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The Role of Supportive Leadership in Building and Sustaining High Performing Organisations

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ABSTRACT

Supportive leadership happens in the everyday lives of effective leaders as they provide positive feedback and recognition of employee achievement and success. This study aimed to determine the perception of supportive leadership of their managers among employees in Saudi retail SMEs. It used descriptive survey research to collect the data. Sixty-one participants replied to a single-item scale: "My manager gives encouragement and recognition to staff." It found that the employees perceive that their managers give encouragement and recognition to staff, indicating that they have higher job satisfaction. Supportive leadership is a powerful managerial behaviour to advance job satisfaction among employees and to build and sustain high performing organisations. The role of leaders in building and sustaining an agile organisation includes practicing supportive leadership. Supportive leadership might be a key factor to help SMEs to survive after the first 5 years of business and remain competitive during uncertain times.

Keywords: Job Satisfaction, SMEs, Supportive Leadership, High Performing Organisations, Uncertain Times.

INTRODUCTION

In order for organisations to remain competitive in an unstable business world, they must strategically plan to reduce uncertainty and risk. Uncertainty and risk are serious problems that have a negative impact on the organisation's performance, productivity, and profits. The major reasons for uncertainty have been categorised as (a) insufficient information, (b) economics reasons, and (c) changes in society. If governments introduce new legislation, a new competitor enters the market, or a global recession strikes, then most organisations would face uncertainty and risk. A serious risk for organisations is not having adequate customers to generate sufficient revenue to cover expenses. Besides business failure, a major factor that leads organisations to risk includes that unsatisfied employees may refuse to work or talented workers may leave the job (Müllner, 2016; Teece, Peteraf, and Leih, 2016; Townsend, Hunt, McMullen, and Sarasvathy, 2018).

Employees perform their job most efficiently when their needs are fulfilled. As a result, they are more likely to improve their productivity, which in turn influences key organisational outcomes. Job dissatisfaction has been revealed to increase employee turnover rates and to decrease job performance. Dissatisfied employees are rarely committed to their organisation. They are more likely to be involved in careless behaviour in the workplace. To avoid job dissatisfaction, employees need job security, suitable working conditions, and acceptable compensation. As these are fulfilled, job satisfaction may be increased by addressing (a) affiliation, (b) power, (c) and achievement. Notably, supportive leadership has been shown to be a powerful managerial behaviour to advance job satisfaction among employees (Du, Shin, and Choi, 2015; Hwang et al., 2015; Lee, Chen, and Liou, 2015; Nging and Yazdanifard, 2015; Thompson, Glaso, and Martinsen, 2016).

Background to the Study

Lussier and Achua (2015) defined transformational leadership as changing the status quo by identifying problems in the existing system and generating a vision of a better organisation. According to Northouse (2018), transformational leadership theory refers to a process that transforms employees to achieve performance beyond expectation by providing positive feedback, acknowledging individual achievement, and taking account staffs' needs. Downton (1973) was the first theorist to coin the term *transformational leadership*. Transformational leadership gained popularity when James McGregor Burns (1978) published his research on political leaders. According to Burns, *transformational* leaders do not exchange rewards for the work but provide promotions to employees who perform outstanding work.

The current literature has demonstrated that transformational leadership fits all types of organisations and any manager can be a transformational leader (Northouse, 2018; Van Knippenberg and Sitkin, 2013; Zhu and Akhtar, 2014). As reported by Carless, Wearing, and Mann (2000), supportive leadership is one of the seven dimensions of transformational leadership theory. One aspect that differentiates transformational leadership from any other leadership is the inclusion of supportive leadership (Alatawi, 2017a; Rafferty and Griffin, 2004). Carless et al. (2000) defined supportive leadership as providing positive feedback and recognition of employee achievement and success.

