

The Leader–Subordinate Fit and Its Relationship to Performance and Burnout

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to determine if leader-subordinate congruence influences leaders' and subordinates' experience of burnout and the subordinate's satisfaction with the leader's work performance. Surprisingly, the results supported neither attraction selection attrition nor person–person fit theory. However, according to the results, the greater the difference between the leader's and subordinate's personalities, the more satisfied the subordinate was with the leader's performance. The results indicate that this matter should be considered in the course of recruitment to ensure organizations do not become too homogenous. The results also appear to offer some weak support to the suggestion that the grounds for effective performance and job satisfaction could differ because the leader–subordinate fit did not correlate significantly to either the leader's or the subordinate's experience of burnout.

Keywords: person-person fit, leader, personality, performance, burnout

1. Introduction

Each year millions of people participate in a personal assessment process. The purpose of personal assessments is to provide information to help us to predict future performance and to evaluate a person's resources. These evaluations emphasize personality because a considerable body of research indicates that personal characteristics predict performance far better than for example professional, technical, or formal qualifications (Hunter & Hunter, 1984). However, in recent years research has mainly focused on individual test methods and their ability to predict performance rather than studying the background theories of recruitment.

Models of fit or congruence have acquired a significant position in the field of industrial and organizational psychology and human resources management (Saks & Ashforth, 1997; Schneider, 2001). The theory of fit is used particularly in the employee selection context (Sekiguchi, 2004). This study is particularly interested in the question of whether it is better that the personality traits of leaders and subordinates match or differ, and the effects of such a fit or misfit. The purpose of this research is to determine if the congruence of leader and subordinate have an effect on burnout among the leaders and the subordinates in an organization, and on the subordinate's satisfaction with the leader's performance. The theoretical framework is the person–environment (PE) fit model and this study focuses on those sub-dimensions of PE fit that could give us more information on the leader's recruitment choices. The aim is to find data that could be used in the decision-making process when building effective organizations.

1.1. The Theory of Fit

The background of fit theory can be found in Schneider's (1987) attraction–selection–attrition (ASA) framework. The framework suggests individuals seek out the situations they are attracted to. Then individuals choose to be part of this situation and remain if they are a good fit with the situation, or leave if they are not (Schneider, 1987). Because of this attraction, selection, and attrition process, a certain homogeneity in terms of personal characteristics (e.g., values and personality) will occur over the years in groups or organizations (Schneider, Goldstein, & Smith, 1995).

Although, Schneider's ASA theory has received support in empirical research (e.g., Schneider, Smith, Taylor, and Fleenor, 1998), it has also been criticized.

According to ASA theory “the people make the place” (Schneider, 1987) whereas for example the group effects (Blau 1960; Merton & Kitt, 1950) and organization culture theories (Levinthal & March 1993; Schein, 1992) suggest that the group or an organization is more than the aggregate of attributes of its members. Therefore the ASA framework may be overly simplistic. However, there is some evidence that eventually organizations become very homogeneous because people have similar personal characteristics (Schneider et al., 1995; Schneider et al., 1998). For example Schneider, Smith, Taylor, and Fleenor (1998) report in their study that managers were more similar within organizations than across organizations or industries.

This kind of homogeneity in organizations may have both positive and negative consequences (Jackson, 1992; Richard, 2000; Staples & Zhao, 2006). According to one of the latest studies (Schneider, Kristof, Goldstein, & Smith, 1998), homogeneity has positive consequences, including higher levels of satisfaction, improved communication and cooperation, and fewer interpersonal conflicts. It has also been argued that in very homogeneous organizations, the decision making is very predictable and that it is difficult to adapt to the demands of the environment (Walsh & Holland, 1992).

Originally researchers did not differentiate between the various types of fit, but during the past 20 years, studies have increasingly focused on different forms of fit or congruence (Kristof-Brown, Zimmerman, & Johnson, 2005). The research has traditionally focused on PE fit, which is defined as the match between a person and the environment (Kristof, 1996). During these past two decades, researchers have found other sub-dimensions of PE fit. However the person–organization (PO) fit and person–job (PJ) fit, are considered to be the most influential views in employee selection studies (Sekiguchi, 2004). The concept of PO fit is defined as the match between a person and the organization (Kristof, 1996). PJ fit refers to the congruence between the abilities of a person and the demands of their job (Edwards, 1991).

