

The Impact of Supervisor-Supervisee Relationship on Organisational Job Performance: An Analysis of the South African Government Employee Relations

TS Ngomane

University of Limpopo, South Africa

Abstract: The relationship between supervisors and their subordinates is crucial in determining attainment of organisational goals. Supervisors have a responsibility of assisting organisations to meet their goals, since they are the front drivers of employee job satisfaction. Skilled supervisors assist organisations in meeting their goals, as they are able to clarify organisational goals, manage workplace relationships and motivate employees, set targets and time frames for the achievement of goals. It is thus important that supervisors have the necessary job and people skills. A positive perception of supervisors by junior employees goes a long way in ensuring the achievement of organisational goals through performance management systems. This paper is a desktop analysis of the role of supervisor-supervisee relationships and the impact of such relationships on job performance and the achievement of organisational goals. The results of this study indicate that unskilled supervisors have a negative impact on employees job satisfaction and are costly to organisations as they negatively affect organisational goals.

Keywords: Organisational goals, Leadership, Public administration, Skills, Supervisor-supervisee

1. Introduction

Human resources are the fundamental cornerstone of organisations in assisting them to achieve their goals. The human relations within human resources are thus an important vehicle towards the achievement of such goals. Supervisor-supervisee relations take place within the public administration and public management spheres. Political interference in recruitment and the general running of organisations impact either positively or negatively on supervisor-supervisee relationships. Leadership behaviours can either strengthen relationships based on supervisors experience or lead to toxic relationships, which in turn can have a serious negative impact on organisations' ability to achieve their goals.

2. Statement of the Problem

Bernard & Goodyear (2014) defines the supervisor-supervisee relationship within the Social Work context. A supervisor-supervisee relationship is explained as the relationship between the supervisor and the counsellor within the work context as they strive to achieve whatever goals has been set. Although Bernard & Goodyear's definition here is embedded within the social work field, this can apply to other supervisor-supervisee relationships in other areas. Supervisors are there to provide

appropriate advice and guidance to supervisees. The supervisor-supervisee relationship is argued to be too complex to define as the term supervisor-supervisee. It involves a whole lot of characteristics such as culture and psychological well-being of both the supervisor and the supervisee (Watkins, 2014). There are many dynamics that govern the supervisor-supervisee relationships such as the leadership style of supervisors, the political climate within organisations such as interference in the recruitment and appointment of senior and/or lower managers, and the skills and experience of supervisors. The supervisor-supervisee relationship is an integral part of any organisation since it represents an organisation's human resources.

Supervisors can either propel organisations to achieve more or create hostile environments, where subordinates view their working conditions as toxic, or subordinates, due to a plethora of issues within the organisation, may make the ability of the supervisor to work an unpleasant experience. A positive relationship between supervisors and their subordinates entails good communication, inclusive decision-making and the ease of accomplishment of given tasks. Supervisors, as drivers of the relationship, have a responsibility to maintain good interpersonal relations with their subordinates by creating harmonious relationships, not only with

their subordinates but also amongst the subordinates themselves. Pitting supervisees against each other or having favourite and least favourite employees breeds resentment and disharmony amongst workers, which in turn has a negative impact on organisational goal attainment.

3. Theoretical Perspective

This article is based on the transactional and transformational theories of leadership. The interest on these theories is based on the fact that they both place character of leaders as crucial in meeting organisational goals. Transactional and transformational leadership concepts were introduced by Jones McGregor Burns in 1978 (Rost, 1991; Jones, 2000). Leadership is defined as a process that shapes and motivates followers towards the attainment of organisational goals (Sharma & Jain, 2013; Northouse, 2016). It is characterised greatly by influence, where followers are influenced to work hard and be innovative in achieving set goals. It is thus vital that a leader be accepted by followers if a leader is to have a positive influence on them. In most instances, it seems like management and leadership are two separate entities that can be applied independently from each other, however, the two are inseparable because managers are expected to play both management and leadership roles. Whilst it is easy to fulfil the role of management since it falls within specific dispensations within organisations, it however, does not mean that any manager can play good leadership role. Arguably, there are scholars who posit that leaders are born and not made, however, especially in organisations where managers are expected to play a vital role in assisting organisations meet their goals, it thus becomes imperative that managers play both leadership and management roles. Seldom do job advertisements indicate a qualification in the ability to manage employees as a requirement (Mohajane, 2017). It is only recently that the South African National School of Governance made it compulsory for those seeking to occupy senior management positions to have a certificate for entry into Senior Management Service. The aim of this certificate is to ensure that senior managers are competent in their job roles. Whilst management focuses on traditional management systems such as planning, controlling, organising, monitoring and administration, leadership on the other hand requires that managers be innovative, focus on people and inspire subordinates or followers. Leaders generally have the

