

Too Much of a Good Thing? Exploring Affective Commitment's Negative Impact

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A critical element of an organization is its human capital or employees. How the organization builds a relationship and commitment with employees can optimize their engagement and output in service of the overall goals. The engagement of employees is an essential part of increasing the probability of better retention and performance (Albrecht et al., 2015). The number of employees resigning from jobs as of July 2021 has risen close to one million (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021). This “Great Resignation” has led to the examination of why employees are leaving (Cook, 2021) and is a challenge to employers to understand that employees are re-examining and reevaluating their relationships with the organization (de Smet et al., 2021). The examinations and evaluations lead employers to find ways to increase the commitment of employees in their organizations.

In their search for approaches to increase organizational commitment to mitigate the issue of falling retention of employees, companies are using human resources management (HRM) strategies to address the issue. For example, compensation plans (Langdon & Stryker, 2022), transparent communication, and a focus on engagement (Sheather & Slattery, 2021) are just a few. While organizations aggressively look for options to increase organizational commitment in employees, there appears to be little pause to examine the negative impact of organizational commitment. This exploration analyzes empirical and theoretical organizational commitment studies to identify the critical drivers that negatively impact affective organizational commitment. The importance of affective commitment in organizational commitment studies will be explored to accomplish the analysis, followed by its application in human resource management strategies and practices. Then, a review of the positive impact of affective organizational commitment, followed by the negative impact. After the research analysis that

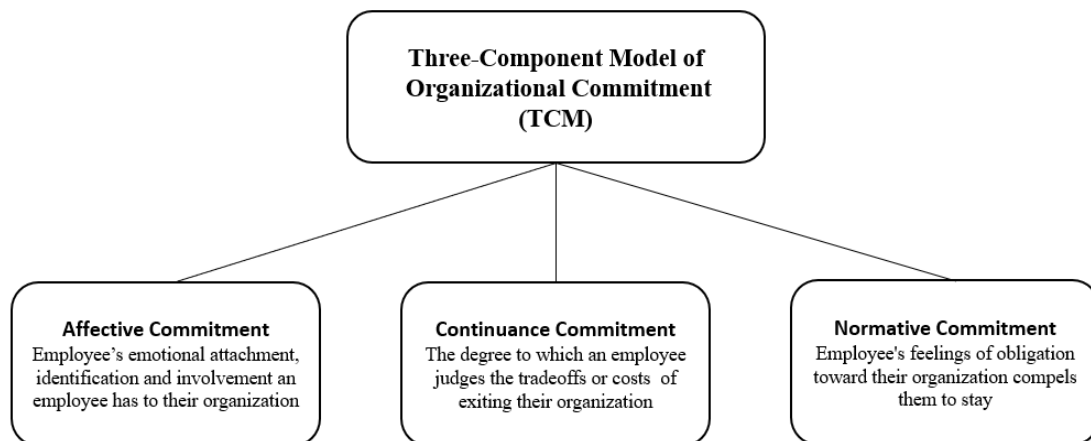
includes common themes and consequences, recommendations for future research will be provided.

Organizational Commitment

Employee-organization relationships have been studied as a critical component of the organizational dynamics that impact employees and employers. Employee-organization relationships can be defined from an employee perspective and an employer perspective, using expectations, reward, and contribution as significant mediating factors to measure the impact of the relationship (Coyle-Shapiro & Shore, 2007; Rousseau, 1989; Shore et al., 2004; Tsui et al., 1997). The various mediating factors can be applied in diverse ways based on the situation, industry, and environment, to increase employee commitment to the organization.

Organizational commitment has been extensively studied and accepted as an organizational construct with valid implications for employees and organizations as they seek to align mutually beneficial goals and outcomes (Meyer and Allen, 1984, 1991; Mowday & Porter, 1979; Solinger et al., 2008). Understanding the different types of commitment an organization needs from an employee is essential in measuring the positive and negative impact organizational commitment can yield. The three-component model (TCM) of organizational commitment: affective (emotional), continuance (cost), and normative (obligation) has been widely studied and debated yet has emerged as a leading theoretical construct and stands as an accepted measurement of organizational commitment (Allen & Meyer, 1990, 1996; Brown, 1996; Meyer & Allen, 1991; Meyer et al., 2002; Solinger et al., 2008). See Figure 1 below.

Figure 1: Illustration of Three-Component Model



Meyer and Allen's Three-component model of organizational commitment, 1990

The TCM has been examined as an accepted way to understand retention by identifying an employee's attitudes that may influence their desire to stay or exit an organization (Allen & Meyer, 1990; Solinger et al., 2008). The degree of distinctiveness and understanding of continuance, normative and affective commitment is important to determine where exploration should focus and the approach to research based on the challenges that need to be addressed.