The employee selection process has traditionally focused on achieving PJ fit (Sekiguchi, 2004). However there are many researchers (for example, Behling, 1998; Borman & Motiwildo, 1993; Kristof, 1996; Montgomery, 1996) who feel that other types of fit, especially the PO fit, is becoming more important. Research suggests therefore that organizations should hire people who share their values and visions (Bowen, Ledford, & Nathan, 1991). Although PJ fit plays an important role in recruitment, the current research suggests that the PO fit should also be considered in employee selection practices.

In 2000, Van Vianen suggested that there is a new sub-dimension to PO fit, which has been termed the person–person (PP) fit. According to Van Vianen (2000) PP fit is the “match between characteristics of people” (p. 117) (i.e., coworkers, subordinates, and supervisors). Van Vianen (2000) states the difference between PO and PP fit to be that PO fit relates to culture whereas PP fit relates to the shared endorsement of culture. In this study the PP fit represents the fit between the leader’s personality and the personality of the subordinate that works for that leader.

In the early years of fit research, it was not always clear which form of fit was being studied. Muchinsky and Monohan (1987) seem to have been the first scholars to realize that there are different forms of fit. Their study (1987) notes the sub-dimensions of fit as either complementary fit or supplementary fit. The difference between complementary and supplementary fit may be found in how the environment is defined. Complementary fit occurs when an individual’s characteristics match the demands of their environment (Muchinsky and Monohan, 1987). Supplementary fit occurs when an individual’s characteristics are similar to other individuals in the environment (Muchinsky and Monohan, 1987). People joining an environment fit into it because they are joining coworkers who have similar characteristics to their own. Therefore, that view of supplementary fit is also grounded in PP fit theory (Muchinsky and Monohan, 1987; Schneider et al., 1995) and that is also why this study focuses on supplementary fit.

1.2 Earlier Studies

In the past, studies stressed the value-based PO fit because of the stability of the characteristics of individuals and organizations. Those earlier studies examined the congruence between individual and organizational values (Boxx, Odom, & Dunn, 1991; Judge & Bretz, 1992; Posner, 1992); goal congruence with organizational leaders (Vancouver, Millsap & Peters, 1994; Vancouver & Schmitt, 1991); congruence between individual preferences and organizational systems and structures (Bretz, Ash & Dreher, 1989; Cable & Judge, 1994; Turban & Keon, 1993); and the match between individual personality characteristics and organizational climate (Bowen, et al., 1991) for example.

According to Ryan and Kristof-Brown (2003), the personality-based PO fit perhaps has an even stronger influence on an individual's attitudes and behaviors. That research suggests that personality is actually even more stable, more able to predict human behavior, and more visible to others than values are. Therefore this study focuses on the personality perspective.

1.2.1 Leader–Subordinate Fit and Job Satisfaction

Based on the theory of ASA, Schneider (1987) implies in her research that people have psychological reactions to fit (i.e., an attitude or behavior). The theory has led scholars to assume that those who experience a fit with their working environment may experience less stress and produce more positive work outcomes than those who experience a misfit. Bell (1990) also noted that incongruence is “psychological distress.” Furthermore, Meglino and Ravlin (1998) have suggested that experiencing fit, could cause people to experience less stress.

There are a few studies that support this theory. For example, Meglino, Ravlin, and Adkins (1989) have studied supervisor's and subordinate's value congruence and found that value congruence between a superior and subordinate predicts the subordinate's job satisfaction and commitment.