SMEs in Saudi Arabia

The Saudi economy relies on big oil companies; the oil industry accounts for about 55% of the gross domestic product (Saudi Arabian Monetary Authority, 2016). However, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) are crucial in Saudi Arabia as they comprise approximately 97% of the entire Saudi businesses (Saudi Central Authority for Statistics, 2010). SMEs are known for their region's economic development and generating of employment opportunities. Although SMEs significantly contribute to job creation, most do not survive the first 5 years. This high failure rate may be attributed to a number of factors including (a) low cash flow, (b) lack of strategic planning, (c) absence of business experience, (d) dictatorial nature of SMEs' owners (e) failure to manage

innovation, and (f) high employee turnover rate (Antony, Kumar, and Labib, 2008; Cebula, Agrawal, Boylan, and Horner, 2016; El Kalak and Hudson, 2016; Gielnik, Zacher, and Schmitt, 2017; Jamali, Lund-Thomsen, and Jeppesen, 2017; Mas-Verdu, Ribeiro-Soriano, and Roig-Tierno, 2015; Millán, Congregado, and Román, 2012).

Statement of the Problem

Lack of supportive leadership leads to reduction in job satisfaction. Employees who do not feel supported are rarely committed to their organisation. The absence of encouragement and recognition to employees results in dissatisfaction. Managers who do not emphasise concern for their subordinates' feelings and needs cause them to experience less job satisfaction in the workplace. Managers may create unhealthy unsupportive work environments in a number of ways: They may disrespect their employees, act as a dictator, fail to assist their subordinates, not be available when needed, and discourage two-way communication or an exchange of ideas. Managers who do not acknowledge or commend the outstanding work of employees leave those workers feeling disappointed and dissatisfied. A poor relationship with managers motivates employees to think about alternatives, including quitting their jobs (Du et al., 2015; Hwang et al., 2015; Lee et al., 2015; Nging and Yazdanifard, 2015; Thompson et al., 2016).

However, managers who display supportive leadership can generate a healthy work environment. Showing respect and consideration for their staffs' feelings and needs generates a friendly relationship between managers and their subordinates. Emphasising supportive leadership would increase job satisfaction among employees (Northouse, 2018; Van Knippenberg and Sitkin, 2013; Zhu and Akhtar, 2014). Therefore, in this study, employees of SMEs were examined to determine their perception of supportive leadership. Despite the significance of supportive leadership in the quest to increase job satisfaction among employees, limited research has been conducted on supportive leadership in retail SMEs, specifically in Saudi Arabia.

Purpose and Significance of the Study

This study aimed to determine the perception of supportive leadership of their managers among employees in Saudi retail SMEs. Using descriptive research, the research question was, "What is the perception of employees regarding supportive leadership in SMEs at Yanbu Mall?" The results could inform the managers of SMEs how to increase the job satisfaction among employees in the workplace. The findings might provide the managers of SMEs with knowledge of how essential encouragement and recognition are to subordinates, as acknowledgment makes employees feel satisfied about their job. The outcomes may provide the managers of SMEs with a technique that might help them stay competitive in an uncertain business world and during uncertain times. The findings might reveal the role of leaders in building and sustaining high performing organisations. The results may show what types of new capabilities leaders need to develop in order to build and sustain an agile organisation. The outcomes might demonstrate what happens in the everyday lives of leaders as they practice leadership in high performing organisations.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Reducing uncertainty and risk is one of the most important tasks of managers. The basic responsibilities of managers include (a) planning, (b) organising, (c) leading, and (d) controlling. However, these basic management functions are no longer a fit in this ever-changing business world. These functions may not build and sustain high performing organisations. Some researchers claimed that today's workers not only want to be given orders to perform tasks but also want to be provided with reasons to perform those tasks. Workers want to practice their knowledge and skills, be engaged in the process of decision-making, and share their ideas and thoughts with their managers. They desire to work in a friendly work environment, with the result that workers then are able to produce more and feel motivated to do so. They appreciate being acknowledged and recognised for their success and achievement in the workplace (Manika, Wells, Gregory-Smith, and Gentry, 2015; García-Peñalvo and Conde, 2014; Teece, 2016).

