

**InFo**  
**Vol. 8, Nos. 1 & 2**  
**2005**  
**pp. 15 – 24**

**FEATURE**

**Faculty Commitment in Higher Education:  
Implications for Strategic Leadership**

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**Abstract** – *The commitment of faculty towards their institution needs to be recognized as having strategic value for higher learning. One component of commitment is affective commitment. Fostering it has a number of important implications for the leadership of educational institutions in higher education. The present article challenges leadership to appropriate action – i.e., leadership in the broader sense of the term. It outlines affective commitment and discusses several practical implications.*

Commitment, a work-related attitude affecting job behavior (Robbins, 2001), has for a number of years been recognized as critical in higher education (Gage, 1993). Fostering commitment in faculty is expected to result in the desirable outcome of greater overall effectiveness. It is about putting workplace intelligences into practice more effectively.

In the present article, commitment specifically refers to organizational commitment, which in essence, consists of the strength of linkages a faculty member has with a college or university and its goals. It is based on literature on the topic from both the developed and developing world. The specific aim is to consider several likely implications of developing a high level of affective commitment from the literature on commitment for higher education. But first, let us develop an understanding of commitment in order to better appreciate it.

**Recognizing Commitment**

Frank Sonnenberg (1994), in his distinguished book “managing with a conscience,” described the existence of a commitment continuum from a low of *apathetic* behavior to a high of *committed* behavior (see Figure 1). He portrayed *apathetic* employees as those lacking interest in the organization. They are not even interested in trying to improve the place and are probably the worst to work with since they passively oppose the organization’s goals. While the *disgruntled* employees may not perform much better in their work, they at least make an attempt, though weak, to communicate where the organization needs to improve. *Obedient* employees

do what they are asked to do, but not much more. Frequently their efforts are only enough to get by and stay out of trouble. The *motivated* employees perform well but require their supervisors to do something frequently to keep them motivated. They may focus on personal success but care little about organizational success. *Loyal* employees are a blessing to the organization. They enjoy coming to work and work faithfully even when they do not necessarily get any personal benefit from doing so. However, they quite likely lack passion for and ownership of the mission of the organization.

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Apathetic    Disgruntled    Obedient    Motivated    Loyal    Committed

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*Figure 1: The Apathy to Commitment Continuum. Source: Sonnenberg, F. K. (1994). Managing with a conscience: How to improve performance through integrity, trust, and commitment. New York: McGraw-Hill, Inc. (p. 16).*

Based on the above continuum, it is refreshing to become aware of Sonnenberg's (1994) description of the *committed* employee.

These individuals have moved a step above loyalty; they are so deeply moved by the organization's values and reason for being that they constantly look for new ways for the organization to develop and grow. This excitement, passion, and sense of ownership spill over onto others. (p. 17)

### Affective Commitment

As pioneers in the research on organizational commitment Mowday, Porter, and Steers (1982) defined it as "the relative strength of an individual's identification with and involvement in a particular organization" (p. 27). This type of commitment is characterized by:

- (a) a strong belief in and acceptance of the organization's goals and values,
- (b) a willingness to exert considerable effort on behalf of the organization, and
- (c) a strong desire to maintain membership in the organization." (Mowday, Porter, & Steers, 1982, p. 27)

Organizational commitment is thus a psychological state, binding employees to their organization. The question does arise, however, whether organizational commitment is always desirable. Could there be situations where such strong links or bonds are counterproductive?

#### Components of Commitment

Not all types of commitment are necessarily desirable. Allen and Meyer (1990) differentiate between three types of commitment: affective, continuance (calculative) and normative commitment. They suggest that the differences between each of these types or components of commitment

reflect the psychological state that binds the employee to their particular organization.

Affective commitment was described as that emotional bonding or attachment to the organization which could be described as *wanting to continue*. The stronger the affective commitment, the more an individual identifies with, is involved in, and enjoys membership in the organization.

