The Effect of Organizational Justice on Salespersons' Perceived Ethical Climate, Organizational Commitment and Turnover Intentions

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Developing an ethical work climate is important for organizations. This study analyzed how organizational justice influences salespersons' perceptions of the degree to which their work environment is ethical. Results indicated that two aspects of organizational justice, distributive and procedural justice, had a direct relationship on salespersons' perception of an ethical work climate and their organizational commitment. An ethical work climate was related to organizational commitment and turnover intentions. The results indicate that perceived fairness has an important influence on salespersons' perception of ethical work climate.

Key words: ethical work climate, organizational commitment, turnover

I. INTRODUCTION

Organizations want to have an ethical work climate. However, it appears to be particularly important in a sales environment. Salespeople perform a boundary spanning role between the buying and selling organizations. Customers report more trust and willingness to continue purchasing from salespeople who behave ethically [37]. Thus, creating an ethical work environment is an important element in building a long-term relationship with customers.

Research also has focused on ethical climate because of its association with salespersons' job attitudes and behavior [2, 12, 24, 51]. Although organizations have made efforts to control unethical behavior, unfortunately it still exists as witnessed by the recent business scandals. Thus, understanding the reasons for unethical behavior is just as important as understanding the consequences of the behavior. Most research investigating the antecedents of ethical climate has focused on the role of the leader in creating an ethical work environment [e.g. 5]. But, another variable organizational justice may also be an important antecedent to ethical climate. While few studies have examined how perceptions of justice influence perceptions of an ethical work climate, research has shown that employees engage in more counterproductive work behavior when they perceive organizational injustice [22]. For example, Treviño and Weaver [47] reported that when employees perceive they are being treated fairly in the organization, they are more likely to behave ethically. While sparse research exists analyzing the influence of organizational justice on perceptions of ethical work climate, organizational justice and ethics have the potential to complement each other [11]. Given these results organizational justice appears to be an important variable related to perceptions of an ethical work climate and warrants further investigation.

The purpose of this study is to investigate the antecedents and outcomes of ethical climate among salespeople. This study makes two important contributions to research investigating unethical behavior. First, this study analyzes organizational justice as an antecedent variable to ethical work climate. Second, this study examines how perceptions of an ethical work climate are related to the degree to which salespeople are committed to the goals and well-being of their organization and their intentions to leave. Understanding variables related to turnover is important given the high costs of replacing employees. Thus, understanding the relationship among organizational justice, ethical work climate, organizational commitment and turnover is important.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTEHSES

Ethical work climate

Ethical climate is "the prevailing perceptions of typical organizational practice and procedures that has ethical content" [50, p. 101]. It provides guidance to employees regarding the organization's expectations for ethical behavior [2] and influences how employees behave [31, 46, 52]. Employees will behave more ethically when they work in an environment where organizational leaders adhere to high ethical standards [6, 48].

While creating an ethical work climate is important in all parts of the organization, it is especially important in a sales environment. Because salespeople often work without direct supervision, they can be susceptible to ethical dilemmas [52]. The pressure to achieve quota may encourage salespeople to behave unethically [40]. Also, customers report greater trust and commitment to a relationship when the salesperson behaves ethically [37].

Organizational Justice

Organizational justice is concerned with employees' perceived fairness in the workplace [7]. Justice is an important concept for understanding

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how people behave in the organization. Organizational justice is comprised of distributive justice, the perceived fairness of outcomes, and procedural justice, the perceived fairness of the process and procedures used to determine outcomes. While organizational justice has been studied extensively during the last 40 years, few studies have examined its influence in a sales force setting [4, 22, 24].

Organizational justice began with distributive justice. Distributive justice examines what occurs when outcomes are allocated differentially. For example, when a pay raise or promotion is given to employees they develop a perception of the fairness concerning how management allocated the reward. The origin of distributive justice is Adams work on equity theory [1]. Equity theory involves the equality of ratios between what employees contribute to the organization (inputs) and what they receive from the organization in exchange for their inputs (outcomes). The balance of the ratio between inputs and outcomes determines the employee's perception of equity or inequity. In order to determine equity the employee will evaluate his/her situation against another person who is similar to himself or herself. For example, a salesperson will expect to receive a similar outcome (pay or promotion) compared to another salesperson who performs at the same level (inputs). Equity occurs when the salesperson perceives that outcomes are distributed fairly when compared to the other salesperson. A perception of inequity occurs when, for example, the salesperson outperforms another salesperson, but the other salesperson receives a promotion or higher pay raise.