Effective managers are usually qualified to create a productive workplace and shape a healthy organisational culture. They carefully plan ways to enhance job satisfaction, improve job performance, and increase commitment among subordinates. In such organisations, the relationship between managers and their subordinates is commonly characterised as friendly. Such a relationship can have a positive effect on job involvement among employees. Subordinates who work with effective managers are more likely to be loyal to their employer, energetic, creative, and feel supported and satisfied. Such managers frequently demonstrate an effective leadership behaviour in order to accomplish greater organisational outcomes (Caillier, 2014; Cascio, 2018; Dabke, 2016; Lussier and Achoar, 2015; Mullins and Schoar, 2016; Zhu and Akhtar, 2014).

According to Carless et al. (2000), supportive leadership refers to providing positive feedback and recognition of employee achievement and success. Effective managers convey confidence in the capacities of their subordinates to perform their job efficiently and to achieve challenging objectives. They support employees when challenging objectives are met; they assist, help, and encourage employees; they provide recognition of individual achievement and success; and they acknowledge group members' achievement on a one-to-one basis. They offer public recognition to group members, which in turn serves as evidence that the manager appreciates and supports the work being undertaken. They show concern for employees and consider their individual needs and feelings (Avolio, 2011; Caillier, 2014; Carless et al., 2000; Dabke, 2016; Lussier and Achua, 2015; Northouse, 2018).

Transformational Leadership Theory

According to Northouse (2018), transformational leadership theory refers to a process that transforms employees to achieve performance beyond expectation by providing positive feedback, acknowledging individual achievement, and taking into account staffs' needs. The current literature has determined that transformational leadership fits all types of organisations and any manager can be a transformational leader, as it is not reserved for extraordinary individuals with certain skills and abilities (Alatawi, 2017b; Northouse, 2018; Van Knippenberg and Sitkin, 2013; Zhu and Akhtar, 2014). Northouse (2018) confirmed that transformational leadership is an effective managerial style that fits the ever-changing business world and motivates employees to accomplish challenging goals. As reported by Carless and her colleagues (2000), transformational leadership theory consists of seven dimensions: vision, staff development, supportive leadership, empowerment, innovative thinking, leading by example, and charisma.

Supportive Leadership and Transformational Leadership

One aspect that differentiates transformational leadership from any other type of leadership is the inclusion of supportive leadership. This dimension of transformational leadership occurs when managers express a supportive orientation toward staff, give encouragement to them, and provide recognition to them. Transformational managers more often demonstrate supportive leadership by providing encouragement for the employees' efforts. They display concern for employees' welfare and generate a friendly, accommodating work environment. They show respect for and encourage their subordinates. They are accessible to address their staff's feelings and needs. They express appreciation when subordinates perform well, complimenting them when they accomplish goals and achieve objectives (Du et al., 2015; Hwang et al., 2015; Jung and Takeuchi, 2010; Lee et al., 2015; Rafferty and Griffin, 2004).

Supportive Leadership and SMEs

In SMEs, the relatively small size creates a lack of hierarchy. As a result, employees have the benefit of working on many aspects of the business in an atmosphere that is often informal. The lack of hierarchy also encourages face-to-face interaction, and thus managers are often people oriented, accessible, and visible. Management visibility allows for opportunities to provide assistance, encouragement, and recognition. It promotes effective communication and generation of ideas and can enable managers to notice their subordinates' efforts and achievements. However,

few managers appear to be taking advantage of the opportunities presented by their relatively small size. They experience high employee turnover and have difficulty retaining talented qualified employees. When small- and medium-sized companies lose seasoned employees, institutional effectiveness is compromised, and there may not be other employees who can easily step into the gap. These factors contribute to a high rate of failure for SMEs within their first 5 years (Antony et al., 2008; Cebula et al., 2016; El Kalak and Hudson, 2016; Gielnik et al., 2017; Hwang et al., 2015; Jamali et al., 2017; Mullins and Schoar, 2016; Ng, Kee, and Ramayah, 2016).

