CHAPTER 24

THE IMPLICATIONS OF SITUATIONAL STRENGTH FOR HRM

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ABSTRACT

Personality does not predict behavior equally well in all situations. Rather, the extent to which personality predicts behavior is influenced by the "strength" of the situation (Mischel, 1977). This chapter introduces the concept of situational strength to HR practitioners and outlines several implications and recommendations for human resource management (HRM). Importantly, we show how situational strength provides for a way to re-conceptualize the human resource (HR) function as a whole. When understood and applied properly, situational strength facilitates peak performance and minimizes employee strain, thereby allowing for a greater contribution by HR to firm performance (Haggerty & Wright 2010).

Definition and Conceptualizations

Situational strength refers to the extent to which a situation provides information regarding "appropriate" behavioral responses (Mischel, 1977; Snyder & Ickes, 1985). Strong situations provide powerful cues that lead individuals to behave

similarly. Weak situations provide few or inconsistent cues, leading individuals to behave in the way that is most natural and comfortable to them. As a consequence, personality should influence behavior more in weak situations, but not in strong situations.

The classic example of a strong situation is a red traffic light. Here, most people engage in the prescribed course of action (namely, to stop one's vehicle) because information about the appropriateness of this behavior is so well defined that it overrides most people's natural tendencies. A yellow traffic light is a weaker situation because appropriate behaviors are less well defined and norms are inconsistent. Here, personality is likely to be the primary influencer of behavior: daring individuals are more likely to speed through the yellow light, whereas cautious individuals are more likely to stop.

Researchers who have studied situational strength have done so by conceptualizing it in many different ways. A few recent examples include the extent of: ambiguity, autonomy, external constraints, availability of suitable alternatives, meta-features of the HRM system (such as consistency), feedback regarding previous errors, and consequences associated with success or failure (Barrick & Mount, 1993; Bowen & Ostroff, 2004; Gill, Boies, Finegan, & McNally, 2005; LePine, Hollenbeck, Ilgen, Colquitt, & Ellis, 2002; Wallace, Paulson, Lord, & Bond, 2005; Van Iddekinge, McFarland, & Raymark, 2007; Withey, Gellatly, & Annett, 2005). A recent review of this literature (Meyer, Dalal, & Hermida, 2010) suggests that existing conceptualizations of situational strength can be grouped into four broad categories (known as "facets"). The following paragraphs briefly introduce these facets. Implications of this facet structure for HRM are then outlined in a subsequent section.

The first facet, "clarity," involves the extent to which information regarding work responsibilities is readily available and easy to understand. Situations are strengthened when information is plentiful and understandable. Situations are weakened when information is scarce or unintelligible. For example, this facet can be increased by crafting unambiguous policies pertaining to important organizational behaviors. Such an increase in situational strength can beneficially impact organizational functioning by making employee behavior more predictable.

The second facet, "consistency," involves the extent to which various pieces of information regarding work responsibilities are compatible with each other. Situations are strengthened when information from different sources (for example, the HR department versus one's supervisor) or information from the same source on different occasions conveys the same "message." Situations are weakened when information is inconsistent. This facet can be increased by ensuring

that policy manuals are kept up-to-date, employees are provided with new policy information in a timely manner, and supervisors are trained to convey policy information in a consistent way. To the extent that a given employee receives the same message from multiple sources, this reduces the likelihood of idiosyncratic interpretation and behavior.

The third facet, "constraints," involves the extent to which an employee's freedom to make decisions or take action on the job is limited by outside forces. Situations are strengthened when outside forces (such as close supervision, performance-monitoring systems, and government regulations) limit the range of possible actions. Situations are weakened when personal latitude is granted to the employee. For example, employees whose work is tightly scheduled for them will likely show less variability in terms of arrival, break, and departure times. On the other hand, the timing of these events among those who experience flexible scheduling is more likely to be influenced by their own personalities and preferences.

The fourth facet, "consequences," involves the extent to which an employee's decisions or actions on the job lead to important outcomes. Situations are strengthened when the employee's decisions or actions have a significant positive or negative impact on the welfare of any person (including, of course, the employee himself or herself) or entity (the organization, society as a whole). Situations are weakened when outcomes from the employee's decisions or actions are less impactful. For example, employees who commonly experience situations wherein important outcomes such as the health and safety of others are in their hands (such as emergency medical technicians) are more likely to demonstrate prescribed behaviors such as diligence and caution. Thus, all things being equal, employees' personalities are more likely to shine through in less consequential situations.