1.2.2 Leader–Subordinate Fit and Work Performance

According to Schein (1985), leader–subordinate congruence has a positive correlation with the performance of the subordinate. There are a few other studies that have also found this kind of relationship (Tsui & O'Reilly, 1989; Wexley et al., 1980). Hatfield and Huseman (1982) have reported that the congruence between a leader's and their subordinate's communication style was related to satisfaction with supervision, among other things. However, there are also contrasting results. For example, Meglino et al. (1989) have found a negative correlation between leader–subordinate congruence and the subordinate's performance.

1.2.3 Studies of Personality

There are only a few studies that have focused either on PP fit (cf. Van Vianen, 2000; Christiansen, Villanova & Mikulay, 1997) and/or personality (Sekiguchi, 2004).

Van Vianen (2000) is naturally one of those who have been studying the PP fit, and she has found it to be related to organizational commitment and level of intention to quit. Furthermore, Christiansen et al. (1997) studied PP fit from the perspective of political compatibility. They suggest that the person's preferences for political influence processes were related to satisfaction with their coworkers, among other things. Despite these studies focusing on the PP fit perspective, they did not take into account the personality factor.

One of the few studies on the personality perspective is that of Kristof-Brown, Barrick and Stevens (2005). The study suggested that people with high levels of extraversion feel more attraction to a team than other members who are introverted and that the opposite also applies. However, the research measured only the extravert versus introvert dimension, and the results suggested that actually the difference rather than the similarity was attractive to the team members.

2. Research Problems

This research seeks to discover the relationship between leader–subordinate fit and burnout among both leaders and subordinates. The study also hypothesizes a relationship between leader–subordinate congruence and the subordinate's satisfaction with the leader's job performance. The investigation will supply information that will help to assess whether a fit or misfit between a leader's and their subordinate's personalities at work would be most productive. There are only a few studies that have focused on PP fit and measured personality, so this study will provide a wealth of new information about this field. Because there are so few studies addressing this area, and because the results to date have been conflicting, the current research will feature tests conducted on a two-tailed basis. The research problems addressed in this study are:

- Q1: Is leader–subordinate fit associated with leaders' performance scores?

Based on ASA theory, the PP fit theory and earlier studies, it is assumed in this study that the leader–subordinate fit is positively associated with the leaders performance scores (Schneider, 1987; Van Vianen, 2000; Tsui & O'Reilly, 1989; Christiansen, Villanova, & Mikulay, 1997; Wexley et al, 1980; Hatfield & Huseman, 1982).

- Q2: Is leader–subordinate fit associated with burnout in leaders?
- Q3: Is leader–subordinate fit associated with burnout in subordinates?

Based on ASA theory, the PP fit theory and earlier studies, it is assumed in this study that the leader–subordinate fit is associated with burnout affecting both leaders and subordinates (Schneider, 1987; Bell, 1990; Meglino & Ravlin, 1998; Meglino et al., 1989).

3. Methods

The issue with research based on fit theory has been that the majority of studies have been non-quantitative, have not differentiated between various types of fit, or have focused on single types of fit (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005). There are also several different ways to measure fit. In recent research, especially that investigating perceived fit, fit has often been measured simply by asking people to what extent they believe a fit exists. This kind of direct way to measure fit has been criticized for confusing the independent effects of the person and the environment with their effect, and secondly because the data are based on human perceptions (Edwards, 1991; Caplan, 1987). Indirect fit has typically been measured by combining different measures into a single index (Edwards, 1994). However, the absolute value of difference scores and squared difference scores is only one option available to assess fit. This study focuses on objective fit because the source of P and E variables has been established in a range of research and because the fit has been calculated indirectly (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005)

3.1. Participants

Data were collected from a global manufacturing organization in Finland during 2010–2011. The researcher was embedded in the organization for a total of 10 months collecting data. All but two lower and middle level leaders participated in this research. The subordinates' names were arranged in alphabetical order and then every sixth employee was selected to report on their leader. For each leader, between three and six subordinates evaluated that leader's performance with the work personality inventory 360 tool (WOPI360). Five chosen subordinates were unavailable because they were on long-term sick leave, so the next employees on the list replaced them. 52 leaders participated in this research and there were 203 leader–subordinate dyads.