ability to reduce employee dissatisfaction, whilst management focus on the achievement of set goals.

Leadership theory is important in understanding the dynamics between supervisor and supervisee since this has an impact on job performance and the attainment of organisational goals. The transactional leadership puts emphasis on the relationship aspect between leaders and followers. It also capitalises on the need for people to make a living and as such, people will work hard to keep their jobs, is preoccupied with power, position and the daily activities of employees. Transactional leaders focus on short-term goals and are said to be data oriented (Medsen, 2001; Bolden, Gosling, Marturano & Dennison, 2003), hence the institution of performance agreements and regular assessment of such. This sphere is where most managers in organisations function, although Medsen (2001) denotes that managers can use transactional and transformational leadership interchangeably. Transformational leadership on the other hand focuses on the employees rather than the processes. It is argued to be long term, is pivoted on releasing human potential and is concerned with the mission and vision of an organisation (Bass, 1994; Bolden *et al.*, 2003; Derue, Nahrgang, Wellman & Humphrey, 2011; Mango, 2018). By focusing on employees transformational leaders reaffirm their importance in an organisation. It is argued that once employees are made to feel important, they work hard to make any organisation viable.

4. Methodological Approach

The paper is qualitative in nature as it is based on the review of literature and documentary review of secondary sources such as scientific journal articles and academic books. Qualitative research methods answer the why's and how's of human behaviour, opinion, and experience (Welman, Kruger & Mitchell, 2005; de Vos, Strydom, Fouche & Delport, 1998). The paper will provide information the impact of supervisor-supervisee relationship on organisational job performance.

5. Literature Review

5.1 Legislative Framework

The legislative framework ensures that employee practices are lawful and binding, especially to managers who are entrusted with the authority to implement

them. They also offer recourse should there be conflict in the application of workplace practices.

5.1.1 Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996)

Chapter 10 of the constitution governs the public administration by ensuring that good human resource management and career development practices to maximise human potential are instilled.

5.1.2 Public Service Act (103 of 1994)

Guides the organisation and administration of the public service about the conditions of employment as these have a bearing on the supervisor-supervisee relationships. Supervisors can use their positions of power to use conditions of employment to the benefit of supervisees or use them to discriminate and oppress them.

5.1.3 Labour Relations Act (66 of 1995)

Puts emphasis on good human resource management and career development practices. Public institutions are urged to utilise personnel management practices that are based on ability, objectivity and fairness.

5.1.4 Employment Equity Act (55 of 1998)

Chapter 3 of the Employment Equity Act provides for the implementation of affirmative action measures, consultation between managers and employees, disclosure of information, all of which were acknowledged as significantly contributing to job performance and impacting on the supervisor-supervisee relationship.

5.1.5 White Paper on Human Resource Management in the Public Service (1997)

Chapter 4 provides a structure in components of employee retention such as human resource planning, succession planning and working conditions should be managed.

5.1.6 Public Service Regulations (2001)

Guides managers on how to institute human resource planning, design compensation systems, manage working conditions, administer procedures for promotions, institute performance management and development and develop training.