Impacts of Supportive Leadership on Organisational Outcomes

Employees whose managers demonstrate support, consideration, and concern for them are more likely to be satisfied. The literature confirms that employees are more satisfied with their job, are less likely to quit their job, feel safer, and engage in productive behaviour when their managers emphasise supportive leadership behaviour. On the other hand, the lack of these supportive qualities in their managers decreases satisfaction and increases stress among employees, who are more likely to quit their jobs (Alatawi, 2017a; Barroso, Villegas, and Casillas, 2008; Cascio, 2018; Effelsberg, Solga, and Gurt, 2014; Lee et al., 2015; Northouse, 2018).

According to Rafferty and Griffin (2004), supportive leadership is not associated with motivational outcomes. However, the literature has shown that the positive impact of supportive leadership contributes other benefits to the organisation; it enhances its effectiveness and profitability. Effective supportive leadership builds employee satisfaction, which in turn serves to create a higher level of customer satisfaction. Strategies that promote supportive leadership contribute to an organisation's competitive advantage because job satisfaction increases employees' buy-in with the company, resulting in increased productivity. Employees who receive supportive leadership are less likely to be involved in careless behaviour in the workplace, precisely because they care about working somewhere where they are treated with care themselves. Finally, these employees are far less likely to leave their jobs than those working in an organisation that lacks supportive leadership (Caillier, 2014; Du et al., 2015; Hamstra, Van Yperen, Wisse, and Sassenberg, 2014; Rafferty and Griffin, 2006; Thompson et al., 2016).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study used survey research with a descriptive design to collect the data (Cooper and Schindler, 2013; Locke, Silverman, and Spirduso, 2010; Sekaran and Bougie, 2016). An organisation is considered to be an SME if it has 250 or fewer employees (Antony et al., 2008). Because the target population is small (Cooper and Schindler, 2013; Locke et al., 2010), the current study researched all the available participants. Therefore, 79 employees, who work in different retail SMEs at the Yanbu Mall, Saudi Arabia, received a paper-based questionnaire in person. Confidentiality was maintained and the subjects were informed that their identity would not be revealed. They were also informed they had the right to withdraw from this research at any time. The item, "My manager gives encouragement and recognition to staff," taken from statements by Carless et al. (2000), measured *supportive leadership*. The measures of central tendency were utilised to analyse the data (Thorne and Giesen, 2003).

RESEARCH RESULTS

Sixty-one employees working in different SMEs at Yanbu Mall, Saudi Arabia responded to an item of the Global Transformational Leadership scale (GTL): "My manager gives encouragement and recognition to staff" (Carless et al., 2000; response rate: 77%). Seventy-two per cent of respondents were male and 28% were female. Sixty-four per cent reported being over 18 years old, while the others reported they were over 40 years old (46%). Around 79% of the sample held an associate's degree, 7% held a bachelor's degree, and 15% had a high school diploma or had not finished high school. Approximately 34% of the participants had worked for their organisation for 0 to 2 years, while 36% had worked for their organisation for 3 to 5 years. Almost 30% of the respondents had worked for their organisation for 6 years or more.

