prosocial behaviors and ultimately, facilitating an altruistic organizational culture.

Altruism and Prosocial Behaviors in Leadership

Altruism is a central component to servant, authentic, spiritual (Mallén et al., 2014), and transformational leadership styles (Reed et al., 2011) and each is associated with specific prosocial behaviors.

Servant Leadership. Altruism is essential to servant leadership (Coetzer et al., 2014). Servant leaders demonstrate altruism through prosocial behaviors, like emotional healing and organizational stewardship (Parris & Peachey, 2012).

Authentic Leadership. In authentic leadership, altruistic leaders demonstrate prosocial behaviors through transparency (Steffens Mols, Haslam, & Okimoto, 2016), trust (Feng, 2016), and internalized moral perspective (Steffens et al., 2016). Furthermore, to successfully encourage prosocial behaviors in their followers, authentic leaders must develop a deep understanding of their own motivations, challenges, opportunities, and beliefs driving their own prosocial behaviors.

Spiritual Leadership. In spiritual leadership, altruistic leaders exhibit prosocial behaviors by demonstrating honesty, compassion, justice, courage, humility (Mallén et al., 2014), vision, hope, faith, spiritual well-being, and the values of altruistic love (Wang & Hackett, 2015).

Transformational Leadership. In transformational leadership, altruistic leaders demonstrate prosocial behaviors through vision, values, and intellectual stimulation (Reed et al., 2011), which help produce a collective identity for the organization (Singh & Krishnan, 2007).

An overarching element that encompasses these leadership styles is visioning. Visioning enables organizations to navigate the future by mapping out where they want to go, watching for strategic shifts in directions, and investigating the impacts of incremental changes. Altruistic leaders can utilize visioning to prepare organizational goals and articulate a vision to empower, engage, and inspire followers (Denis, Kisfalvi, Langley, & Rouleau, 2011) to prosocial actions, ultimately to improve the group's long-term sustainability and viability.

Therefore, elements of altruism can be found in many forms of positive leadership. As such, practitioners of servant, authentic, spiritual, and transformational leadership, among others, can utilize various prosocial behaviors associated with their individual leadership styles to facilitate an altruistic culture within their organizations.

Application: Utilizing Prosocial Behaviors to Nurture an Altruistic Culture

According to Mallén et al. (2014), managers can nurture an altruistic culture in their organizations by encouraging prosocial behaviors among their employees. They stated, "For prosocial behavior, the institutional environment in which people decide to contribute to public goods is crucial" (Meier, 2006, p. 13). The following prosocial behaviors have been identified, which encourage overall altruism within an organization:

1. ***Helping.*** In a helping culture, employees are motivated to reduce challenges or increase benefits for their coworkers with the express intent of improving the welfare of others in the organization (Batson et al., 1981). Employees participate in a helping culture by assisting others with heavy workloads, orienting new employees, and alleviating the pressure experienced by those with significant personal challenges (Singh & Krishnan, 2007). Leaders can facilitate a helping culture in their organizations by encouraging collaboration and fostering or rewarding citizenship behavior (Parris & Peachey, 2012).

2. **Trusting:** According to Axelsson and Axelsson (2009), a trusting culture requires a high level of trust between leaders and followers. They argued that this type of culture enables a long-term perspective, compromise, and bending the rules, if necessary, in the interest of collaboration. Trusting cultures have been found to encourage prosocial motivation, job performance, and employee satisfaction (Cho & Perry, 2008).
3. **Fulfilling:** Leaders in a fulfilling culture create “an environment that allows employees to feel they are contributing” (Kjeldsen & Andersen, 2012, p. 171) to a greater goal or a higher purpose. This type of culture requires competent leaders who enact fair practices and enhance employees’ feelings of autonomy, capability, and personal responsibility (Clarkson, 2014). To foster a fulfilling culture, leaders should provide meaningful work (Cho & Perry, 2008), connect employees to the beneficiaries of their efforts (Castanheira et al., 2016), establish a vision and core values for the organization (Castanheira et al., 2016), and provide opportunities to perform altruistic acts (Castanheira et al., 2016).

Therefore, prosocial behaviors can be utilized as a foundation to build helping, trusting, and fulfilling environments, which subsequently contribute to an overall, altruistic culture for the organization. In contrast however, Vigoda-Gadot (2006) cautioned that leader-facilitated altruism can lead to compulsory prosocial behaviors among followers. The author suggested these forced behaviors may lead to professional burn out, higher levels of stress, decreased job satisfaction, lower levels of innovation, and higher levels of negligence. Ultimately, Vigoda-Gadot (2006) concluded that leader-facilitated altruistic behaviors can produce destructive results that are counterproductive to leaders’ intents. While altruism and the motivations of prosocial behaviors have been studied widely, research on the topics is far from exhausted.

Next Steps

Researchers have extensively debated the practicality of altruism and whether it is realistically possible for an individual to be authentically altruistic. This debate is because, as Avolio and Locke (2002) argued, there is an inherent benefit (a good feeling or a bolstered self-esteem) when acting to benefit someone else. However, other researchers simply define altruism as an action that benefits others without the *expectation* of a reward (Warneken & Tomasello, 2009). Therefore, there is an opportunity for additional research investigating the altruistic nature of prosocial behaviors, which produce a positive, yet unintended, benefit to the actor.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this article investigated altruism in the context of leadership. It studied how leaders can promote prosocial behaviors to facilitate collectivism. It also explored the extrinsic, intrinsic, and ulterior motivations for prosocial behaviors. Lastly, the author examined how leaders can build altruistic cultures in their organizations by demonstrating and encouraging prosocial behaviors. Curry et al. (2009, p. 2) cited Curry and Robinson as stating, “altruism is the purest form of caring—selfless and non-contingent upon reward—and thus a predecessor of prosocial cognitions and behaviors.” The author concludes that altruistic leaders can model prosocial behaviors for employees thereby nurturing a

collectivist environment to create an altruistic culture. This type of culture can ultimately help promote the long-term viability and sustainability of their organizations.

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