5.2 Supervisor-Supervisee Relations Within the Public Administration and Public Management Environment

The supervisor-supervisee relationship takes place

within the public administration environment because it is governed by legislative framework. The terms public administration and public management are sometimes used interchangeably whereas they are arguably not similar. The implementation of legislative framework is done within the public sector domain and thus involves public administration and management. Public administration is defined as a process that involves organisations and human resources implementing requirements and regulations, which are in a form of policies that are assigned and supervised by the legislation. Public administration is defined as the involvement of policies and legislation by human resources within organisations (Coetzee, 1988; Zake, 2011). Public administration is said to be a combination of theory and practice designed to promote superior understanding of government and its relationship with the society it governs. It is about the encouragement of the development of and engagement on public policy. Public management on the other hand refers to the performance of tasks related to policy implementation in publicly supported programmes. It involves basic management skills such as planning, leading, organising and controlling (Jones, Thompson & Zumeta, 1988). The difference between the two systems is that public management involves dealing with the entire government and hence has political undertone because it deals with policies that are responsive to the needs of society whilst the latter is performed within organisations and has little or no political connotation. Public administration is therefore sustained by political power because it involves the administrative decisions that are meant to serve the public.

The challenge on public administration and management according to Masuku & Jili (2019), is the separation of the two or knowing when and how to implement each when carrying out duties. Since public administration duties are carried out by employees, they are thus not concerned with politics and as such, when politics interfere with their daily performance, it causes tension. This in turn then affects the relationship between them and their supervisors, who most of the time, have political pressure to carry out certain functions. The climate within organisations, whether political or cultural has an impact on supervisor-supervisee relationship, especially if there is a haphazard implementation of public administration and public management. Skilled supervisors are thus needed to know when and how to interface the two concepts such that

there is no interference in their relationships with their subordinates. It is also imperative that supervisors know the difference between the two concepts, to be able to apply them in their day-to-day running of an organisation.

5.3 Leadership Behaviours and Impact on Job Performance

Supervisors by virtue of their positions within organisations, occupy leadership positions (Lok & Crawford, 2004). Supervisees are thus led by supervisors who must ascertain that performance agreements are in place, they must guide, motivate, lead and educate supervisees where necessary. As previously alluded, when the relationship between the supervisor and supervisee is positive, it has the ability to yield good results for an organisation, should it be negative, it has deleterious effect on the attainment of organisational goals. Most of the reviewed literature has agreed that immense research has been carried out on the positive side of leadership, however there is still a vacuum in research about the destructive side of leadership behaviours (Kemper, 2016). There may be several reasons why supervisors mistreat their subordinates and the causes of such behaviour may stem from political interference in administrative functions to poorly motivated supervisors. Whilst it is the responsibility of human resources to manage the relationship between the supervisor and supervisee through workplace policies, the attention of human resources is argued to be more on managing subordinates than on supervisors. Mehlape (2017) argues that the role of human resources is to focus on both the supervisor and supervisee using available legislation, whilst also focusing on organisational success. Supervisors who do not only focus on work, but the well-being of their subordinates are said to assist in creating an enabling environment for their subordinates to reach their personal and organisational goals. Happy employees are said to have a positive view of the organisation, work hard in assisting organisations meet set goals. That is said to create job satisfaction and make employees valuable assets of organisations.

Although supervisors as leaders may choose different leadership styles, it is however not important as long as supervisees are happy and tasks are carried out with ease. The type of leadership style should yield positive results for the organisation, where there is ambience between supervisors, supervisees and the goals of an organisation. The transactional and

transformational leadership styles if chosen, have the ability to propel employees to meet their basic needs such as the ability to provide for their families. They must also be assisted to reach self-actualisation needs, where they are able to be creative, to grow and to develop themselves. Creating an environment for self-actualisation makes organisations retain their human resources as valuable assets. Besides workplace benefits such as policies and other incentives, supervisors have role in creating good work spaces.

5.4 Abusive Supervision and Impact on Job Performance

Performance management is the crux of any organisation since it is the area where organisations can track the achievement of goals and this role is carried out by supervisors. Performance management is defined as a management process of identifying, appraising and the development of employee performance (Selepe, 2018; Bester & Hofisi, 2019). In its totality, performance management is about performance measurement, having targets and rewarding those performing well or sanctioning those who are not performing well. The success of performance management as a function depends on the management ability of supervisors, leadership skills and the ability to inspire employee innovation (Andrews, 2014; Jansen & Hlongwane, 2019). There are institutions that offer performance bonuses in a form of financial rewards as motivation for employees to work hard. The award of performance bonuses has received its fair share of criticism because it is argued that supervisors are mostly to use it to alienate other employee. Performance bonuses are argued to can be used as a weapon to victimise employees that are not liked, whilst compensating those that are likeable despite employees performing the same functions. It is contended that financial rewards are not the sole motivational factor for employees to work hard. By creating an enabling environment, where employees get involved in decision making and be able to be innovative, organisations create a sense of belonging for employees where job performance becomes more important instead of fuelling financial incentives (Jansen & Hlongwane, 2019). Paul (2010) posits that good working conditions can be a motivating factor for employees.

