Building employee commitment to the workplace is one important goal of human resource policies and practices. Research shows commitment has a positive effect on productivity, turnover and employees’ willingness to help co-workers. But the downsizing, wage erosion and productivity demands of recent years have reduced this commitment.

While commitment has been declining, the use of work teams has been on the rise. Recent data indicate 47 percent of Fortune 1000 companies use teams to some extent, and 60 percent plan to increase the use of teams in the near future. Employers believe teams can enhance productivity while giving employees a more active role in decision-making and a greater opportunity to be involved in meaningful work. But team success is often dependent on high levels of employee commitment—to both the organization and its goals.

**The Importance of Commitment**

In assessing employees’ attachment, it is important to determine the focus of their commitment. Different individuals may have different “profiles of commitment”; they may be highly committed to the team, but not to the organization, or committed to both, or committed to neither.
Studies have shown that commitment to a team may translate into a willingness to help team members and improved team performance. Low levels of commitment to both the organization and the team have been linked to absenteeism, turnover, and intention to quit. But no study had been done to explore the causes of both team and organizational commitment and the effect they have on productivity, willingness to help team members, and intention to quit.

**THE SETTING FOR THE STUDY**

This study was conducted in an apparel manufacturing plant owned by a Fortune 100 company in the mid-Atlantic region. The plant had fifty 10-person sewing teams with a small support staff of team facilitators, managers, maintenance personnel and material handlers. All employees on sewing teams took part in the survey, and plant management reported no unusual absence patterns during the survey period. The organization had implemented work teams as part of its strategy to keep jobs from going overseas.

Teams had been in place at the plant for just over two years. According to management, team sewing had increased productivity, improved quality, and decreased turnover and absenteeism (though turnover did increase when teams were first introduced). The use of teams also significantly reduced in-process inventory and turnaround time for customer orders.

Compensation was based on a team production system with minimum performance standards set by industrial engineers. Team members were compensated at the same rate, based on the percentage of the standard.

**FACTORS AFFECTING COMMITMENT**

Certain conditions that are of primary importance in self-directed work team environments affect both organizational and team commitment. Because the following characteristics have a dual relationship with self-directed work team environments and commitment, they were chosen as independent variables for this study:

- Satisfaction with supervision.
- Resource-related role conflict: the ability of employees to access the tools they need to perform the job as requested.
- Task interdependence: the degree to which team members rely on one another to complete work assignments.
- Intersender conflict: the degree to which employees receive conflicting orders or requests from superiors or co-workers, or orders that conflict with company policy, ethical standards or legal requirements.
- Satisfaction with co-workers.

**Effects on organizational commitment.** We found that satisfaction with supervision and resource-related conflict had significant positive and negative influences on organizational commitment, respectively, but no significant influence on team commitment. Task interdependence had positive and significant influences on both organizational and team commitment. Although task interdependence had an impact on team commitment, it was not significant.

In general, these findings supported our hypothesis that commitment resulting from satisfaction with supervision would focus more strongly on the organization than on the team. Prior research had indicated that in work team environments, many employees view supervisors as representatives of the company and, often, an extension of it.

Adequate material resources are critical to work team effectiveness. Lack of resources is often a major cause of poor team performance. We hypothesized that resource-related conflict would be strongly related to organizational commitment because organizations are responsible for providing the resources and materials employees need to do their work and earn their pay. Companies that do not provide these resources break the reciprocal relationship that stimulates employees to put forth effort, a component of commitment. This broken relationship has a negative effect on organizational commitment.

Because task-related interchanges take place within teams, we expected that the interdependent nature of their tasks would be more conspicuous. As a result, we thought this perception of task interdependence would have a greater effect on team

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**ANALYZING THE DATA**

We used structural equation modeling to examine the data collected. By using this technique, we were able to examine the simultaneous impact of multiple independent variables on multiple dependent variables, both directly and through intervening variables. We needed this capability to test our model—a model we believe is more representative of actual conditions in organizations than models that do not allow for simultaneous multiple dependence relationships. We have found structural equation modeling more intuitive and, thus, easier to understand.
commitment than on organizational commitment, but our results indicated this was not the case. The influence of task interdependence on organizational commitment was not significantly different from its influence on team commitment.

The reason for this result may have to do with circumstances in the plant. Teams had been in place for a little over two years and the majority of employees worked at this location when teams were introduced. The change was mandated by the company, team structure was designed by the company, and task integration was engineered by the company. Employees were most likely aware of the company's influence in creating this interdependence, so the organization remained the focus of commitment.

