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The Problem with "All for One and One for All" Expectations: Differential Effects of Race and Commitment in the Workplace

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As far back as 1968, with the findings of the Kerner Commission, there have been reports of "two Americans, separate and unequal." Indeed, the recent commission on race formed by President Clinton reached much the same conclusion. While three decades separate the work of two groups, the main inference drawn is strikingly consistent with regard to race. There is a persistent chasm in how majority group and minority group members view and are viewed by each other. Put another way, a values gap exists for racial groups in America. Dire predictions have been made about the negative impact on society of such disparate set of perspectives, and some, perhaps, have born fruit. This paper does not seek to address some of the critical issues raised by the values gap (e.g. poverty, crime, etc.) but instead focuses on the impact of incongruent values in the workplace.

Congruence of values is a central concept in commitment, one of the major constructs in the study of organizational behavior. A typical definition of organizational commitment refers to it as being "the psychological attachment of workers to their workplaces." Organizational commitment from an attitudinal perspective is:

The relative strength of an individual's identification with an involvement in a particular organization, which is characterized by belief in and acceptance of organizational goals and values, willingness to exert effort on behalf of the organization and a desire to maintain membership in the organization. (Mow day, Porter, & Steers, 1982, p. 27)

Commitment as compliance occurs when, in order to gain particular rewards or avoid specific punishments, people adopt certain attitudes and behaviors. Commitment can also be measured in terms of identification and internalization. Commitment is termed identification when "people adopt attitudes and behaviors in order to be associated with a satisfying, self-defining relationship with another person or group." Internalization commitment occurs when "people adopt attitudes and behaviors because their content is congruent with the organization's value systems." Two recent empirical studies illustrate the manner in which the latter two senses of commitment, in conjunction with dissimilar racial perspectives, may explain and predict differential workplace outcomes for employees.

In the first study, employees in a large private hospital were studied to see what

effect demands to express or suppress emotions on the job have on employee outcomes. One outcome examined was performance of organizational citizenship behavior (OCB), defined as "individual behavior that is discretionary, not directly or explicitly recognized by the formal reward system, and that in the aggregate promotes the effective functioning of the organization." Examples of OCB include volunteering for activities not related to an individual's job description (e.g. planning the company picnic) or assisting others (e.g. a salesperson helping a vendor to unload a truck). Employee OCB may be measured by supervisors or by employees themselves. Generally, employee self-reports of OCB are higher than supervisor reports, perhaps due to self-biasing effects. However, in the study cited here, non-white employees self-reported lower levels of OCB than did their supervisors, a finding that did not hold for white employees, nor for any other demographic categorization (age, gender, etc.). One plausible explanation for this contradictory finding may lie in the fact that the non-white employees also reported lower levels of identification and internalization commitment. As such, they may have felt a sense of inequity in their organizational outcomes and sought to restore balance by cognitively "devaluing" the contributions, or inputs, they made to the organization, even though the more "objective" evaluation of their supervisors suggested otherwise.

In the second study, also investigating the effects of emotional demands on employees in a large service organization, those who were required to frequently express positive emotions and also self-reported a low level of organizational identification were highly likely to experience negative health effects (e.g., respiratory illness). The relationship between emotional demands and health was not present for those reporting high level of organizational identification. One of the coping mechanisms those in the minority often employ in order to co-exist is to "grin and bear it" or "put on a happy face." Traditionally underrepresented employees may therefore actually endanger their health and productivity by "going along to get along," particularly if they hold values incongruent with those of the organizational power brokers.

The examples cited here reinforce the need for theoreticians and practitioners alike to consider the difficulties that may arise from viewing people through a single lens. The fastest growing segment of the U.S. work force of the next century will be members of non-white racial and ethnic groups. Armed with that knowledge, those who fail to incorporate the reality of divergent perspectives when seeking answers to workplace problems risk becoming like one person's definition of a metaphysician - "a blind man in a dark room - looking for a black hat - which isn't there."

PRESENTER:

James R. Jones is an assistant professor of Management at the University of Nebraska at Omaha. He received his doctorate in Business from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, and also holds Bachelor of Science in Business Administration and Master of Business Administration from the University of Nebraska at Omaha. Dr. Jones's business experience includes 10 years as a human resources professional and consultant at Baker's Supermarkets in Omaha, Neb., and at the Gallup Organization in Lincoln, Neb. His research interests include studying the effects of workplace demands on employees, individual differences, ethics and feedback-seeking behavior.