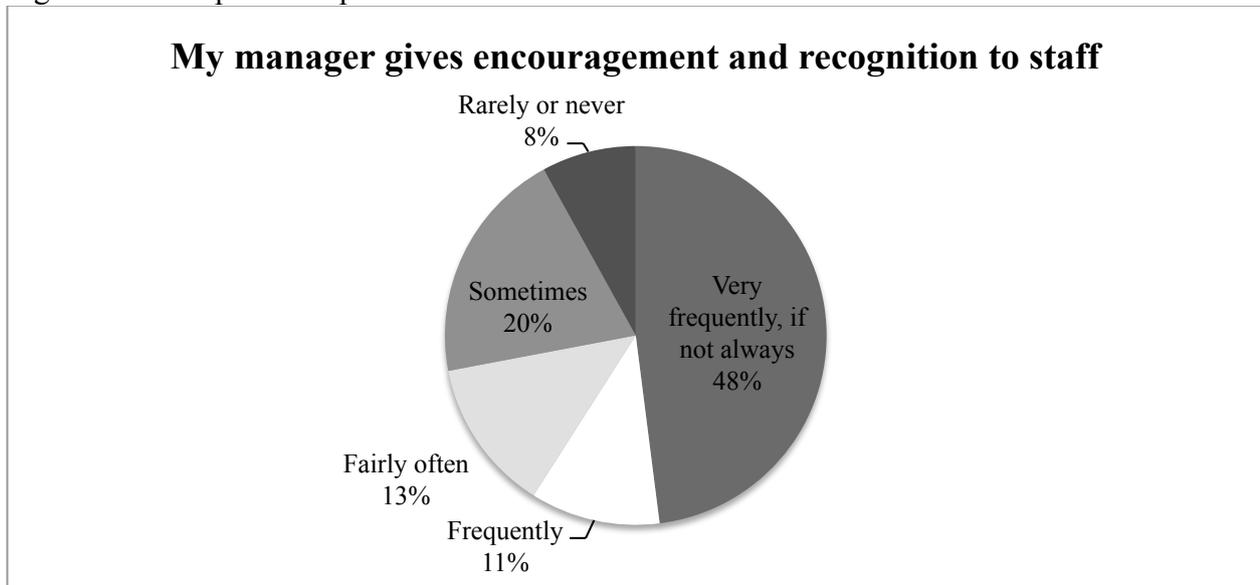
Table 1. Mean and Standard Deviation of Supportive Leadership, an Item of GTL

Scale	Scale dimension	Scale items	$M (SD)$
GTL	Supportive leadership	Gives encouragement and recognition to staff	3.7 (1.4)

Note. $n = 61$.

Scales of measurement refers to “the rules that we use to assign numbers to objects or events” (Thorne and Giesen, 2003, p. 15). The rating scale ranged from 1 (*rarely or never*) to 5 (*very frequently, if not always*). Table 1 exhibits the mean and standard deviation scores of the measured item. The results showed that the managers give encouragement and recognition to staff ($M = 3.7$, $SD = 1.4$). This demonstrated that 48% of participants perceived their manager *very frequently, if not always*, gives encouragement and recognition to staff, whereas 8% considered that their manager *rarely or never* does so. Further, this revealed that 11%, 13%, and 20% of participants noted that their manager *frequently*, *fairly often*, and *sometimes* gives encouragement and recognition to staff, respectively (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Participants' responses.



DISCUSSION

This study aimed to determine the perception of supportive leadership of their managers among employees in Saudi retail SMEs. The results found that the managers of SMEs give encouragement and recognition to staff at Yanbu Mall ($M = 3.7$, $SD = 1.4$). This outcome is in line with what the literature reflected about supportive leadership. Effective managers express a supportive orientation toward staff, give encouragement to them, and provide recognition to them. They display concern for employees' welfare, feelings, and needs. They generate a friendly supportive work environment. They are available when needed and assist their subordinates. They encourage two-way communication and an exchange of ideas. They respect their subordinates and acknowledge improvements in their employees' quality of work. They express gratitude and appreciation when subordinates perform a job efficiently. They commend and compliment their subordinates when they perform outstanding work (Carless et al., 2000; Du et al., 2015; Hwang et al., 2015; Lee et al., 2015; Lussier and Achua, 2015; Northouse, 2018; Rafferty and Griffin, 2006).