Each component of organizational commitment, as defined by the TCM, has a discrete definition that assists researchers in identifying where they want to focus their research. Continuance commitment is the component in which an employee judges the trade-offs of exit to determine if they will remain in their current organization (Allen & Meyer, 1990; Meyer & Allen, 1991). Continuance commitment is considered the most distinct component of the model from affective commitment (Allen & Meyer, 1990; Meyer et al., 2002). Normative commitment is based on an employee's feelings of obligation toward the employer (Allen & Meyer, 1990; Meyer et al., 2002), and within the three-component model, despite areas of similarity in correlation to affective commitment, it remains distinct (Allen & Meyer, 1990; Meyer et al.,

2002; Meyer & Herscovitch, 2001). Affective commitment is the emotional attachment and identification an employee experiences in relation to their organization (Allen & Meyer, 1990).

This paper's structure is as follows: The importance of affective commitment in organizational commitment, application in HRM practices, and research analysis on the positive and negative impact of affective commitment. Following the research analysis that includes common themes and consequences, recommendations for future research will be provided.

Affective Commitment

For this exploration, the affective commitment component of the Three-Component Model will be the focal point, examining the corresponding existing literature that asserts the negative impact it has on employees and organizations when high. The rationale for exploring the negative impact of affective commitment is that while there is sparse literature compared to the positive effects, what does exist uncovers meaningful consequences for employees and organizations. This investigation seeks to bring together the literature that examines when high affective commitment may lead to employee and organizational harm.

As stated earlier and to expand on the definition, affective organizational commitment is the emotional attachment and identification an employee has to the organization, which theoretically influences their behavior and choices as an organizational actor (Meyer & Allen, 1990; Allen & Meyer, 1996; Meyer et al., 2002). Affective commitment starts as a core component of organizational commitment research, as commitment is seen as "reflecting a general affective response to the organization as a whole" (Mowday et al., 1979, p. 226). Additionally, affective commitment has been argued as the core component or factor of organizational commitment. The designation of affective commitment as a core component of organizational commitment is due to the strong influence and presence of affective measures in

evaluating each part of the TCM, with affective measures influencing normative commitment the strongest and continuance to a lesser degree (Meyer et al., 1993; Mercurio, 2015). Therefore, affective commitment is generally present and a key component of organizational commitment strategies: namely human resource management (HRM) strategies and practices.

Human resource management strategies leverage practices that strengthen employees' affective commitment to the organization to impact organizational and talent outcomes positively. HRM practices that demonstrate high commitment, such as employee participation, career opportunities, and performance measurement, are demonstrated to increase affective commitment in employees (Sanders et al., 2007). HRM practices and affective commitment have also been shown to impact turnover favorably (Tumwesigye et al., 2020). Furthermore, HRM practices and psychological contracts, implied unwritten promises from organizations to employees, have impacted employee affective commitment to their organizations. For example, there may be an implied promise of promotion for an employee based on good performance (Rousseau, 1989). Similarly, career development, rewards, and job content may contain implied elements that influence an employee's beliefs (Kraak et al., 2017). The above demonstrates a consistent application of HRM practices by organizations to increase employee affective commitment to engage, retain and develop employees to meet organizational business objectives.

Positive Consequences of Affective Commitment

Affective commitment demonstrates strong correlations with desirable outcomes for employees and organizations. Positive identification with an organization as a component of affective commitment is positively correlated to employee productivity (Gautam et al., 2014). Affective commitment is also correlated with performance (Meyer et al., 2002; Solinger et al., 2008), seemingly demonstrating that an increased emotional connection with an organization

fosters the impetus to put forth an achieving effort. Additionally, affective commitment is negatively correlated to turnover and absenteeism (Meyer et al., 2002; Solinger et al., 2008), demonstrating that emotional connection to an organization deters a desire to exit. The above examples create compelling reasons why an organization would and should apply strategies to increase affective commitment.

Using methods to increase affective commitment is shown in other areas that may benefit employees' attitudes. Glazer and Kruse (2008) also found that affective commitment lowers the degree of job anxiety an employee experiences. Burnout and exhaustion are realities in the workplace that employees experience and employers attempt to mitigate. Enginyurt (2016) found that when affective commitment increases, it may assist in decreasing employee burnout. In highly mental, emotional, and physically stressful professions such as nursing, S (2019) found that high affective commitment may mitigate exhaustion in nurses. Additionally, Glazer and Kruse (2008) determined that high affective commitment may mitigate an employee's intent to leave their organization, affirming Meyer et al. (2002) finding that affective commitment lowers turnover. The above research demonstrates the solid evidence of the positive impact affective commitment has on attitudinal disposition.

Affective commitment has been positively correlated with job satisfaction (Meyer et al., 2002). The influence of affective commitment on positive employee outcomes demonstrates its value as a mediator for HRM practices to deploy in service of organizational goals. However, the cost of affective commitment and its impact on negative outcomes warrants exploration. The trade-offs deserve highlight and attention. As mentioned earlier, affective commitment is at the core of organizational commitment, is the strongest validated, and often the primary component studied to determine overall organizational commitment (Brown, 1996; Meyer et al., 2002;

Mercurio, 2015; Solinger, 2008). The negative impact of affective commitment, if unaccounted for, may have a detrimental impact on overall organizational commitment due to its presence within normative commitment and to a lesser degree continuance.