Procedural justice started with Thibaut and Walker's [4] work regarding litigants' perceived justice in legal proceedings. Thibaut and Walker [4] compared the American legal system with the European legal system. They concluded that participants viewed the American legal system as fairer than the European legal system because disputants were allowed a voice in the process. An important conclusion to their research was that the disputants viewed the system as being reasonably fair even when the outcome was disadvantageous to them.

Procedural justice was introduced to organizational behavior by Folger and Greenberg [16]. They emphasized that while outcomes are important to perceptions of fairness the process by which these outcomes are derived also is important. Similar to the conclusion reached by Thibaut and Walker [44] one of the most important aspects of procedural justice is allowing people a voice in the process. Research indicates that regardless of the outcome participants will view the process as fairer when they are allowed a voice in the process [17].

While organizational justice is related to a variety of job outcomes, what is the relationship between organizational justice and ethical work climate? Organizational justice involves ethical assumptions about how people should be treated [15]. Only a few studies have investigated the relationship between organizational justice and ethical work climate [32, 39, 47]. Theoretically the two variables should be related. For example, distributive justice involves evaluating if an outcome is ethical and moral [14]. One of Leventhal's [26] six attributes of procedural justice fairness involves the process being based on prevailing ethical standards.

According to Treviño and Weaver [47] both ethical climate and organizational justice focus on similar outcomes. For example, Treviño and Weaver [47] examined employees' perceptions of fairness and various ethics-related outcomes. Their findings indicated that unethical behavior was more likely to occur when employees perceived they were not being treated fairly, but when treated fairly they were more likely to report unethical behavior to management.

Using social exchange theory and the norm of reciprocity [3] when employees perceive they have been treated fairly by management (organizational justice) they will feel an obligation to reciprocate through helpful work behaviors (behaving ethically) and abstain from unethical behaviors that are destructive to the organization [5]. In other words, if the supervisor rewards ethical behavior while punishing employees who behave unethically, a perception of fairness should exist. When the supervisor is fair in how he or she distributes rewards (distributive justice), and is fair in the process that leads to an outcome (procedural justice), employees should perceive that their work environment is more ethical. Although empirical results are limited, theoretically organizational justice and ethical work climate should be related.

Hypothesis 1: Distributive justice is related positively to ethical work climate.
Hypothesis 2: Procedural justice is related positively to ethical work climate.

Organizational Justice, Ethical Work Climate and Organizational Commitment

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Meyer and Allen [27, p. 67] define affective commitment as "the employee's emotional attachment to, identification with, and involvement in the organization." Published research has shown that both distributive justice and procedural justice are related positively to organizational commitment [8, 10].

Hypothesis 3: Distributive justice is related positively to organizational commitment.
Hypothesis 4: Procedural justice is related positively to organizational commitment.

Ethical climate has been shown to be related positively to organizational commitment [32, 43]. For example, with respect to salespeople, Valentine and Barnett [49] reported that corporate ethical values were related significantly to organizational commitment. Similar results have been reported in other studies involving salespeople [31, 51].

Hypothesis 5: Ethical work climate is related positively to organizational commitment.

Antecedents to Turnover

An abundance of research has shown that employees in both non-sales positions [19, 29] and sales positions [e.g. 13, 33, 38] who have a high commitment to their organization will display a lower intention to leave).

Hypothesis 6: Organizational commitment is related negatively to turnover intentions.

Research has found a significant negative correlation between ethical work climate and turnover intentions [21, 31, 41] with various groups of employees. Therefore, in this study ethical work climate is hypothesized to have both a direct relationship with turnover intentions and an indirect relationship to turnover intentions through organizational commitment.

Hypothesis 7: Ethical climate is related negatively to turnover intentions.

III. METHODS

Sample

Respondents were obtained using a similar procedure as employed by Miao, Lund, and Evans [30]. The sample consisted of 334 industrial salespeople from a variety of industries. The names of the salespeople were obtained by purchasing a national direct mailing list of 500 sales managers from a commercial list broker. Each sales manager was asked to distribute the questionnaire to salespeople that he or she managed and have them return the questionnaire to the researchers. Twenty three surveys sent to the sales managers were returned as undeliverable. Of the remaining 477 sales managers, 133 agreed to participate. The names of 618 salespeople were provided to the researchers. Prior to mailing the survey to the salespeople, the sales managers were asked to provide demographic data (e.g., gender, number of years employed by the company, and age) for the sales force. The purpose of collecting the data was to determine is non-response bias was a problem. Each questionnaire was numbered and then sent to the salespeople along with a cover letter explaining the purpose of the study. The salespeople were told that their responses were confidential and that the number was used only to determine if the salespeople who responded were similar in characteristics to those salespeople who chose to not respond. A total of 334 questionnaires were received from the salespeople (54%).

