

RESEARCH BRIEF

SEEING THROUGH OTHERS' EYES CAN AFFECT ASSESSMENTS OF PERFORMANCE

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Abstract: Knowledge workers can establish their benevolence and trustworthiness by imagining how others experience a situation, which in turn tends to boost supervisor's assessments of the knowledge workers' performance.

Questions

How can knowledge workers signal their trustworthiness to others? Do supervisors' perceptions of knowledge workers' trustworthiness affect assessments of workers' performance?

Conclusion

Knowledge workers in managerial and technical positions can establish their trustworthiness by perspective taking—that is, by consciously and actively imagining how others experience a situation and adjusting their behavior accordingly. Perspective taking is a cognitive, proactive, and strategic process that helps build trust in a relationship and facilitates cooperative behavior. Perspective takers value coworkers' welfare, communicate more effectively, and behave more compassionately than people who do not consider the perspectives of others. As a result, coworkers and supervisors perceive perspective takers as benevolent and trustworthy. Perceptions of trustworthiness (measured here as benevolence) enable the joint search for optimal outcomes. Moreover, knowledge workers perceived as trustworthy tend to receive higher performance ratings from supervisors.

Implications for organizations

Perspective taking—an antecedent of trustworthy, benevolent behavior—is critical in environments where work is interdependent and nonroutine. Knowledge workers perceived as benevolent by others

are more likely to trigger interpersonal trust and thus generate information sharing and cooperation. Benevolent behavior by knowledge workers also increases others' willingness to adjust to new, challenging, and unforeseen situations. Because time pressure and heavy work loads can constrain perspective taking, managers should ensure that knowledge workers are trained in its practice so it becomes a well internalized habit that is not jettisoned at moments when effective communication is critical and when harmful, opportunistic behaviors might otherwise be appealing.

Discussion

Benevolence is a primary component of trustworthiness. Benevolence itself is understood to connote concern for others' welfare and is manifest by supportive (as opposed to harmful) behaviors. The research literature often views benevolence and other elements of trustworthiness as stable character-based traits that are passively revealed over time.

This paper takes a different approach and argues that individuals can actively and purposefully demonstrate their benevolence. They do so by consciously attending to others' thoughts and feelings about a situation; that is, through perspective taking. Stated in academic terms, perspective taking refers to the cognitive, anticipatory, and intersubjective process of imagining others' thoughts and feelings from their point of

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view. The act of perspective taking prompts individuals to behave in a benevolent manner and others to view them (i.e., the perspective takers) as benevolent. The benevolence of perspective takers generates positive emotions in others and motivates trust, information sharing, cooperation, learning, and flexible responses to contingencies. In the workplace, these are all factors that improve organizational outcomes.

The researchers here explored the relationship among perspective taking, perceived benevolence, and performance by knowledge workers in managerial and technical positions. They took as a starting point existing theory and empirical research that suggest perspective taking influences behaviors related to benevolence, such as responsiveness, compassion, and valuing the welfare of others. Through surveys of knowledge workers and their supervisors, they found that perspective taking is key to signaling benevolence. In other words, perspective taking by an individual is positively associated with others' perceptions of his/her benevolence.

Perspective taking is also directly and indirectly linked to performance. Other studies have shown that people tend to trust benevolent others: When people work with someone they trust, they are less suspicious of his/her motives, more likely to go the extra mile, more adaptable to the unexpected, and more willing to work toward outcomes that are good for all parties. Analysis of the survey data for this study indicates that perceptions of a knowledge worker's

benevolence are positively associated with assessments of his/her performance by supervisors. Moreover, perspective taking by knowledge workers is also associated with positive assessments of their performance; perceived benevolence is the path through which perspective taking affects performance.

Methods

The researchers analyzed survey data from a matched sample of 147 knowledge workers and their immediate supervisors. Most of the knowledge workers were mid-career professionals enrolled in a specialized MBA or executive education program, and varied by age, gender, and nationality. Separate but corresponding surveys were developed for workers and supervisors. The information requested concerned measures of the knowledge worker's propensity to engage in perspective taking, the supervisor's assessment of the knowledge worker's benevolence, and the supervisor's rating of the knowledge worker's performance. The control variables included age, gender, and nationality. The researchers tested their hypotheses using structural equations modeling, a statistical technique that tests direct and indirect causal relationships.

Source document

Williams, M. (with Xia, L.) "Seeing Through Others' Eyes: Appraisal-Related Perspective Taking, Trustworthiness, and Performance" was presented at the 2008 Annual American Sociological Association Meetings in Boston, MA.