Negative Consequences of Affective Commitment

The exploration of the negative impact of affective commitment starts with acknowledging there are trade-offs with any employee-organization intervention, especially when looking at commitment. For example, O'Driscoll (1989) argued that there had been little emphasis on exploring the negative impact of organizational practices that seek to encourage, reinforce and create the conditions for emotional attachment to and identification with organizations by employees. The argument questions the assumption that high commitment is singularly good for employees. Additionally, O'Driscoll (1989) points to negative implications of employee overcommitment to jobs and their companies, such as work-life and family imbalance, work stress, and potential compromise or trade-off of values. O'Driscoll's (1989) examination appears to corroborate earlier interrogations of high commitment and the unintended negative consequences.

Despite the documented benefits, high commitment comes with a cost to individuals and organizations. Costs to individuals occur in and outside of work. For example, Randall (1987) examined from a collection of studies that high-commitment individuals experience limited growth and career movement as a negative consequence. Additionally, affirmed by O'Driscoll (1989), a negative consequence for an individual can be an increase in stress which has a cascading negative impact on family life (Randall, 1987). Some of the previously stated consequences lend toward work or role impact, others on the outcome of stress that may impact an employee's family life, yet there are emotional consequences that warrant review.

Kabat-Farr et al. (2018) asserted that there is an emotional cost to highly committed individuals in the face of incivility at work, such as a brush-off from a supervisor or an act of disrespect. When examining highly effectively committed employees and their reactions to rude, invalidating, and neglectful acts at work, Kabat-Farr et al. (2018) found that those employees experienced intensified emotional reactions, such as guilt, which in turn negatively impacted their work performance. Furthermore, these highly committed employees appear to take on the emotional burden of incivility and attribute the blame and responsibility for a resolution to themselves. High affective commitment employees may be more vulnerable to incivility, internalizing the negative acts more, resulting in higher emotional harm (Kabat-Farr et al., 2018). Kabat-Farr et al. (2018) additionally state that "it is these most-valued persons who endure the most emotional harm when rudeness arises" (p. 123).

There are additional consequences for highly affective committed employees facing incivility at work. Employees with high affective commitment experience disproportionately higher emotional injury from incivility, making them more susceptible to burnout due to expelling more personal energy in the face of these acts (Liu et al., 2019). Other issues in the areas of stress and overwork in highly effectively committed employees emerge beyond emotional injury.

When examining the impact of high affective commitment and the ability of employees to detach from work and not use communication technology after hours, Lee et al. (2021) found that high affective commitment in employees led them to detach less, work more after hours, which resulted in higher levels of fatigue. Many of the negative consequences of high affective commitment are primarily detrimental to employees; however, there are more direct organizational ramifications.

The negative consequences to organizations also occur due to high commitment, such as lower innovation and employee resistance to change (Randall, 1987). Interestingly, Randall (1987) states that "highly committed employees may be more willing to commit illegal or unethical behavior on behalf of the organization" (p. 466). A core element of affective commitment is organizational identification (Meyer & Allen, 1991; Meyer et al., 2002; Solinger et al., 2008). Umphress et al. (2010) found that employees with high identification with the organization and belief that their actions would return positive benefits to the organization tended to demonstrate unethical pro-organizational behavior (UPB). The high level of identification appears to obscure employees' sense of the negative personal consequences of their actions and the impact of a breach of ethics on an organization. Furthermore, Matherne and Litchfield (2012) confirm the assertion that high affective commitment can lead to a lapse in employee ethics or UPBs and state that "higher levels of affective commitment contribute to higher levels of unethical pro-organizational behaviors" (p. 40). High affective commitment can lead to individual and organizational consequences that not only put employee performance and career development at risk but can also harm their organizations through unethical and low-value behaviors. X. L. Liu et al. (2021) found that when employees engage in unethical activities or behavior intended to benefit their organization, they also harm themselves through guilt, anxiety, and a disruption to their work-life balance.

As outlined above, the negative impact resulting from high affective commitment warrants discussion despite the scarcity of research examining it as an independent variable. Understanding when high affective commitment is a cause of negative issues for organizations and employees may prove valuable for organizational dynamics practitioners who are developing practices and observing the impact of those in their companies.

Future areas of research

There is an opportunity to increase exploration and acknowledgment that high commitment, particularly emotional commitment, may yield unintended consequences for employees and organizations. Future research should examine which leadership styles exacerbate and mitigate the impact of the high commitment, negative outcomes paradox. Additionally, scholars should seek to identify if the paradox is more prevalent in specific industries compared to others, such as, but not limited to, technology, service-oriented healthcare delivery, religious institutions, sales and marketing (of various domains), and education. While the negative consequences of high affective commitment have been examined with behavioral outcomes, quantifying the cost to businesses would be a valuable study to demonstrate the impact on the bottom line. Lastly, HRM professionals, consultants, and organizational leaders should re-examine the outcomes of the employee-organization relationship strategies they employ and use a critical eye to identify and measure over-commitment behaviors in employees in their culture.

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