The demographic profile for the sample of 334 salespeople is as follows: the salespeople worked in a variety of industries including health care, computer hardware and software, and advertising; their average age was 39.2, most of them were male (270, 81%), they had an average of 9.2 years of sales experience, and a large majority of the salespeople (232) worked for companies with fewer than 100 employees (69.5%). Based on the demographic data provided by the sales managers for all of their salespeople, no significant difference was found between respondents and non-respondents. Therefore non-response bias probably is not a problem.

Measures

All of the scales have been used in prior research and have been shown to be reliable and valid. Ethical climate, organizational commitment, and turnover intentions were measured on a scale ranging from (1) strongly disagree to (5) strongly agree. *Distributive Justice* was measured using the five item scale developed by Price and Mueller [10] ($\alpha = .96$). The items were measured on a scale ranging from (1) very unfair to (5) very fair. An example of an item is "How fair has your company been in rewarding you when you consider the responsibilities you have?" *Procedural Justice* ($\alpha = .90$) was measured using the scale developed by Colquitt [9] ranging from (1) to a small extent to (5) to a large extent. An example of an item is "Have

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you been able to express your views and feelings during the performance appraisal?" *Organizational Commitment* was measured using the six-item version of the scale developed by Meyer, Allen and Smith [28] ($\alpha = 0.87$). An example of an item is "I would be very happy to spend the rest of my career in this organization." *Ethical Work Climate* was measured using the seven item scale developed by Schwepker, Ferrell, and Ingram [42] ($\alpha = .87$). An example of an item is "Unethical behavior is not tolerated." *Turnover Intentions* was measured using three items developed by Konovsky and Cropanzano [25] ($\alpha = .91$). The scale ranged from (1) very unlikely to (5) very likely. An example of an item is "How often do you think about quitting your job at this organization?"

Analytic Approach

The data were analyzed using LISREL 8 [23]. Before analyzing the hypothesized relationships, a CFA (confirmatory factor analysis) was performed. All of the items were used as indicants of the latent variables. Traditional fit indices were used to assess the fit of the hypothesized model: Goodness-of-fit (GFI), adjusted goodness-of-fit (AGFI), normed fit index (NFI), and root square error of approximation (RMSEA).

IV. RESULTS

Assessment of Measurement Model

The correlation among the variables, means, and standard deviations appear in Table 1.

A confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) of the variables was first conducted before testing the hypothesized relationships. The results of the CFA indicated a good model fit by most indices (χ^2 = 481.86, df = 340, p = .00, GFI = .90, AGFI = .88, NFI = .97, RMSEA = .037). Construct validity was assessed in four ways [20]. First, all standardized factor loadings were .7 or higher. Second, the variance extracted for all of the variables was above .5. Third, coefficient alpha and construct reliability was above .7 for all of the variables. Fourth, the variance extracted estimates among the factors was greater than the square of the correlation between the factors providing evidence of discriminant validity.

Common Method Variance

Common method variance is a potential serious problem when using cross-sectional data [34]. Harmon's CFA method was used to test statistically for common method variance. A one-factor model was compared to the measurement model. The results indicated that the χ^2 for the one-factor model was significantly greater than for the measurement model ($\Delta\chi^2$ = 4,038.34). This result indicates that common method variance is not a problem.

Hypothesis Testing

Since the CFA indicated a good model fit, the next step in analyzing the data was to test the hypothesized model. The results indicated a good fit by most indices (χ^2 = 500.65, df = 342, p = .00, GFI = .89, AGFI = .87, NFI = .97, RMSEA = .039).

The first two hypotheses investigated the relationship between organizational justice and ethical work climate. Support was found for both of the hypotheses. Distributive justice ($\beta = .47$, t = 7.38, $p < .01$) and procedural justice ($\beta = .15$, t = 2.56, $p < .01$) were related significantly to ethical work climate.

