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Absence of Support Makes the Heart Wander

Why People Want to Leave (or Stay with) Their Organization

By: William A. Gentry, Ph.D., Kristin L. Cullen, Ph.D.,
Jennifer J. Deal, Ph.D., & Sarah A. Stawiski, Ph.D.

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CONTENTS

It's a normal business day. Employees are steadily working away at their desks, typing incessantly, sending e-mails, and returning phone calls. This is of course encouraging to their bosses and the organization. All seems well, but instead of working on their projects, how many of them might be working hard at polishing their résumés? How many individuals that you think are calling clients are really using their networks to find a new career opportunity or a way out of the organization? It could be more than you think.

A 2010 workplace survey estimated that two-thirds of currently employed Americans are looking for new jobs or opportunities[1]. Further, a 2011 workplace survey found that almost one-third of employees are not satisfied with their job, and 74% of employees would leave their organization if another opportunity arose[2]. More often than you may think, the lyrics of the popular song by the band The Clash are repeated in the minds of employees and whispered in the office hallways and around the coffee machine: "Should I stay or should I go?"

As the economy improves, employees will have even more opportunities to look at other places of employment. So, organizations need to pay attention to how they can retain the best and brightest now, and understand what triggers them to want to leave in the first place. "People don't quit jobs, they quit their bosses"[3] is a true statement but (as sad as this sounds) realistically, organizations are probably unable to identify and get rid of all the bad bosses in the world. What an organization can do is to bolster the bright, positive aspects of work that improve engagement, even when the boss isn't the best. So a key question is, what will be effective in encouraging employees to stay put, even if their boss is not as supportive? To that end, we are focusing on the importance of support an organization and boss provides, and how different combinations of that support play a part in whether people want to stay with their organization or go somewhere else.

- **Perceived Supervisor Support**[4] was assessed with a 4-item measure of how much support participants felt their respective boss/ supervisor gave them. An example item is: My manager takes pride in my accomplishments at work.

- **Perceived Organizational Support**[5] was assessed with a 4-item measure of how much support participants felt their respective organization gave them. An example item is: My organization values my contribution to its well-being.

3

The Findings: Support from Both the Organization and Boss Is Important

Our results[6] show that when support from both the organization and boss are examined together, managers who were the least likely to leave their organization, the most committed to their organization, and the most satisfied with their job were the ones who felt the highest levels of support from both their organization and boss. On the other side of the spectrum, those managers most likely to leave their organization, have the least amount of commitment to their organization, and the lowest amount of satisfaction with their job were the ones who felt the lowest levels of support from their organization and boss. This was true for first-level managers and middle-level managers. No real surprise with these findings – people who feel supported are committed, satisfied, and want to stay; people who don't feel supported are not committed, dissatisfied, and likely to go. But, that is not the whole story.

Organization Support vs. Supervisor Support: Which Matters More?

Not everyone feels the same amount of support from their organization as they do from their boss. Some may feel they have the best boss in the world who gives them all the support they could ever want, but also feel their organization doesn't care about them at all. Others may feel that their organization provides them with growth opportunities and cares for their well-being, but that their boss is nowhere to be found when it comes to support. So, what's the consequence when managers experience dissimilar support from their organization and boss? And is it the same for first-level managers and middle-level managers?

For first-level managers, contrary to the common belief that people quit because of their bosses, our results indicate that one source of support is no more important than the other. First-level managers reported about the same levels of turnover, commitment, and satisfaction if they had high levels of support from the boss and low levels of support from their organization, or vice versa. When it comes to what matters more, the take-away message is that no one source of support is more important than the other for first-level managers; they need to feel they are supported by both their boss and organization.

For middle-level managers, it's a different story: level of support from their boss matters much less than the level of support from the organization. If there is little felt organizational support, it doesn't matter how supportive the boss is – middle-level managers are going to be less committed to their organization, less satisfied with their jobs, and more likely to say they intend to leave for another opportunity. But, middle-level managers

with an unsupportive boss can still feel committed to their organization, satisfied with their jobs, and unlikely to leave as long as they feel support from their organization. So, while it may generally be true that people don't quit organizations, they quit bad bosses, our results suggest that middle-level managers may stay with an unsupportive boss as long as they have a supportive organization (see Table 1 below).