Continuance or calculative commitment carried more of a transactional flavor. This type of commitment would usually be the outcome of employees carefully weighing the perceived costs if they were to leave the organization. It would be described as an attitude of *having to continue* due to unacceptable net consequences if they were to leave; either due to the extent of investments made by the employee (e.g., loss of pension) or perhaps a perceived lack of alternatives (e.g., unemployment). There is a danger that high levels of continuance commitment may be negatively related to loyalty to the institution (Bloemer, Odekerken-Schroder, & Martens, 2002).

Normative commitment, on the other hand, describes a sense of obligation an individual may have to remain with an organization; in short, feeling *obliged to continue*. Individuals with this type of commitment may demonstrate commitment-like behaviors merely because they believe it is the right or moral thing to do, but not necessarily because they have a desire to do them.

Clearly, affective commitment is of greatest interest to an educational institution. It has to do with developing a strong emotional bond, attachment, or sense of belonging. It is also the type of commitment that matches Sonnenberg's (1994) description of the committed individual. While many questions remain regarding the best interventions to foster affective commitment (Mathieu & Zajac, 1990), research does reveal a number of potential antecedents and outcomes.

### **Expected Antecedents and Outcomes**

Various authors (e.g., Mowday, Porter, & Steers, 1982; Allen & Meyer, 1990; Mathieu & Zajac, 1990) have published models for the antecedents and outcomes of affective commitment. The present alignment builds on these previous models and includes a review of more recent related literature, thus, extending their results to higher education. The resulting model (see Figure 2) is given here to help provide a larger perspective as the implications of fostering faculty commitment are discussed in a subsequent section.

#### *Leadership as a Strategic Endeavor*

The use of the term *strategic leadership* in this article is not an attempt to extend leadership theory. Rather, its use is merely to emphasize the significance of certain behaviors and decisions by leadership on the

occurrence of events in the life of an institution. Simply put, administrative behavior can affect affective commitment.

There are a great number of definitions for *leadership* in the literature, but all tend to define it by focusing on some aspect of exerting influence. It is best to envision such influence as not being limited to those in top positions of authority. More recently leadership has come to be viewed as a collective endeavor rather than as an individual enterprise where power remains mostly in the hands of a certain powerful individual (Astin & Astin, 2000). Consequently, readers should perceive leadership in a broader sense with each member of an institution potentially having some leadership role. Each member could have some part to play in building vision, modeling, providing direction, influencing and aligning, motivating, empowering, creating opportunities, and building culture. "A leader... can be anyone—regardless of formal position—who serves as an effective social change agent. In this sense, every faculty and staff member, not to mention every student, is a potential leader" (Astin & Astin, 2000, p. 2). Thus, in essence, by addressing the leadership of an institution, this article is really addressing all members concerned, not only the administration.

Antecedents		Outcomes
<i>Personal Characteristics</i> – e.g., well-being, faith maturity (where relevant).		<i>Retention</i>
<i>Human Resource Practices</i> – e.g., supervisory feedback, perceived organizational support, training and development, perceived equity, person-institution fit.		<i>Job Effort &amp; Performance</i>
<i>Work Characteristics &amp; Job-Related Experience</i> – e.g., expectations confirmed, task significance, empowerment, sense of efficacy, opportunity for self-expression, job satisfaction.	Affective Commitment	<i>Personal &amp; Career Satisfaction</i>
<i>Organizational Culture</i> – e.g., leader communication, transformational leadership.		

Figure 2: Expected Antecedents and Outcomes of Affective Commitment in Higher Education.

The word *strategy* is most frequently used in terms of planning for war or competition. But there is another use that is perhaps even more important and often overlooked. *Strategic* refers to taking a view "of great or vital importance within an integrated whole" (Webster, 1993). It includes three important aspects:

- Long- and short-term. A strategic approach takes into consideration long-term impact as well as short-term impact. It, thus, considers the entirety of time.
- Across all dimensions. Strategic considers the bigger picture and how the present action fits in with the larger vision. It attempts to move from compartmentalization to integration.
- Not superficial or trivial. Strategic efforts look deeper than merely obvious evidence. It involves getting to the heart of the matter and is therefore mission-critical.