Because of the firm's manufacturing background, 95 % of the participants were male and only 5 % female. The age curve was, however, evenly distributed. The mean age was 41 years, with 51 % being 40 years old or younger and 49% being older than 40.

3.2 Methods and Study Variables

First, internal consistencies were computed for the scales. Cronbach's alpha values were over the 0.7 point usually considered to be an acceptable value. In the case of leader job burnout, the alpha was 0.86, and for subordinates' job burnout it was 0.88, and for the WOPI360 tool it was 0.99. In contrast, all the sum dimensions concerning the congruence, recorded alpha coefficient values of less than 0.7. The internal consistencies were 0.45 for congruence of achievement motives; 0.61 for congruence of *leadership* motives; 0.40 for congruence of *interaction* motives; and 0.23 for congruence of *thinking*. The congruence variables were initially derived by summing the single dimensions separately for leaders and subordinates (for example focusing), and then the absolute difference between the score of the leaders and subordinates was calculated. Therefore the result was the leadership–subordinate congruence concerning a single dimension (in the example above, focusing). After that step, the final sum dimensions were calculated by summing these single sum dimensions (for example congruence of focusing + congruence of competition = congruence of achievement motives). In spite of the low alpha values they can be considered acceptable because it is acceptable for values of newly developed scales to be under 0.7 (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994).

Personality and fit. Personality was measured by a standardized self-report questionnaire WOPI360 (Niitamo, 2010; Nederström and Niitamo, 2010). WOPI360 is based on the psychology of motivation (7 scales), thinking (4 scales) and attitudes (3 scales). Participants responded to the items on a dichotomous (True–False) scale (Niitamo, 2010). The inventory comprises 224 items with each of 14 scales measured by 14 items (Niitamo, 2010). These 14 dimensions are arranged along the five general competencies at work (Niitamo, 2010).

The concept of personality traits occupies a dominant position in the research literature and especially the “Big Five” framework. However the theory of the Big Five has also attracted some criticism. For example, McAdams (1995) argues that the Big Five explains only a small part of human personality and the traits are very easy to observe even in a stranger. Therefore it is important to understand that the motives and ways of thinking that the WOPI360 measures are more like regulators of behavioral consistencies.

In this study, the items are examined at the level of dimension sums rather than the level of single dimensions. These dimension sums are *achievement motives*, *leadership motives*, *interaction motives*, *thinking motives*, and *attitudes*. The first four dimensions were studied and calculated using the data from primary single dimensions. The fifth dimension sum—*attitudes*— consists of three separate attitudes and therefore does not create any sum dimension. The absolute difference between the subordinate's and leader's personality factors was calculated for these four dimension sums.

Burnout. Burnout was measured with the Maslach Burnout Inventory – General Scales (MBI-GS) (Maslach et al, 1996). The current research used the Finnish version that has been validated by Kalimo, Hakanen, and Toppinen-Tanner (2006). The MBI-GS consists of 16 items that are grouped. Items were scored on a 7-point frequency rating scale anchored with *never* (= 0) and *every day* (= 6). Burnout for instance was evaluated by the item, "I feel emotionally drained from my work."

Leader's Performance. Leader's performance was measured with the WOPI360 tool (Niitamo, 2010). WOPI360 is a multi-rater tool for the appraisal of competence resources and deficits (Niitamo, 2010). The leader's behavior was appraised with 45 standard questions. Questions were answered on a 7-point Likert scale anchored with *not at all descriptive* (= 0) and *very descriptive* (= 6). In this study only one rater group was used, the manager's direct subordinates, the number of which ranged from three to six for each manager.

3.3 Analysis

The data were analyzed using the SPSS 18.0 for Windows program. The associations between the leader-subordinate fit and leader's burnout, subordinate's burnout, and subordinate's satisfaction with the leader's performance were examined via the Pearson correlation.

