

Co-worker Support as a Catalyst in Strengthening Employee Relations: A Study from Human Resource Practitioners' Perspectives

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ABSTRACT: Employee relations is one of the pillars in the field of Human Resource Management. Various perspectives must be examined in order to develop employee relations in the workplace, including relationship between employees and their co-workers. Along with rapid industrial and societal transformations, human resource practitioners need continuous support from co-workers to keep abreast with the changes. This study aims to explore the meaning of co-worker support from the perspectives of human resource (HR) practitioners using qualitative approach. Eleven HR practitioners were selected based on purposive sampling technique. The findings of the study revealed six themes of co-worker support.

Keywords: *Co-worker Support; Employee Relations; Human Resource Practitioners*

1. INTRODUCTION

Employee relations is one of the pillars in the field of Human Resource Management [1]. Various perspectives must be examined in order to develop employee relations in the workplace, including relationship between employees and their co-workers. Employees spend most of the time with their co-workers. Thus, numerous experiences are acquired from interacting with their co-workers [2]. In comparison to superiors and others, this interaction allows for the development of closer ties with co-workers.

The influence of co-workers is a predominant issue among employees, where some of the co-workers can be good supporters, while some of them can cause destructive effect on employees' mental health [3]. Co-workers play important roles not only by ensuring a healthy environment to work in but also in strengthening employee relations as they are the source of support in the workplace. Therefore, the relationship between employees and their co-workers should not be disregarded. This study aims to explore the meaning of co-worker support from the perspectives of HR practitioners.

2. THE IMPORTANCE OF CO-WORKER SUPPORT

In order to keep abreast with rapid industrial and societal transformations, Human Resource (HR) profession is one of the professions that play a pivotal role in the organizations. Transformations will be accompanied by the changes in values, thus requiring HR practitioners to revise organizational practices [4]. HR practitioners not only have to cope with new organizational demands and expectations; they also have to face new employee demands and expectations.

A recent study found that co-worker support acts as an important facilitator for workplace learning to occur [5]. In the workplace, HR practitioners spend more time working with their co-workers compared to their superiors. Thus, the co-workers' behaviours at the workplace may influence the HR practitioners, physically and psychologically. Therefore, it is fundamental to explore HR practitioners' perceptions of co-worker support in the workplace.

3. METHODOLOGY

The study used a qualitative design to explore HR practitioners' perceptions of co-worker support. The sample of the interviews were HR practitioners who work in public organizations, private organizations and government-linked companies. The interview's participants were selected using purposive sampling technique. The number of participants was determined based on the accomplishment of the saturation point of the interviews (until a stable set of themes/dimensions of co-worker support are established, and no new themes emerged). Eleven participants were selected from public organizations, private organizations and government-linked company (GLC) who were working in the Klang Valley, Malaysia. In-depth interviews, guided by semi-structured questions, took about one and a half hour to two hours for each interview session. Based on the interviews, data were transcribed verbatim. Significant words, phrases and statements regarding the co-worker support were extracted and analysed using constant comparative method.

4. FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

The key findings of the study revealed six themes of co-worker support, namely ‘Assisting Co-worker’, ‘Providing Companionship’, ‘Protecting Co-worker’, ‘Guiding Co-worker’, ‘Recognizing Co-worker’ and ‘Respecting Co-worker’. Together, these six themes represent the dimensions of co-worker support. Based on the findings of the study, co-worker support is defined as the extent to which one’s co-worker is able to assist, provide companionship, protect, guide, recognize and respect his/her co-worker. Figure 1 shows the conceptual model of co-worker support which is developed based on the interview findings.

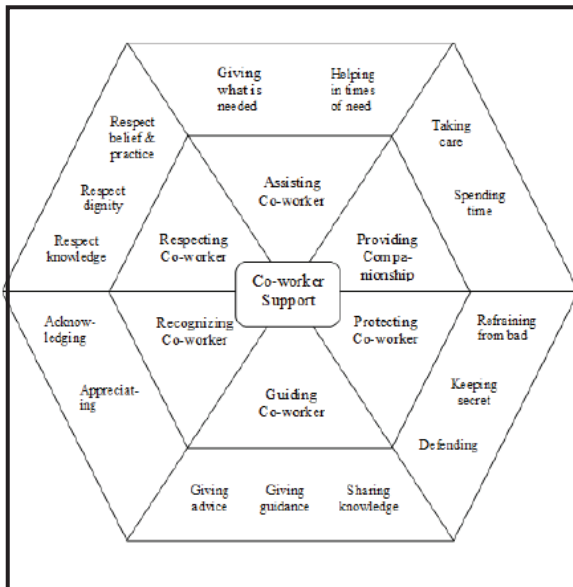


Figure 1 Conceptual Model of Co-worker Support

The first dimension of co-worker support is named as ‘Assisting Co-worker’ because all of the behaviour codes that emerged in this dimension is about giving what is required or needed by the co-worker and helping the co-worker in times of need. The second dimension is termed as ‘Providing Companionship’ reflects the act of taking care of a co-worker’s emotion and co-worker’s wellbeing as well as spending time with the co-worker for social interaction. The third dimension of co-worker support that was discovered in the study is ‘Protecting Co-worker’. This dimension is theorized to underlie expectation that a supportive co-worker will refrain him/herself from backstabbing, sabotaging and taking advantage of other co-workers. In addition, this dimension emphasizes the need for defending co-worker from something bad and keeping co-worker’s secret.

The fourth dimension of co-worker support, ‘Guiding Co-worker’, reveals the need for an individual to give advice and guidance as well as to share knowledge his/her with co-workers. The fifth dimension namely ‘Recognizing Co-worker’ that emerged from the interview findings is considered as an important dimension in describing co-worker support because the co-worker will feel valued and supported. The last theme that emerged from the interview findings is ‘Respecting Co-worker’. Respecting co-worker means the act of

honouring co-worker with regard to his/her knowledge, his/her religious belief and practices, his/her cultural belief and practices, as well as co-worker’s dignity. Practically, the new conceptualization of co-worker support that has been explored in the study will provide a comprehensive model for practitioners in understanding the dynamism and dimensions of co-worker support. Through this model, HR practitioners can identify the types of co-worker support that are required by the employees. Consequently, it will help in designing appropriate interventions to strengthen employee relations in the workplace.

5. CONCLUSION

The concept of co-worker support in the study has been explored through a qualitative study among HR practitioners from various organizations. The conceptualization of co-worker support would seem to be of paramount importance because support is the product of interpersonal relations. By understanding the concept of co-worker support, it will help to enhance understanding of interpersonal relations, and indirectly it will help in improving employee relations in the workplace. In other words, co-worker support is to be seen as a catalyst to strengthen employee relations.

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