These four facets, however, do not exist in a vacuum. On the one hand, it is reasonable to expect that some occupations that are defined by high consequences are also defined by high clarity, consistency, and constraints. For example, operational jobs within nuclear power plants are likely to score very high on all four facets of situational strength. On the other hand, the four facets of situational strength do not necessarily operate in concert in all jobs. For example, the job of a CEO is extremely consequential, but often much less clear or constrained. When making predictions about employees' likely behaviors, it is therefore important to not only understand the nature and level of each facet, but also the overall (or "global") strength of the situation. Indeed, when situational strength is more fully appreciated and understood at both the facet and global levels, it has the potential to have profound implications for HRM systems.

Implications for HRM

Predictive Power of Personality

One of the primary implications of situational strength is that it influences the extent to which personality predicts employee performance. In fact, situational strength has been referred to as the single most important situational force influencing the predictive power of personality (Snyder & Ickes, 1985). Again, the effects of employees' personalities on their performance are minimized in strong situations and maximized in weak situations.

For example, in situations wherein conscientious behavior is explicitly expected and rewarded (that is, strong situations), employees should exhibit uniformly high levels of conscientious behavior, even if this behavior runs contrary to their personality (see Minbashian, Wood, & Beckmann, 2010, for a conceptually similar demonstration). However, in situations wherein conscientious behavior is neither expected nor rewarded (that is, weak situations), high levels of conscientious behavior will only be demonstrated by those with a conscientious personality (Fleeson, 2007). Indeed, a major reason for the disappointingly low observed relationship between personality and job performance is likely to be the neglect of situational strength in contemporary research (Murphy & Dzieweczynski, 2005). Consistent with this perspective, Meyer, Dalal, and Bonaccio (2009) demonstrated that the relationship between conscientiousness and overall job performance in prototypically weak jobs is about 2.5 times larger than it is in prototypically strong jobs.

Potential Side Effects of Strong Situations

The current discussion has primarily focused on the benefits of strong situations (that is, increased performance and behavioral predictability). It is important to note, however, that there are a number of potential costs that likely accompany increases in situational strength. For example, psychologists have long argued that humans generally have a need for autonomy (Deci & Ryan, 1987) and that threats to this need are not viewed favorably (Brehm & Brehm, 1981). When situations encourage behaviors that are counter to their natural tendencies, it is possible that employees will react negatively—for example, they may exhibit increased levels of psychological exhaustion (Perry, Witt, Penney, & Atwater, 2010) as well as higher job dissatisfaction and intent to quit. Situational strength, therefore, is likely to be a double-edged sword. If not utilized with caution, it may lead to negative employee attitudes and emotions, even as it increases employee performance.

Recommendations for HRM

Modern situational strength research is able to shed light on many HRM practices. First, organizational decision-makers should be aware of the levels of situational strength associated with various jobs. Consider, for example, the jobs listed on the Occupational Information Network (www.onetonline.org; see also Peterson, Mumford, Borman, Jeanneret, Fleishman, Levin, et al., 2001). Among the jobs with very high levels of situational strength are "nuclear equipment operation technicians" and "subway and streetcar operators"; among the jobs with very low levels of situational strength are "curators" and "poets, lyricists, and creative writers" (Meyer, Dalal, & Bonaccio, 2009). In those jobs with very high levels of situational strength, theory and data suggest that personality will "matter" less than it will in prototypically weaker jobs. Personality should therefore be given less weight when selecting employees in very high-strength jobs. To the extent that job analyses and utility analyses do not account for the effects of strong situations, the return on investment for an organization's selection system will be over-estimated.

Organizations should also be aware that changes in the tasks performed and/or the technology used in a given job may greatly alter its situational strength over time. For example, increased automation will generally lead to greater situational strength and a corresponding decline in the impact of personality. Further, as a given job becomes stronger or weaker over time, those employees who were selected to work in the original environment may be less suited to their new environment. Indeed, organizational decision-makers should be aware that numerous HR practices can have a substantial impact on situational strength.