4. Results

Table 1 presents the correlations found among the variables. As expected the leader-subordinate fit was associated with the leader's performance scores (Q1). However the correlation was not positive as expected but was in fact negative. The congruence of achievement ($r = -0.18$, $p < .05$), and thinking ($r = -0.14$, $p < .05$) were associated with the leader's performance. The bigger the difference between the subordinate's and the leader's congruence, the better the leader's performance was assessed to be. The highest correlation to the leader's performance was the interaction congruence ($r = -0.20$, $p < .01$). The greater the difference between the subordinate's and leader's motivations for interaction, the better the leader's performance was assessed to be. The congruence of leadership motivation had no significant correlation with the leader's performance.

In addition to leader-subordinate fit, the leader's ($r = -0.36$, $p < .01$) and subordinate's ($r = -0.28$, $p < .01$) burnout feelings associated with the leader's performance. The less the leader and subordinate experienced the feeling of burnout, the better the leader's performance was assessed to be.

The leader-subordinate fit was not significantly associated with either burnout among leaders (Q2) or among subordinates (Q3). The only significant correlation was between the leader-subordinate fit in leadership motivation and the leader's job satisfaction ($r = -0.15$, $p < .05$). The more similar the leader's and subordinate's leadership motivation was, the less likely the leader was to report experiencing burnout.

Table 1 here: Correlations between the leader-subordinate fit, burnout, and the leader's performance.

5. Discussion

The purpose of this research was to provide new information on the relatively new PP fit theory, and more specifically to discover if leader-subordinate fit is associated with burnout among leaders and subordinates, and also the subordinate's satisfaction with the leader's performance. ASA theory and the findings of earlier studies suggested that the study would find a similarity between leader's and subordinate's personalities to be associated with feelings of burnout among both leaders and subordinates, and would affect how the performance of the leaders was assessed.

The result did not generally support the ASA or PP fit theory that the more similar the supervisor is to the subordinate, the less they experience burnout, and the more the subordinate will be satisfied with the leader's work performance (Schneider, 1987; Van Vianen, 2000; Tsui & O'Reilly, 1989; Christiansen, Villanova, & Mikulay, 1997; Wexley et al, 1980; Hatfield & Huseman, 1982; Bell, 1990; Meglino & Ravlin, 1998; Meglino et al, 1989).

Instead, the results suggest that the more different the leader's and subordinate's personalities, the better the leader's performance is assessed to be. More specifically, congruence between a leader's and a subordinate's achievement motivation, interaction motivation, and thinking motivation was associated with positive leader performance. Based on these results it is likely that, at least in manufacturing organizations, having leaders and subordinates with personalities that are too similar may have a negative impact.

These results offer some support to the view that the demands of a leader position are different from those of a subordinate position, and therefore it is natural that the personalities of the leader and subordinate are also different. Earlier studies have largely focused on issues other than personality, for example, values (Boxx, Odom & Dunn, 1991; Judge & Bretz, 1992; Posner, 1992), organizational systems and structures (Bretz, Ash & Dreher, 1989; Cable & Judge, 1994; Turban & Keon, 1993), and organizational climate (Bowen, Ledford & Nathan, 1991). It seems the personality perspective may be a totally different thing. Ryan and Kristof-Brown (2003) suggest that this personality perspective should be the focus in PO fit research in the future, because actually personality is even more stable, able to predict human behavior, and more visible to others than values are. Although the cause and effect Relationship cannot be verified, based on the theory and the earlier knowledge of the stability of the personality, it can be assumed that there being differences between the leader's and subordinate's personalities does improve the leader's work performance.

The unexpected finding was that the leader-subordinate fit did not correlate significantly with burnout experienced by either leaders or subordinates (Schneider, 1987; Bell, 1990; Meglino & Ravlin, 1998; Meglino et al., 1989). The only significant correlation and the only result that supported the ASA and PP fit theory was the association between the leader's and subordinate's leadership motivation, and burnout experienced by leaders. The more similar the leader's and subordinate's leadership motivation, the less the leader experienced symptoms of burnout. One possible explanation for these results could be that this study was focusing on job satisfaction from the negative point of view. It does not necessarily mean that people do not experience job satisfaction if they are not suffering from burnout, and vice versa. The fact that almost all the participants (95%) were male may also have had an effect on the study's results.