This paper would be deficient if toxic supervision is not discussed within the supervisor-supervisee relationship, to reveal its impact on the job performance. Tepper (2000:178) defines abusive

supervision as "sustained display of hostile verbal and non-verbal behaviours". Behaviour such as bullying, emotional abuse, victimisation, workplace aggression, yelling, belittling, silent treatment and withholding information by supervisors is classified as abusive supervision (Kemper, 2016; Laila, Salmaan & Rasheed, 2019). This kind of behaviour is looked at in terms of power relationships in which the supervisor is the one who is in power and can in certain instances, display this hostile behaviour towards subordinates. Abusive supervisors are said to make insistent and excessive demands from employees they do not like, with full knowledge that they would not be able to meet the demands. Such supervisors, if not timeously assisted and managed can be costly to organisations due to them creating hostile work environments (Tepper, Carr, Breaux, Geider, Hu & Hua, 2009; Mawritz, 2014; Shoss, Jiang & Probst, 2014). Abusive supervision creates disillusionment amongst employees where they do not identify and can even start stealing valuables or time from their employers. Abusive supervision can also cause psychological problems such as anxiety, frustration, depression and burnout leading to organisations losing valuable employees. Whilst it can be interpreted as an infringement of human rights, it can also be a form of constructive dismissal because it creates a toxic environment which makes employees unhappy leading them to resigning from work. Zhang & Bednall (2016) attributes destructive behaviour from supervisors as stemming from their own negative experiences. It is however, acknowledged that more research needs to be carried out on why supervisors choose destructive behaviours. It should also be acknowledged that not much has also been researched on managing abusive supervisees.

5.5 Political Interference in the Appointment of Senior Managers and the Impact on Supervisor-Supervisee Relations

Political interference is defined as the involvement of politics into management functions such as planning, staffing, budgeting and reporting, amongst others (Mfuru, Sarwatt & Kanir, 2018). Political interference in the appointment of staff is said to be more prevalent in Africa as compared to other continents (Rauch & Evans, 2000; Wangwe, 2012). This is because the appointments are normally based on comradeship rather than qualifications and skills for a particular job, which compromises the management in organisations (Heywood, 1997;

Bendor, Daniel & Michael, 2003; Pretorius, 2017; Mfuru *et al.*, 2018). Undoubtedly, that also spills into the day-to-day running of organisations leading to social ills such as corruption. In South Africa, political interference in administrative functions is said to stem from the African National Congress' policies that advocate for the appointment of comrades in senior management posts (Mafunisa, 2003). Whilst not criticising the appointment as such, the argument is for the appointment of suitable people because those within organisations who have the qualifications and skills get frustrated with the appointment of unqualified and unskilled people (Netshitenzhe, 2013; Tshishonga, 2014). This frustration is most often a contributory factor in the negative relationship between supervisors and their subordinates. This mostly happens because those who are political appointees often lack the skills and expertise for the job they are deployed to and must then rely on those already on the job and have the skills and expertise but lack political connections. The interface of politics in administration is a sensitive matter which if handled well, can lead to flourishing organisations that reach their goals by having happy employees. The South African Constitution puts it clearly that the employment of people should be based their skills, be fair and just, whilst at the same time addressing the racial discrimination imbalances of the past (RSA, 1996).

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

The achievement of organizational goals and retention of employees rely much on the human resources of an organization. The relationship between supervisors and supervisees play a crucial role in the creation of vibrant workplaces and thus the retention of employees. Supervisors play both leadership and management roles and by failing to instil a positive relation between themselves and their supervisees can have a negative impact on job performance resulting in the failure of organisations to meet their goals. Since the supervisor-supervisee take place within the public administration and management sphere, political interference in the recruitment process can cause poor relations between supervisors and their subordinates.