The findings indicate that managers of SMEs at Yanbu mall may exhibit transformational leadership behaviour. This study reveals the managers may believe that the employees are the most important assets of the SMEs. They might want their subordinates to perform work efficiently and

to generate a vision of a better organisation. It infers that the employees may feel satisfied and supported, as their manager displays concerns about their feelings and needs. It informs the managers that if they commend and compliment employees, the latter may feel supported, encouraged, and satisfied. It implies that the working environment may be healthy, supportive, and successful in SMEs at Yanbu Mall.

Limitations of the Study and Suggestions for Future Research

The main limitation of this study was that the questionnaire did not capture what type of encouragement managers give to employees. Therefore, a recommendation for a study would be to conduct research determining the type of encouragement and support managers give to employees in a single case-study organisation. A further recommendation would be to conduct a study to identify reasons why SME managers display supportive leadership in the workplace. This research was conducted in Yanbu, Saudi Arabia; however, the study included a limited population, so the results are not necessarily generalisable to a broader area. It would be valuable to find out whether or not similar findings would be found in other countries. Further research is recommended with target subjects from organisations of other sizes or industry types to discover whether or not similar results would be found.

CONCLUSION

There is little research that has studied supportive leadership in Saudi retail SMEs; however, this research adds depth to the knowledge regarding supportive leadership. The current study finds that the employees perceive that their managers give encouragement and recognition to staff, indicating that they have higher job satisfaction. This implication often increases job performance and decreases employee turnover. The improved job satisfaction is more likely to influence key organisational outcomes such as employee productivity and organisational commitment. Once these key organisational outcomes are met, SMEs can survive beyond the first 5 years of trading.

Although supportive leadership is not associated with motivational outcomes (Rafferty and Griffin, 2004), managers of SMEs should express gratitude in the form of a “thank you” when improvement in a subordinate’s quality of work has been noticed, as these two words have a significant impact on employees’ satisfaction. A likely result of positive feedback in response to some employees’ excellent performance will be to encourage their co-workers to perform a better-than-average job. Recognition can make employees feel good about their workplace and their job, and also makes the work environment friendlier, which will ultimately affect overall employee satisfaction.

Supportive leadership is a powerful managerial behaviour to advance job satisfaction among employees and to build and sustain high performing organisations. The role of leaders in building and sustaining high performing organisations is to give encouragement and recognition to their subordinates. Supportive leadership is the mind-set and capability leaders practice in order to build and sustain an agile organisation. It is the leadership behaviour that effective leaders practice everyday in high performing organisations. It can assist SMEs survive beyond the first 5 years of business. It can help SMEs survive in the ever changing business world and remain competitive during uncertain times.

Managerial Implications

Giving encouragement to subordinates happens in the everyday lives of effective leaders as they practice leadership in high performing organisations. Managers should express a supportive orientation toward employees to create an agile organisation. They should display concern for employees’ welfare, take account of their feelings and needs, and generate a friendly workplace. They should also support their subordinates in performing the job professionally, especially when challenging goals are set. They must be available when needed and provide their employees positive feedback. It is essential that the managers assist their subordinates, encourage two-way

communication, and solicit employees' ideas; this will most likely lead to an increase in the job satisfaction among staff and sustain high performing organisations.

Giving recognition to subordinates is one of the main roles of leaders in order to build and sustain high performing organisations. One way to accomplish this is to publicly thank and recognise staff at work. It is important that managers acknowledge improvements in their employees' quality of work and display appreciation as subordinates perform a job efficiently. They should express written and verbal gratitude as subordinates perform an outstanding work. They should commend in response to their subordinates' excellent performance.

In order for organisations to survive in ever changing business world, remain competitive during uncertain times, reduce uncertainty and risk, managers must practice supportive leadership. In order to build and sustain an agile organisation, leaders ought to develop the mind-set and capability of supportive orientation toward employees. Effective leaders in high performing organisations should provide positive feedback and recognition of employee achievement and success. Managers should display gratitude and appreciation as subordinates perform a job efficiently.

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