Support also was found for Hypotheses three, four, five, six and seven. Both procedural justice ($\beta = .47$, t = 7.38, $p < .01$) and distributive justice ($\beta = .19$, t = 2.98, $p < .01$) were related positively to organizational commitment. Ethical work climate was related positively to organizational commitment ($\beta = .13$, t = 2.18, $p < .01$); organizational commitment was related negatively to turnover intentions ($\beta = -.35$, t = 5.22); and ethical climate had a significant, negative relationship with turnover intentions ($\beta = -.16$, t = 2.61).

TABLE 1
Correlations Matrix, Means, and Standard Deviations

Ethical Climate					
Organ. Commitment	.40				
Turnover Intentions	-.31	-.42			
Procedural Justice	.35	.61	-.18		
Distributive Justice	.53	.47	-.24	.44	
Means	26.51	20.05	8.92	25.18	17.14
Standard Deviations	6.58	4.93	2.70	5.44	5.35

V. DISCUSSION

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The major purpose of this study was to investigate how organizational justice influences salespersons' perceptions of an ethical work climate. In addition to analyzing the relationship between organizational justice and ethical work climate this study examined how both of these variables influence salespersons' organizational commitment and turnover intentions. The results have important theoretical and managerial implications to understanding ethical climate within the sales force.

From a theoretical perspective, prior research has concentrated on examining outcomes of ethical work climate. However, this study expanded our understanding of ethical work climate by including an antecedent variable (organizational justice) along with various outcomes. Knowing the outcomes of having an ethical work climate is important. But, understanding what causes employees to perceive that their work environment is ethical or unethical is also important. Salespersons reported that they perceived their work environment was more ethical when they believed that they were being rewarded fairly for their efforts (pay and promotional opportunities) given their job inputs (education and experience) and when they were given a voice in how outcomes are determined (procedural justice). Thus, the results indicate that perceived fairness is an important variable influencing salespersons' perception of an ethical work climate.

In addition, this study analyzed how ethical work climate was related to organizational commitment and salespersons' intention to leave their job. The results corroborate prior research in that ethical work climate is related directly to turnover intentions and indirectly to turnover intentions through organizational commitment. Salespeople are less committed to the organization's goals and report a greater intention to leave their job when they perceive the work climate is less ethical.

While the results reported here have significant theoretical implications, they also have important managerial implications. Negative publicity about business scandals has created a need to develop an ethical work climate. While many companies have codes of ethics, their effectiveness in curbing unethical behavior is questionable. Therefore, discovering and understanding antecedents to ethical work climate is important for all companies. When managers treat salespeople fairly, they develop a perception that their work climate is ethical and subsequently are more committed to the organization and are less likely to search for another job.

Salespeople want to be treated fairly. They expect to be rewarded fairly in comparison to other salespeople for the same level of performance (distributive justice) and be given the opportunity to express their opinion when evaluated (procedural justice). In other words sales managers or other upper level managers who are fair when interacting with their salespeople also are the type of managers who expect ethical behavior and will punish those salespeople who behave unethically.

Organizational justice has another important implication beyond its relationship with establishing an ethical work climate. Directly or indirectly both measures of organizational justice were related to turnover intentions. If a company wants to reduce turnover among its best salespeople, then it needs to employ sales managers who are willing, knowledgeable and properly trained in implementing fair procedures when rewarding and evaluating the sales force.

The last managerial implication is the importance of creating an ethical work climate. Beyond the obvious negative repercussions of salespeople behaving unethically, the presence of an ethical work climate is related to salespersons' commitment to their company and lower turnover intentions. Salespeople identify with a company that emphasizes high ethical values and does not tolerate unethical sales force behavior. Given the high costs of turnover [19] and the high level of turnover among salespeople [36], understanding reasons why salespeople choose to stay or leave their job is important.

VI. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This study has several limitations. This study was cross-sectional. Testing the model within a single organization may produce different results. In addition, few efforts have been made to examine antecedent variables to ethical work climate. Future research needs to replicate these results along with including additional antecedent variables. Last, this study was limited to examining the relationship among organizational justice, ethical work climate, organizational commitment and turnover intentions. Future research may consider analyzing the role that leaderships plays in developing an ethical work climate.

In conclusion, this study has expanded current research by examining how ethical work climate is influenced by salespersons' perception of

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organizational justice. Hopefully, these results can provide organizations with a better understanding of the causes and outcomes of having an ethical work environment.

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