It recommended that:

- Organisations put more emphasis on relationships amongst its employees instead of results at any cost. Programmes such as the employee

health and wellness programme (EHWP) and labour relations should be implemented fully for control and have remedial strategies in case of destructive relationships. Relationships are governed by policies and there should be monitoring on the implementation, to improve the attainment of organisational goals.

- Training and development programmes should be instituted to empower supervisors and supervisees on the correct organisational behaviour.
- The South African National School of Governance to make courses on the management of personnel compulsory for all management positions in government.
- Awareness campaigns and research on employee job satisfaction should be routinely carried out, to gauge and root out behaviour from supervisors and subordinates that have a potential of creating toxicity in an organisation. Employees should be able to understand and identify destructive behaviours from both supervisors and supervisees.
- Preventative strategies in a form of policies such as sexual harassment and bullying, with clear channels of reporting, should be implemented and monitored to protect employees.

References

- Andrews, R. 2014. *Performance Management and Public Service Improvement*. Public Policy Institute for Wales, PPIW Report No. 3. Available at: <http://ppi.wales.gov.uk/files/2014>. Accessed 4 October 2021.
- Bass, B.M. & Avolio, B.J. 1994. *Improving Organizational Effectiveness through Transformational Leadership*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Bendor, J., Daniel, D. & Michael T. 2003. A Behavioural Model of Turnout. *American Political Science Review*, 97:261-80.
- Bernard, J.M. & Goodyear, R.K. (eds.). 2014. *Fundamentals of clinical supervision*. (5th ed.). Boston, MA: Pearson.
- Bester, J. & Hofisi, C. 2019. Analysing conditions necessary for effective implementing of performance management systems: The Botswana experience. *Journal of Public Administration and Development Alternatives*, 4(1):67-85.
- Bolden, R., Gosling, J., Marturano, A. & Dennison, P. 2003. *A review of leadership theory and competency frameworks*. Centre for Leadership Studies. University of Exeter: United Kingdom.
- Coetzee, W.A.J. 1988. *Public Administration: A South African Introductory Perspective*. Pretoria: JL Van Schaik Publishers (Pty) Ltd.
- Derue, D.S., Nahrgang, J.D., Wellman, N. & Humphrey, S.E. 2011. Trait and behavioural theories of leadership: An integration and meta-analytic test of their relative validity. *Personnel Psychology*, 64:7-52
- Heywood, P. 1997. Political corruption: Problems and perspectives. *Political Studies*, 45(3):417-435.
- Jansen, M.R. & Hlongwane P. 2019. *Employee Performance Reward and Recognition Inequity in the Western Cape Provincial Department of Transport and Public Works*. The 4th Annual International Conference on Public Administration and Development Alternatives held at Kempton Park, Johannesburg, South Africa 3-5 July 2019.
- Jones, G.R., George, M.J. & Hill, C.W.L. 2000. *Contemporary Management*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Jones, L.R., Thompson, F. & Zumeta, W. 1988. *Public Management for the new Millennium: Developing relevant and integrated professional curricula?* In the age of smart machine. New York: The future of work and power.
- Kemper, S. 2016. *"Abusive Supervision in the Workplace: An Examination of Current Research and a Proposal for Preventive Measures"*. University Honors Theses. Paper 303. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.15760/honors.248>.
- Laila, U., Salmaan, I. & Rasheed, M. 2019. Abusive supervision and workplace deviance: The moderating role of power distance, *Pakistan Journal of Commerce and Social Sciences (PJCSS)*, 13(2):334-357.
- Lok, P. & Crawford, J. 2004. The effect of organisational culture and leadership style on job satisfaction and organisational commitment, A cross national comparison. *Journal of Management Development*, 23(4):321-338.
- Mafunisa, M.J. 2003. Separation of politics from the South African public service: Rhetoric or reality. *Journal of Public Administration*, 38(2):85-101.
- Mango, E. 2018. Rethinking Leadership Theories. *Open Journal of Leadership*, 7:57-88.
- Masuku, M.M. & Jili, N.N. 2019. Public service delivery in South Africa: The political influence at local government level. *Journal of Public Affairs*, e1935.
- Mawritz, M.B., Folger, R. & Latham, G.P. 2014. Supervisors' Exceedingly Difficult Goals and Abusive Supervision: The Mediating Effects of Hindrance Stress, Anger, and Anxiety. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 35:358-372.
- Madsen, M.T. 2001. *Leadership and Management Theories Revisited*. The Danish Management Barometer (DDL) Working Paper No. 4.
- Mehlape, S.S. 2017. *The Role of Human Resource Development in Improving Municipal Service in South Africa*. The 2nd Annual International Conference on Public Administration and Development Alternatives. Gaborone, Botswana.
- Mfuru, A.W.E., Sarwatt, A.C. & Kanir G. 2018. The impact of political interference in public administration in Kibaha Town Council. *Global Journal of Political Science and Administration*, 6(4):21-31.