In the present article, leadership becomes an important role that each member in higher education can and should participate in. Furthermore, leadership ought to see its actions as far-reaching and strategic.

### **Affective Commitment: Implications for Strategic Leadership**

Efforts in attempting to foster faculty commitment could easily be misplaced if affective commitment is misunderstood. What are the implications when considering the strategic value of affective commitment in higher education? Six practical implications are suggested.

#### 1. Educational Leaders Need to Foster Affective Commitment in Faculty.

Affective commitment is particularly important in service-type organizations. This is due to the need for allowing greater freedom to employees for performing discretionary acts. It is not possible to structure their jobs rigidly, and if one attempted to do so, the quality of service would most likely suffer. In higher education, the importance of a high level of affective commitment in faculty is easily perceived when one considers the great difficulty supervisors have in inspecting and controlling the work, and how easily individuals could disagree on expected outcomes (Firestone & Pennell, 1993). It would be difficult to direct the work of the faculty if their hearts were not in it. Even slight differences in the performance of their responsibilities could result in major differences in outcomes.

No direct method of increasing commitment exists; it has to be voluntarily given. Fostering commitment is an attempt to encourage behaviors that will lead to better retention, superior job performance, and greater career satisfaction. The resulting response of a faculty member to such leadership efforts could lead to an increase in commitment. Thus, a cycle could start where faculty members display committing behaviors, which in turn allows for greater trust and confidence from supervisors in their performance and work outcomes. Hence, fostering commitment can easily become mutually beneficial to both the institution and its faculty members.

Fostering affective commitment is best accomplished by considering the human resource practices of the institution, the job-related experiences, and the organizational culture as faculty members experience it (see Figure 2); then bringing about change where change is most needed.

2. Affective Commitment is Likely to Have a Greater Effect on Extra-Role Than on In-Role Work Performance.

While research evidence consistently reveals a positive relationship between affective commitment and job performance (Riketta, 2002; Testa, 2001), the relationship is often not as pronounced (mean  $r = .20$ ) as one would reasonably expect. The figures indicate that employees with higher levels of commitment do perform significantly better than their counterparts but not to such an extent as to warrant much attention. This is likely due to work performance being measured in terms of objective, in-role behaviors. The relationship does become more pronounced when considering extra-role in place of in-role behaviors (Riketta, 2002) and may be even greater if one were able to include hard-to-measure, subjective work behaviors.

One example of such work behaviors is organizational citizenship behaviors. These are work behaviors by individuals “that are beneficial to the organization and are discretionary, [but are] not directly or explicitly recognized by the formal reward system” (Wikipedia, 2006). Citizenship behaviors are known to be important to the effectiveness and efficiency of an organization yet are not formally required, so are not included in the job description. Specific examples could include being particularly conscientious in one’s work or voluntarily helping others with work-related problems when such is not specifically required.

While the benefits of faculty having a high level of affective commitment may not always be easily measurable, such team members do benefit the overall effectiveness of the institution, even if those benefits may be indirect or even immeasurable.

3. In the Recruiting Process, Consider Relevant Personal Factors, Person-Institution Fit, and Expectations.

The process of recruiting faculty should not be taken lightly since it plays such a strategic role in the effectiveness of an institution. This is an ideal time to ensure that the most suitable candidates are employed that will contribute to and not detract from the goals and mission of the institution. Unfortunately, the human resource office is not well developed in many institutions, and feeble efforts are often made to ascertain much more than the academic qualifications of prospective faculty members.

Every institution and each candidate is unique. Just because candidates performed well in one place does not guarantee their success in another. It is essential that a good person-institution fit be found. Faculty-university value congruence is likely one of the more important factors affecting faculty commitment (Harshbarger, 1989). There may be other factors that need to be considered as well, such as spiritual experience or work ethic. Spiritual experience would be particularly important when recruiting someone to work in a Christian institution, since it accounts for such a high variance in commitment (Oberholster, Taylor, & Cruise, 2000). It is not the purpose of this article to discuss how to overcome the difficulties of assessing the

suitability of candidates. Rather, the purpose is merely to point out the strategic value of making the effort to do so.