Table 1: Summary of Findings

First-Level Managers		
	Low Supervisor Support	High Supervisor Support
Low Organizational Support	• High Turnover Intentions • Low Job Satisfaction • Low Organizational Commitment	• Average Turnover Intentions • Average Job Satisfaction • Average Organizational Commitment
High Organizational Support	• Average Turnover Intentions • Average Job Satisfaction • Average Organizational Commitment	• Low Turnover Intentions • High Job Satisfaction • High Organizational Commitment
Middle-Level Managers		
	Low Supervisor Support	High Supervisor Support
Low Organizational Support	• High Turnover Intentions • Low Job Satisfaction • Low Organizational Commitment	• High Turnover Intentions • Low Job Satisfaction • Low Organizational Commitment
High Organizational Support	• Low Turnover Intentions • High Job Satisfaction • High Organizational Commitment	• Low Turnover Intentions • High Job Satisfaction • High Organizational Commitment

What Our Findings Mean

You can never have too much support, but all sources of support do not have an equal impact on the experience of all employees.

People who are at the first levels of management are often managing for the first time in their lives. They need – and respond to – support from both their own boss and their organization. Think about what first-level managers are going through when they step up into management. First-level managers have to move away from doing the work that made them successful and promotable, and move toward coaching, developing, and motivating others to do the work. And, they are probably managing people who they used to work side-by-side with: their former peers and, oftentimes, current friends. This huge shift takes a lot of mental, emotional, and physical effort, and they must change their ways, habits, and values. This is why careers sometimes derail at this stage. And this is why a lot of support from numerous sources is invaluable to first-level managers. CCL believes that support must be in place for people to develop into successful leaders: "Support helps people handle the struggle and pain of developing. It helps them bear the weight of the experience and maintain a positive view of themselves as capable, worthy, valuable people who can learn and thereby grow."[7]

Bosses of first-level managers can be key providers of support by:
- Reinforcing desirable behaviors.
- Playing the roles of:
  - Mentor.
  - Provider of advice.
  - A shoulder to lean on.
  - A sounding board.
- Giving a voice to others in decision-making processes.
- Treating people fairly. Being fair in allocating resources and communicating exactly how decisions are made.
- Communicating to people how valuable they are. Letting them know how their work matters to the effectiveness of the group, to the bottom-line of the organization, or possibly how what they do benefits society.
- Providing formal recognition of a person's work.

"Everyone wants to be appreciated, so if you appreciate someone, don't keep it to yourself."
– Mary Kay Ash, the founder of Mary Kay cosmetics

6

Satisfaction and commitment are at their highest and intention to turnover is at its lowest when managers receive support from both their supervisor and the organization. However, our research indicates that middle-level managers specifically can feel high levels of job satisfaction and commitment and low turnover intentions even with an unsupportive boss, provided that they feel they are working in a supportive organization. Why the difference? We believe it has to do with the unique challenges and struggles middle-level managers must face in their job on a daily basis that makes support from their organization so critical. They have to work across diverse functions, operations, and boundaries, manage organizational politics, and select and lead managers for high performance. They, more than first-level managers, must link the thoughts of upper-level management and lower-level employees and must constantly work across organizational groups and systems. Support from their boss may not make a difference to their satisfaction, commitment, and turnover levels because no one single person (like their boss) can be the end-all fixer for these huge organization-wide challenges. Rather, it takes support from the organization as a whole (groups of people, systems, and processes) for middle-level managers to effectively perform their job. Middle-level managers may be able to get by without the support from their boss, as they probably get support from other people such as trusted peers, their own subordinates, or others who are in their network over a longer period of time.

So what can be done so that managers believe their organization supports them? There are several HR practices, programs, and strategies that can increase perceptions of organizational support[8]:

- Have systems in place that support and reinforce learning.
- Make it known where the organization's culture embraces learning and development.
- Develop a culture or norm where feedback is appropriate.
- Have systems to help people identify development needs and ways to cultivate or strengthen those needs.
- Make resources available for learning.
- Reward efforts for personal development.
- Hire from within.
- Redesign jobs so that:
  - The scope of a person's responsibility at work increases.
  - The person can understand the value in his/her job to the organization or society.