- Mohajane, M.P. 2017. *Job satisfaction and employee retention in the South African Police Service*. Unpublished Doctoral Thesis. University of South Africa: Pretoria.
- Netshitenzhe, J. 2013. *Why inequality matters: South African trends and interventions* Mapungubwe: Institute for Strategic Reflection (Mistra).
- Northouse, P. 2016. *Leadership Theory and Practice*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Paul, E. 2010. *Motivating Civil Servants for Reform and Performance*. United Nations Development Programme: New York.
- Pretorius, M.C. 2017. *The influence of political and administrative interaction on municipal service delivery in selected municipalities in the Free State province*. PhD Thesis. Central University of Technology. South Africa. Accessed 5 August 2021.
- Rauch, J.E. & Evans, P.B. 2000. "Bureaucratic Structure and Bureaucratic Performance in Less Developed Countries", *Journal of Public Economics*, 75(1):49-71.
- Rost, J.C. 1991. *Leadership For the Twenty-First Century*. Westport Connecticut, London: Praeger.
- Selepe, M.M. 2018. *The Assessment and Enhancement of Performance Management within the South African Local Government Environment*. The 3rd Annual International Conference on Public Administration and Development Alternatives. Stellenbosch University, Saldanha Bay, South Africa held on 6-8 July 2018.
- Sharma, M.K. & Jain, S. 2013. Leadership Management: Principles, Models and Theories. *Global Journal of Management and Business Studies*. Research India Publications, 3(3):309-318.
- Shoss, M., Jiang, L. & Probst, T.M. 2018. Bending without breaking: A two study amination of employee resilience in the face of job insecurity. *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology*, 23:112-126.
- South Africa. 1994. *Public Service Act 103 of 1994*. Government Printer: Pretoria.
- South Africa. 1995. *Labour Relations Act (66 of 1995)*. Government Printer: Pretoria.
- South Africa. 1996. *Constitution of the Republic of South Africa*. Government Printer: Pretoria.
- South Africa. 1997. *Basic Conditions of Employment Act 75 of 1997*. Government Printer: Pretoria.
- South Africa. 1997. *White Paper on Human Management in the Public Service*. Government Printer: Pretoria.
- South Africa. 1998. *Employment Equity Act (55 of 1998)*. Government Printer: Pretoria.
- South Africa. 2001. *Public Service Regulations (Notice R.1 of 2001)*. Government Printer: Pretoria.
- Tepper, B.J., Carr, J.C., Breaux, D.M., Geider, S., Hu, C. & Hua, W. 2009. Abusive supervision, intentions to quit, and employees workplace deviance: A power/dependence analysis. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 109(2):156-167.
- Tepper, B.J. 2000. Consequences of abusive supervision. *Academy of Management Journal*, 43(2):178-190.
- Tshishonga, N. 2014. Cadre development and its implications on service delivery in South Africa: A human development capability approach. *Journal of Public Administration*, 49(3):891-908.
- Wangwe, F. 2012. *Overview of social cognitive theory and of self-efficacy*. Available at: <http://www.emory.edu/EDUCATION/mfp/eff.html>. Accessed 13 October 2021.
- Watkins, C.J. Jr. 2014. The supervisory alliance as quintessential integrative variable. *Journal of Contemporary Psychotherapy*, 44:151-161.
- Zake, A. 2011. Gender Issues in Public Administration in Latvia. *Journal of Management Theory and Studies for Rural Business and Infrastructure Development*, 2(360):271-278.
- Zhang, Y. & Bednall, T.C. 2016. Antecedents of abusive supervision: A meta-analytic review. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 139:455-471.