

RESEARCH BRIEFS

Managing "Open" Employees: Do Resources and Leadership Style Matter?

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For most managers, hiring and retaining creative, imaginative, and self-directed employees is often a challenge. Yet it's likely to be perceived as a worthy pursuit nonetheless. Why? Largely because most managers would say that employees with such traits (described by experts as having a high degree of "openness to experience") are likely to be outstanding performers. In short, managers often believe that the characteristics associated with openness to experience are something that brings added value to the firm.

But are they right? It turns out that the answer may not be so simple. Previous research has suggested that openness to experience doesn't necessarily ensure good job performance by employees. Indeed, some researchers have concluded that the relationship between openness and job performance is either non-existent or elusive. So, are there impediments or obstacles that prevent employees who are open to experience from self-actualizing and becoming superior performers on the job? And conversely, are there certain factors that can help such employees flourish in work environments?

To help answer these questions, Simon Moss, Janis McFarland, Simon Ngu, and Anna Kijowska, all of Monash University, recently conducted two interesting studies. They focused on employees from both the public and private sectors to determine what might hinder or hold back employees who are open to experience from being committed and outstanding performers. In particular, Moss and his colleagues explored how such employees responded to: 1) resource availability in the workplace; and 2) different leadership styles.

To examine the impact of workplace resource availability on employees, Moss and his colleagues surveyed some 300 Australian public sector employees. In doing so, they explored how the lack of resources (scarcity) in the workplace relates to the affective and normative commitment of employees who display a high degree of openness to experience. Moss and his colleagues suggest that when resources are limited, such employees will be less committed to the organization. Conversely, when resources are plentiful these employees should manifest higher levels of commitment. The idea behind these predictions is that creative, self-managing employees are especially concerned with organizational support—when they have it, they may be intensely loyal to the firm, but without it, their commitment will flag. After all, resources (e.g., materials, equipment, money) are required for the kind of innovativeness, experimentation, and creativity that employees who are open to experience find attractive.

In their second study, Moss and his colleagues examined the impact of leadership style on the relationship between employees' openness to experience and their organizational commitment. The key question they addressed was whether specific types of leadership (transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire) might have a positive effect on employees who possess a high level of openness to experience. Moss and his colleagues suggested that transformational leadership would positively strengthen the connection between employee openness and their organizational commitment. In essence, transformational leadership provides employees with: 1) intellectual stimulation, 2) inspirational motivation, 3) idealized influence, and 4) individual consideration, particularly when compared to transactional leaders (i.e., leaders who adopt a *quid quo pro* approach with subordinates). Put another way, transformational leaders behave in ways that are a better fit to the characteristics and values inherent in em-

ployees with high levels of openness (i.e., employees who challenge the status quo, embrace innovation, and so on). Consequently, transformational leadership should be associated with more positive feelings and stronger organizational loyalty in employees who are high in openness to experience.

To test these ideas, Moss and his colleagues again relied on survey methods, this time in a sample of Australian manufacturing workers. They measured supervisory leadership styles with the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (a well-known instrument). As expected, transformational leadership had a positive relationship with both affective and normative commitment for employees with high openness. However, Moss and his colleagues cautioned that their study could not tease out precisely why and how transformational leaders seemed to have a positive influence on employees with high openness.

Nevertheless, this research offers two broad implications for managers to consider. First, ensuring that employees who are creative, innovative, and self-directed (i.e., with high openness to experience) have sufficient resources on the job may be critical for obtaining their commitment and a sense of worth. Moreover, without those resources it may be difficult for such employees to deliver the creativity and innovativeness that made them so attractive to the organization in the first place.

Second, Moss and his colleagues have once again demonstrated that leadership matters, especially for employees with a creative streak. Indeed, leadership style seems to matter a great deal to employees who are open to experience. And a transformational leadership approach, more so than other styles (e.g. transactional and *lassiez-faire*), may align best with such employees. In short, the stimulation and motivation provided by transformational leaders may help free employees who are the most open to new experiences to be at their committed, creative, and innovative best. And that, in the end, is a win-win result for everyone.

Source: Moss, S.A., McFarland, J., Ngu, S., & Kijowska, A. (2007). Maintaining an open mind to closed individuals: The effect of resource availability and leadership style on the

association between openness to experience and organizational commitment. *Journal of Research in Personality*, 41, 259–275.

Assertiveness and Effective Leadership: Is There a Tipping Point?

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Leadership remains an elusive concept. Yet people somehow know when leadership is present or absent in an organization. And one of the characteristics that people sometimes look for in leaders is assertiveness. But where should leaders draw the line when it comes to assertiveness? In short, when speaking and acting to advance their interests, how assertive should leaders be? Of course, assertiveness can run the gamut. On the low end of the continuum, leaders with low levels of assertiveness may be viewed as too passive, while at the high end, leaders with extremely assertive behavior may be viewed as too hostile. In between these two extremes are many possible additional descriptors for leader assertiveness. Generally, however, leaders can exhibit low assertiveness (e.g., being very passive and deferential to others), moderate assertiveness (e.g., mounting a defense when provoked), or high assertiveness (e.g., pursuing objectives with hostility). And in the end, depending on the situation, perhaps a particular level of assertiveness may mean the difference between leader success and failure.

That said, the nature of the relationship between the assertiveness and leadership isn't that clear. Indeed, many unanswered questions remain. For instance, how do we view assertive leaders? And do various levels of assertiveness have any differential impact on relationships (social outcomes) or goal achievement (instrumental outcomes) in ways that reflect well (or poorly) on leaders? These are some of the questions that Daniel Ames and Francis Flynn, both of Columbia