**Effects on team commitment.** As we expected, task interdependence and satisfaction with co-workers had positive influences on team commitment, while intersender conflict had a negative effect. We believed satisfaction with co-workers would be particularly important in a self-directed work team environment. Because a key feature of self-directed work teams is the high degree of self-determination in managing work, teams take on many of the responsibilities formal supervisors once had and their members must undergo a
considerable transition in terms of their role requirements.

To make this transition successfully, members must learn to work together to overcome conflicts and "promote both group creativity and member satisfaction." We found that satisfaction with co-workers significantly affected team commitment, but not organizational commitment.

Intersender conflict had a negative impact on team commitment. We hypothesized this would result because in self-directed work team environments, the distribution of tasks and the pace of the work are usually decided and communicated within the team. As a result, the source of any intersender conflict that occurs is most likely within the team.

**HOW COMMITMENT AFFECTS EMPLOYEES**

Because managers at the plant believed implementing teams had influenced morale, absenteeism and employees' willingness to help others, they were very interested in the effects organizational and team commitment have on production, intention to quit and willingness to help team members.

Commitment significantly influenced team productivity, intention to quit and willingness to help. However, commitment to the team and the organization did not influence all the outcomes equally. For example, when team commitment and organizational commitment decrease, intention to quit increases. But only organizational commitment had a direct influence on intention to quit. The influence of team commitment on intention to quit, when the influence of all other variables is considered, was not significant.

**Team productivity.** Team commitment led to increased productivity, but organizational commitment did not. This result did not surprise us because we expected that the team would have the greatest effect on productivity.

We were surprised that resource-related conflict positively influenced team productivity. This result is counterintuitive, but may be explained by the increased sensitivity employees whose pay is tied to production have for a lack of resources. A short delay in obtaining materials may be very important to these individuals, while the same delay may not be noticed by those less concerned with production.

**Intention to quit.** Prior research indicates that organizational commitment is related to intention to quit—often used as proxy for turnover. We found that a high commitment to the organization translated into lower intention to quit, but that commitment to the team did not have a significant effect on intention to quit. This finding is consistent with our hypothesis. After all, an employee who is not committed to the team may choose to change teams while staying with the company, but one who is not committed to the organization has few choices of action. There is a relationship between team commitment and intention to quit—which is important to be aware of—but the relationship is not causal.

Many times organizations have problems that result from what has been termed *intersender conflict*—employees receiving conflicting orders from two or more superiors, conflicting requests from co-workers; or orders that conflict with company policy, ethical standards, or even the law. We noticed that when intersender conflict increased, so did intention to quit. Though we did not hypothesize this relationship, we feel it is reasonable since in a work team environment, most of the interaction that may lead to intersender conflict takes place within the team.

**Willingness to help.** Willingness to help was positively influenced by both organizational and team commitment. We hypothesized that team commitment would positively influence willingness to help, because of a desire of those committed to their team to put forth effort on its behalf. However, the data indicate that the path from organizational commitment to willingness to help does not differ significantly from the path from team commitment to willingness to help.

We also found that task interdependence—the extent to which individuals in the work group interact and depend on one another to accomplish their work—had a significant and positive influence on willingness to help. Apparently those who perceive high levels of task interdependence are also more willing to help their teammates.

**IMPROVING TEAM PERFORMANCE**

Satisfaction with supervision had a positive effect on organizational commitment, while resource-related conflict had a negative effect. Satisfaction with co-workers had a positive effect on team commitment, but resource-related conflict had a negative effect. And both organizational and team commitment were positively affected by task interdependence. Managers may be able to increase employee commitment by focusing attention on specific variables.

1. Engage teams in team building exercises and training—this increases commitment to the team by increasing members' satisfaction with each other and by reducing intersender conflict.
2. Train first-level supervisors to be visible and alert to teams' needs.
This is especially challenging in self-directed work team environments, where working as independently from direct supervision as possible is one of the goals.

3. Pay special attention to inventory control, maintenance and repair issues, and the availability of supplies. Downtime may cost the company more than just lost productivity; it may have a negative effect on organizational commitment.

4. Pay close attention to production procedures and technical and team training for employees. High levels of task interdependence have positive effects on organizational and team commitment, and a direct influence on employees’ willingness to help each other.  

ENDNOTES


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