7

Conclusion

If people humming the tune "Should I stay or should I go" is less about a catchy song and more about jumping ship from your organization, whether they leave is likely to be partly determined by how much support they receive from their boss and their organization. First-level managers are more likely to stay, be committed to their organization, and feel satisfied with their job if they feel they are supported by their boss and organization; they are more likely to go if they don't feel support from either. While middle-level managers also need support from both their boss and their organization, it is more important for middle-level managers to feel supported by the organization than by their boss. This means that middle-level managers are more likely to quit their unsupportive organization than their unsupportive boss. To maintain their leadership pipeline and enhance their bottom line, organizations really need to pay close attention to supporting their employees and coming up with ways to bolster employees' perception that they are supported by their boss and their organization. By doing this, it is more likely that as managers wander the hallways, they will be humming a different tune.

Endnotes

[1] http://web.jobvite.com/rs/jobvite/images/Jobvite_Survey_Jobseeker_Nation_2010_final.pdf

[2] http://www.tlnt.com/media/2011/03/Plateau-JobSeeker-Infographic.jpg

[3] Attributed to Marcus Buckingham and Curt Coffman in their book *First, Break All the Rules: What the World's Greatest Managers Do Differently*.

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[6] We controlled for several variables in our study (year survey was taken, sex, race, education, and age of participant, as well as the organizational sector in which the participant works).

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Sample, Methods, and Analyses

The World Leadership Survey (WLS) has continued to collect data online in English since its inception in March 2008, and began collecting data in twelve additional languages in March 2009. Participants in the research come through partner organizations, interested individuals, and enrollment in CCL programs.

Participants fill out a survey online that is hosted by Clear Picture Corporation and takes them approximately 20 minutes to complete. In thanks for their participation, participants receive a free CCL Guidebook to download immediately upon completion of the survey. Questions about the survey are sent to the World Leadership Survey e-mail account at WorldLeadershipSurvey@ccl.org.

The sample for this study consisted of first-level and middle-level managers who took the WLS between March 2008 and July 2012. In total, data from 275 first-level managers (i.e., Forepersons, Crew Chiefs, Section Supervisors) and 1,409 middle-level managers (i.e., Office Managers, Professional Staff, Mid-Level Administrators) were used in our study. Table 2 gives demographic information for each managerial population in our study.

Table 2: Demographic Information of First-Level Managers (n = 275) and Middle-Level Managers (n = 1,409)

Demographic Variable	First-Level Manager	Middle-Level Manager
Gender	56.4% male	48.3% male
Race	68.0% Caucasian	73.2% Caucasian
Age	M = 40.82 years (SD = 10.86)	M = 42.98 years (SD = 10.09)
Education	68.8% had at least a bachelor's	86.6% had at least a bachelor's
Sector	72.0% private sector	81.6% private sector
Sample Job Titles	Forepersons, Crew Chiefs, Section Supervisors	Office Managers, Professional Staff, Mid-Level Administrators

It is important to note that this is not a random sample of North American managers or employees, and therefore it is likely not fully representative of the working population. Our sample consists of people who are employed, are currently proactively working on their own development, and who were willing to take 20 minutes of their own time to participate. Though it is not a representative sample, it is a good sample of managers and professionals at higher levels in organizations who are currently employed and are engaged in improving their work skills. They offer insight into how people who are either in current leadership roles or have aspirations for leadership roles think about life in organizations.

As part of the WLS, participants were asked many questions about their work attitudes and perceptions of leadership. For this research, we only included:

- Organizational and Supervisor Support (see page 3 for definitions)
- Turnover Intentions[9, 10]
- Organizational Commitment[11]
- Job Satisfaction[12]
- Perceived Supervisor Support
- Perceived Organizational Support

Research has shown that the more an organization cares for the development and well-being of an employee, the more the employee "repays" the organization by helping the organization meet its goals[13]. The same goes for bosses as well[4]; the more a boss cares for the development and well-being of his or her employee, the more the employee will "return the favor" and help the boss – and ultimately the organization – reach their objectives.

We examined how combinations of both sources of support (organization and boss) may lead to outcomes using polynomial regression and response surface analysis[14, 15]. This analysis provides information regarding which source of support may be more related to each of the outcomes of interest (turnover intentions, organizational commitment, and job satisfaction), and which combinations of support may lead people to want to leave their jobs, be committed to their organization, and lead them to feel satisfied with their jobs. The findings are plotted on a three-dimensional graph (response surface) to show the effects of the two sources of support together, on each of the outcomes of interest. We conducted this analysis separately for the first-level and middle-level managers in our data.