HR Practices and Situational Strength

Several modern HR practices weaken situations. For example, flexible work schedules, tele-work, virtual teams, and virtual workplaces increasingly allow employees to work at the time and place of their choosing. Furthermore, practices such as job enrichment, participative decision making, autonomous work teams, and employee empowerment increase employee decision-making latitude and decrease organizational control. These HR practices are therefore likely to increase the impact of employee personality on performance. At the same time, however, several HR practices also work to strengthen situations. For example, training, socialization/orientation, close supervision, performance monitoring, pay-for-performance, and goal-focused leadership increase the influence and salience of the organizational environment. These HR practices are therefore likely to decrease the impact of personality on employee performance.

In addition to its implications for individual HR practices, situational strength offers a simple, yet useful, way of conceptualizing the HRM system as a whole (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004; Haggerty & Wright, 2010; see also Meyer & Dalal, 2009). One of the primary functions of an HR system is that it facilitates the communication of information from the firm (and its agents) to the employee (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004). Consequently, organizational decision-makers should consider the ramifications of individual HR practices on situational strength, with the goal of aligning these practices, rather than having them work at cross-purposes.

Well-aligned HR situational strength-relevant practices allow an organization to more precisely and efficiently achieve its strategic goals. The explicit incorporation of the situational strength perspective into HR practices would, therefore, answer calls for HR to adopt a systems orientation (Haggerty & Wright, 2010) and enable the HR function to serve as a competitive advantage. A potentially complicating factor, however, is that different employees are likely to prefer different levels of situational strength.

Preferences for Situational Strength Versus Weakness

Many employees can be expected to dislike strong situations. Three examples suffice to illustrate this point: (1) a lack of autonomy is associated with harmful consequences (Gagné & Bhave, 2011; Spector, 1986); (2) employees dislike having their day-to-day job performance closely monitored (Bates & Holton, 1995; Smith & Tabak, 2009); and (3) some employees actually prefer ambiguity and unpredictability (Neuberg & Newsom, 1993). On the other hand, many employees prefer strong situations. For example, certain employees need high levels of structure and closure (Neuberg & Newsom, 1993; Whitson & Galinsky, 2008). A misfit between preferred and actual levels of situational strength on the job is likely to lead to increased stress, dissatisfaction, and intent to quit (Kristof-Brown & Guay, 2011; Kristof-Brown, Zimmerman, & Johnson, 2005).

The existence of divergent employee preferences creates complications for organizations, because HR practices cannot reasonably be expected to be so highly customizable as to account for the unique preferences of each and every employee. One potential solution involves incorporating job applicants' preferences for situational strength into the employee selection process, such that only applicants who are comfortable with the optimal level of situational strength are hired. However, this approach is not without limitations because, as alluded to previously, situational strength can change over time within a job. Moreover, employee preferences for situational strength can also change over time—for example, new employees generally desire more guidance than do experienced employees.

Fortunately, HR practices are not the only influence on the situational strength experienced by employees. Immediate supervisors also play a major role. For example, supervisors can provide a high degree of autonomy to some subordinates while closely monitoring and directing the work of others. Supervisors can also use their power to reward and punish (French & Raven, 1959) to a greater extent with some employees than with others. Thus, in order to achieve optimal fit, supervisors should communicate regularly with each subordinate regarding the level of situational strength the subordinate desires and the level the supervisor is willing and able to provide.

In conclusion, situational strength has the potential to play an important role in HR practices related to employee selection, job design, job attitudes, and attrition/turnover. That being said, it is important that organizations strive to balance their desire to control and standardize employees' desires for freedom and autonomy.

Summary

This chapter introduces HR practitioners to the modern conceptualization of situational strength. In addition to being one of the most pervasive situational forces predicted to affect employee behavior (Meyer, Dalal, & Hermida, 2010; Snyder & Ickes, 1985), situational strength represents a useful way of aligning an organization's overall HRM system in order to achieve the organization's goals. The concept of situational strength therefore allows for a theory of HRM—that is, an understanding of how specific HR practices function (Haggerty & Wright, 2010; Ulrich, 1997), why they influence behavior in particular ways, and how to maximize their monetary productivity value (Haggerty & Wright, 2010; Huselid, 1995; Steffy, 1991). Ultimately, an effective understanding of situational strength can be used by HR professionals to facilitate the fine balance between the organization's desire for consistently high performance and the employee's desire for freedom and agency.

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