The results also appear to offer some weak support to the suggestion that the basis for effective performance and job satisfaction could be different from each other. The leader-subordinate congruence did not have any associations with the subordinate's job satisfaction. In contrast, the more similar the leader's and subordinate's leadership motivation, the less the leader experienced burnout. This leadership motivation was the only motivation that had no significant correlation with the leader's performance and vice versa, the achievement, the interaction, and the thinking motivations did not have any significant correlation with the leader's job satisfaction. Moreover the motivation that did correlate with job satisfaction was negative, meaning that the similarity in personality between leader and subordinate produced a positive outcome. Congruence between leader and subordinate in contrast produced only negative outcomes in terms of assessed performance.

5.1 Limitations

When generalizing these results some limitations should be noted. The study is cross sectional so therefore does not support conclusions about the direction of causality. Moreover, 95% of the participants were male so these results should not be generalized to sectors where the gender balance among employees is more equal. It should also be noted that all the variables were based on self-assessment. Weaknesses of self-assessment can include it encouraging a socially desirable answering style or the respondent's being unwilling to answer some questions. For example, when measuring burnout, those who are suffering from severe burnout may protect themselves by reporting more minor symptoms of burnout than they actually feel. One important strength of this study is its sample size (N = 203), which makes its results statistically significant. Second, the survey response rate was extremely encouraging, with only two leaders and five subordinates unable to participate in the research.

5.2 Theoretical Implications and Future Studies

Surprisingly this research supported neither the ASA theory nor the PP fit theory (Schneider, 1987; Van Vianen, 2000). These results suggested that people may be more attracted to other things, for example organizational values or job tasks, than by personality and choose to stay in an organization for those reasons. Schneider's ASA theory has been criticized in the past on the grounds that it can be overly simplistic (Blau, 1960; Merton & Kitt, 1950; Levinthal & March, 1993; Schein, 1992).

According to the group effects (Blau 1960; Merton & Kitt, 1950) and organizational culture theories (Levinthal & March, 1993; Schein, 1992) the group or an organization is more than the aggregate of attributes of its members; whereas ASA theory suggests that “the people make the place” (Schneider, 1987). Another criticism of ASA theory revolves around its consequences, in that even if the attraction, selection, and attrition process ultimately produces homogeneity in personal characteristics (Schneider, Goldstein & Smith, 1995) it should not be concluded that such homogeneity will have only positive consequences (Walsh & Holland, 1992; Jackson, 1992; Richard, 2000; Staples & Zhao, 2006).

Overall, the theory of fit is still an interesting and important background theory for many human resource management processes, and particularly for the recruitment process. However, the results of research on the topic are inconsistent, and we cannot say anything for certain on the causality of these variables. Longitudinal studies would be required to confirm the cause and the effect relationship. Moreover because there has been some inconsistency in the results, there must be some variables which are either moderating or mediating these relationships.

Although the results were not as expected, they still indicate that PP fit does have a significant role to play in predicting leaders' work performance, and therefore this issue should be considered in the recruitment process to ensure that organizations do not become too homogenous. These results suggest that if firms want to improve the performance of their leaders and the satisfaction of those leaders' subordinates with the leaders' job performance, they should ensure that there is some heterogeneity between the personalities of the leader and the subordinate. It is also likely that leaders face different demands in the performance of their roles than subordinates do, and therefore their personalities should be different.

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Table 1: Correlations between the Leader–Subordinate Fit, Burnout and the Leader's Performance

	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.
1. Burnout, employee	1						
2. Burnout, leader	0.13	1					
3. Leader's performance	-0.28	-0.36	1				
4. FIT achievement	-0.04	-0.06	-0.18	1			
5. FIT leadership	-0.04	-0.15	0.09	0.21	1		
6. FIT Interaction	-0.08	0.05	-0.20	0.12	0.10	1	
7. FIT Thinking	0.12	0.01	-0.14	-0.08	0.01	0.02	1

|0.14 – 0.18| significant at the 0.05 level, |0.20 – 0.36| significant at the 0.01 level