Lastly, it is in the institution's interest to create clear previews about the job and the institution for prospective faculty so as to create rational expectations. Provide candid, realistic information of both a positive and negative nature. This is also the time to be particularly explicit about the institution's value system. It is imperative that candidates be able to answer for themselves whether their goals would be attainable if they joined the institution.

4. The Initial Experiences Upon Employment are Critical.

Longitudinal studies on commitment (Allen & Meyer, 1988; Arnold & Davey, 1999; Holton & Russell, 1999) reveal that initial experiences upon employment can have a long-term impact on organizational commitment. What happens in the first month can predict the level of commitment months and even years later. However, the impact of work experiences on commitment is likely to decrease over time (Allen & Meyer, 1988). Thus, the initial period is the most critical in establishing faculty-institution linkages.

During this initial period, new faculty should ideally experience job satisfaction, job challenge, opportunity for self-expression, and a confirmation of their expectations since these are important predictors of commitment (Allen & Meyer, 1988). At this time faculty will need to confirm the expectations that they had before joining. These expectations could have been formed as a result of a formal document, an interview, or even informal discussions with non-members of the institution. Such expectations could easily be very different from the reality that the new member is about to experience. Consequently, a new faculty member's confirmation of their expectations and ensuing commitment may reflect on the success of the recruiting process.

5. Invest in People as a Group.

An institution's human resources are its most important asset. Employees have more to do with the effectiveness of an institution than any other resources. This is well illustrated by the following quotation from industry credited to Andrew Carnegie:

Take away my people, but leave my factories, and soon grass will grow on the factory floors. Take away my factories, but leave my people, and soon we will have a new and better factory.  
(International Institute of Management, n.d.)

Commitment among university faculty correlates positively with professional growth opportunities in both the developed world (e.g., Armon, 1995) and in the developing world (e.g., Aquino, 1993). If institutions recognize the value of their faculty, they will go to great lengths to invest in their professional development. This perceived support from the institution

may also effectively include non-work related training. In essence, faculty need to sense that the institution is supportive of them and has a genuine concern for both their career development and their personal welfare.

In some instances, however, this investment in faculty is done mostly in terms of specific individuals and not in terms of the faculty as a group. The effect of such an approach could lead to perceptions of inequity, which in turn may have a negative impact on the commitment of many faculty members to the institution.

#### 6. Encourage Transformational Leadership.

Transformational leadership is about helping followers develop into leaders. It is about creating a culture of empowerment so that both the organization and its people become transformed (Sashkin & Sashkin, 2003). It includes elements of open communication, trust, caring, creating opportunities (despite the risks), having an enabling orientation, and inspiring a shared vision. Transformational leadership is positively related to affective commitment in a moderate way even in cultures with predominantly autocratic style practices (Walumba, Peng Wang, Lawler, & Kan Shi, 2004).

Transformational leaders use good communication skills—active listening, appropriate feedback—to share ideas clearly (Sashkin & Sashkin, 2003). The open communication inherent in this type of leadership is more likely to result in the faculty experiencing role clarity, participation in decision-making (with regard to their own work), and a feeling of management being receptive to their suggestions; all factors that relate positively to commitment (Allen & Meyer, 1990). Furthermore, timely and accurate leader communication and feedback enhances commitment and may in fact be one of the approaches with the greatest impact on commitment (Mathieu & Zajac, 1990).

### **Conclusion**

Having faculty who identify with the values of the institution, subscribe to its goals, and desire to continue supporting it whole-heartedly is likely to assist any institution in fulfilling its mission. Leadership, in the broadest sense, not only can but needs to foster the affective commitment of faculty in higher education as an integral part of its strategic endeavor. Several implications have been discussed in this regard, however, this list is not exhaustive. Faculty members are challenged to see themselves as leaders—persons of influence—that can contribute individually and collectively to the strategic success of their institutions.



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