

3.8: The Role of Ethics and National Culture

Learning Objectives

1. Consider the role of job attitudes on ethical behavior.
2. Consider the role of national culture on job attitudes and behaviors.

Job Attitudes, Behaviors, and Ethics

People prefer to work in companies that have an ethical environment. Studies show that when an organization has a moral climate that values doing the right thing, people tend to be happier at work, more committed to their companies, and less likely to want to leave. In other words, in addition to increasing the frequency of ethical behaviors, the presence of an ethical climate will attach people to a company. An ethical climate is related to performing citizenship behaviors in which employees help each other and their supervisors, and perform many behaviors that are not part of their job descriptions (Leung, 2008; Mulki, Jaramillo, & Locander, 2006; Valentine, Greller, & Richtermeyer, 2006).

If people are happy at work and committed to the company, do they behave more ethically? This connection is not as clear. In fact, loving your job and being committed to the company may prevent you from realizing that the company is doing anything wrong. One study showed that, when people were highly committed to their company, they were less likely to recognize organizational wrongdoing and less likely to report the problem to people within the organization. [Whistleblowers](#), or people who reported wrongdoing, were more likely to have moderate levels of commitment to the company. It is possible that those people who identify with a company are blind to its faults (Somers & Casal, 1994).

Companies trying to prevent employees from behaving unethically face a dilemma. One way of reducing unethical behaviors is to monitor employees closely. However, when people are closely monitored through video cameras, when their e-mails are routinely read, and when their online activities are closely monitored, employees are more likely to feel that they are being treated unfairly and with little respect. Therefore, high levels of employee monitoring, while reducing the frequency of unethical behaviors, may reduce job satisfaction and commitment, as well as work performance and citizenship behaviors. Instead of monitoring and punishing employees, organizations can reduce unethical behavior by creating an ethical climate and making ethics a shared value (Crossen, 1993).

Job Attitudes Around the Globe

Do the same things satisfy people around the globe? Even though many of the findings regarding satisfaction are generalizable to different cultures, some research reveals that differences may also exist. In one study comparing job satisfaction in 20 countries, work–family conflict was found to lower job satisfaction only in individualistic cultures. It is possible that in collectivistic cultures, when people have to make sacrifices for work, they may compensate by forming better relations with coworkers, which prevents employees from being dissatisfied. There is also evidence that while autonomy and empowerment are valued in the United States, Mexico, and Poland, high levels of empowerment were related to lower job satisfaction in India (Robert et al., 2000; Spector et al., 2007). Despite some variation, major factors that make people happy, such as being treated well and having good relations with others, are likely to generalize across cultures.

Culture also influences work behaviors. Behaviors regarded as a citizenship behavior in the United States or other Western cultures, such as helping a new coworker learn the job, may be viewed as part of a person's job performance in other cultures. Research shows that managers in cultures such as Hong Kong and Japan define job performance more broadly. For example, the willingness to tolerate less than ideal circumstances within the company without complaining was viewed as part of someone's job in Hong Kong, whereas this was viewed as more discretionary in the United States and Australia. Norms regarding absenteeism and turnover are also subject to cultural differences. One study shows that in China, absence from work because of one's illness, stress, or depression was relatively unacceptable, while in Canada, these reasons were viewed as legitimate reasons for being absent (Johns & Xie, 1998; Lam, Hui, & Law, 1999).

Key Takeaways

There is a connection between a company's ethics climate, work attitudes, and citizenship behaviors demonstrated by employees. A highly committed workforce may not necessarily demonstrate higher levels of ethics, because highly committed people may be less likely to notice companywide wrongdoing and, in turn, not report them. Companies have to strike a balance between reducing

unethical behaviors and maintaining a highly satisfied and committed workforce. Some tactics of reducing unethical behaviors, such as close monitoring of employees, may erode trust between management and employees and lead to negative work attitudes. There are cross-cultural differences in how employee work attitudes are shaped and the work behaviors that are expected from employees. Being aware of these differences facilitates effective management of a global workforce.

Exercises

1. Which factors related to work attitudes in Western cultures should also be related to work attitudes in other cultures? Are there any that you think would not be important in a different culture you are familiar with?
2. Do you think people leave their jobs for the same reasons around the world? If not, explain why you think so.

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