William A. (Bill) Gentry, Ph.D., is currently a Research Scientist/Enterprise Associate and coordinator of internships and postdocs at the Center for Creative Leadership (CCL) in Greensboro, North Carolina. He also trains the Assessment Certification Workshop and Maximizing Your Leadership Potential program at CCL. His research interests are in multi-source (360) research, survey development and analysis, leadership and leadership development across cultures, mentoring, managerial derailment, multilevel measurement, and in the area of organizational politics and political skill in the workplace. He also studies nonverbal behavior and its application to effective leadership and communication, particularly in political debates. Bill holds a B.A. degree in psychology and political science from Emory University and an M.S. and Ph.D. in industrial/organizational psychology from the University of Georgia.

Kristin L. Cullen, Ph.D., is currently a Research Scientist at CCL in Greensboro, North Carolina. Kristin's work focuses on leadership development, including improving leaders' understanding of organizational networks and the ability of organizations to facilitate shared, collective forms of leadership, complex collaboration, and change across organizational boundaries. Other interests include the implications of leadership integrity and political skill in the workplace. She holds a B.S. degree in psychology and commerce from the University of Toronto, and an M.S. and Ph.D. in industrial/organizational psychology from Auburn University.

Jennifer J. Deal, Ph.D., is a Senior Research Scientist at CCL in San Diego, California. She is also an Affiliated Research Scientist at the Center for Effective Organizations at the University of Southern California. Jennifer's work focuses on global leadership and generational differences around the world. She is the manager of CCL's World Leadership Survey (currently in 15 languages) and the Emerging Leaders research initiative. In 2002 Jennifer coauthored *Success for the New Global Manager* (Jossey-Bass/Wiley Publishers), and has published articles on generational issues, executive selection, cultural adaptability, global management, and women in management. Her second book, *Retiring the Generation Gap* (Jossey-Bass/Wiley Publishers), was published in 2007. An internationally recognized expert on generational differences, she has worked with clients around the world and has spoken on the topic on six continents (North and South America, Europe, Asia, Africa, and Australia), and she looks forward to speaking to Antarctic penguins about their generational and leadership issues in the near future. She holds a B.A. from Haverford College and an M.A. and Ph.D. in industrial/organizational psychology from The Ohio State University.

Sarah Stawiski, Ph.D., is a Research Scientist at CCL in San Diego, CA. Sarah's work focuses on evaluating the impact of leadership development programs, and understanding individual and organizational factors that influence workplace attitudes and behaviors. Other interests include small group processes, ethical decision making, and corporate social responsibility. Before coming to CCL, Sarah worked for Press Ganey Associates, a healthcare quality improvement firm. She holds a B.A. in psychology from the University of California, San Diego, and an M.A. and Ph.D. in applied social psychology from Loyola University Chicago.

About CCL

The Center for Creative Leadership (CCL®) is a top-ranked, global provider of executive education that accelerates strategy and business results by unlocking the leadership potential of individuals and organizations. Founded in 1970, CCL offers an array of research-based programs, products and services for leaders at all levels. Ranked among the world's Top 10 providers of executive education by *Bloomberg Businessweek* and the *Financial Times*, CCL is headquartered in Greensboro, NC, with offices in Colorado Springs, CO; San Diego, CA; Brussels, Belgium; Moscow, Russia; Singapore; New Delhi - NCR, India and Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

Center for Creative Leadership®

CCL Regional Headquarters

CCL - Americas
www.ccl.org
Greensboro, North Carolina
P: +1 800 780 1031 (U.S. or Canada)
P: +1 336 545 2810 (Worldwide)
E-mail: info@ccl.org

CCL - Europe, Middle East, Africa
www.ccl.org/emea
Brussels, Belgium
P: +32 (0) 2 679 09 10
E-mail: ccl.emea@ccl.org

CCL - Asia Pacific
www.ccl.org/apac
Singapore
P: +65 6854 6000
E-mail: ccl.apac@ccl.org

Other CCL Locations

Colorado Springs, Colorado
+1 719 633 3891

San Diego, California
+1 858 638 8000

Addis Ababa, Ethiopia
+251 913 204547; LBB.Africa@ccl.org

New Delhi – NCR, India
+91 124 435 4185/ 86; cclindia@ccl.org

Moscow, Russia
+7 495 662 31 39; ccl.cis@ccl.org