Managing commitment to customer in the public sector: highlight the role of the supervisor

Pascal Paillé*
Département Management,
Université Laval,
G1K7P4, Québec, QC, Canada
E-mail: pascal.paille@fsa.ulaval.ca
*Corresponding author

Denis Morin
Université du Québec à Montréal,
315, Sainte-Catherine Est,
Montréal (Québec), H2X 3X2, Canada
E-mail: morin.denis@uqam.ca

François Grima
Université Paris,
12-IRG et RMS,
Avenue du Général de Gaulle,
94000 Créteil, France
E-mail: grimaf2000@yahoo.com

Abstract: This study investigates the role of the supervisor as a determining factor in helping public employees in contact with citizens (customers) to deliver better service. Data were collected using public employees in contact with customers (N = 228). Overall, findings supported predictions of the study and were consistent with social exchange theory premises. Thus, within public organisations, public employees demonstrate willingness to commit to customers when they feel supported by the immediate superior. This study suggests that improvements to the physical work environment are one way to support employees. Implications of the findings are discussed.

Keywords: HRM practices; perceived supervisor support; commitment to the supervisor; commitment to the customer; social exchange; public sector.


Denis Morin is an Associate Professor of Human Resource Management at University of Quebec in Montreal, Canada. His research and teaching focus on performance management, research methods, psychological measurement and multivariate statistics. He has published papers and chapters in the areas of performance appraisal and staffing.

François Grima is an Associate Professor of Human Resource Management at Université Paris, Est Créteil and Reims Management School in France. His research interests are toxic behaviour, organisational citizenship behaviour and career. His research appears in the Journal of Social Psychology, International Journal of Human Resource Management, European Management Journal, and Industrials Relations.

1 Introduction

Around the world, the public sector is seeking better ways to improve services and overcome an endemic lack of motivation among employees (Vigoda-Gadot, 2004). States, governments, municipalities and, by extension, other organisations concerned about the rules of public management are thus compelled to experiment with management practices borrowed from the private sector. Holmes and Shand (1995) argued the need to align the management standards in public institutions with those of private organisations. Such standards focus primarily on effectiveness and service quality [for a more complete list, see Holmes and Shand, (1995), p.555], and their application to public administration contributes significantly to modernisation efforts. Public administration has undergone modernisation at varying rates, depending on the country (Simonet, 2008), and with varying efficacy, taking into account cultural differences (Bouckaert, 2007). In Canada, the public administration underwent reform in two major phases: public service renewal during the 1980s and fiscal restraint in the 1990s (Borins, 1995; Savoie, 1995; Dinsdale, 1997). As Dinsdale (1997, p.371) has asserted, “this meant improving service to Canadians and renewing the public service by streamlining administrative procedures, reducing managerial constraints, and adopting a results-oriented culture”. In Quebec, the predominantly French-speaking province, such reforms were generally introduced later (Demers and Gow, 2002) for complex reasons closely tied to the unique nature Quebec society (see Côté, 2006, for an excellent analysis). The process of modernisation in Quebec was accelerated in the early 2000s with the enactment of the Public Administration Act (PAA) on improving services to citizens.

The PAA provided the provincial government with the tools it needed to better serve its citizens (Côté, 2006). However, simply defining citizens as customers does not in itself ensure that users of public services will be treated as customers. As theorised, a dissatisfied customer in the private sector can choose between two options: he can seek a remedy (voice) or switch providers (exit). Users of public services (citizens) should ideally also be able to use these ‘voice’ or ‘exit’ options, but dissatisfied citizens are often limited to exercising the ‘voice’ option (Savoie, 1995). In this regard, the modernisation of public services has pushed relations between citizens (now considered customers) and public administration to evolve toward a better balance, in
part because customer focus has become a major concern for public administration (Demers and Gow, 2002), and in part because the accountability of public employees has increased (Borins, 1995).

As pointed out by many observers (Amstrong, 1998; Arnaboldi et al., 2010; Demers and Gow, 2002; McGurk, 2009; Pollitt, 1995; Robbins, 2007), the modernisation of public administration has helped give public sector managers greater autonomy. Holmes and Shand (1995) assert that one of the most important principles in the modernisation process is “the replacement of highly centralised hierarchical organisational structures with decentralised management environments where decisions on resource allocation and service delivery are taken closer to the point of delivery”. Holmes and Shand suggest that the application of a market culture in the public sector highlights the importance of the role of the immediate public sector managers who must take decisions quickly to enable team members to respond to customer (citizen) demands.

Although considerable theoretical work in the public management literature attributes great importance to both the question of treating the citizen as a customer and to the autonomy of public sector managers, to date very few empirical studies have been conducted to examine the role supervisors play in the process of improving customer service (Demers and Gow, 2002). There is thus much that remains poorly understood about the role of public sector managers. Consequently, this study addresses this issue by investigating the role of the supervisor as a determining factor in helping public employees who deal directly with citizens (customers) deliver better service. Given that a strong commitment to the customer enhances organisational performance (Siders et al., 2001), and that customer orientation positively influences job satisfaction, commitment and the performance of altruistic organisational citizenship behaviours (OCBs-altruism; Donavan et al., 2004), it would appear essential for public organisations to better understand how supervisors can help foster customer commitment. This paper proposes testing a model (Figure 1) in which human resource management practices related to the work environment and implemented by the supervisor foster employee commitment to the customer through a social exchange process between supervisors and their employees. By applying a social exchange theory (SET) framework to the supervisory level, this study makes a specific contribution to understanding how public sector supervisors help foster customer commitment.

From the customer-focus perspective, we believe that using the premises of SET can greatly help improve the performance of public employees in providing better customer service.

**Figure 1** Research model

![Research model](image)

- **H1** Perceived supervisor support
- **H2** Attachment to the supervisor
- **H3** Commitment to the customer

*Exchange process*
2 Theoretical background

Serving the citizen as a customer has emerged as an important concern in public management (Osborne and Gaebler, 1992; Vigoda, 2002). Demers and Gow (2002) demonstrated that public employees in Canada, at both the provincial and federal levels, are motivated more by the desire to provide better service to the public than by the desire for better pay. As behavioural intent, commitment to the customer has thus become an important and valued outcome in the Canadian public sector. Commitment to the customer refers to the extent to which individual employees exercise their relative propensity to engage in continuous improvement and exert effort to serve customers (Peccei and Rosenthal, 1997). Employee commitment to the customer is central to service quality (Stinglhamber et al., 2002). Peccei and Rosenthal (1997) argue that commitment to the customer is a function of

1. individual willingness to engage in continuous improvement and exert effort on behalf of customers
2. their capacity to do so.

The following sections consider these two factors (willingness and capacity) in further detail. The literature on social exchange and on HRM practices was examined to explore how immediate superiors help shape employees’ customer commitment: whereas the social exchange literature helps explain the question of ‘willingness’, the HRM literature addresses the question of ‘capacity’.

2.1 The social exchange process – willingness

Cropanzano and Mitchell (2005) assert that SET provides strong theoretical and empirical arguments for building a ‘unitary framework’ to better examine workplace behaviour. Social exchange has been defined as “the voluntary actions of individuals that are motivated by the returns they are expected to bring and typically do in fact bring from others” (Blau, 1964). Social exchange in organisational settings involves an exchange of items to which each party assigns some value. The recipient’s perception of this type of positive experience creates a feeling of obligation toward the donor stemming from the need to reciprocate. This principle of reciprocity between two parties is central to the theory of social exchange (Blau, 1964). Gouldner (1960, p.171) asserts that once established as a standard between individuals, reciprocity involves two basic premises:

1. people should help those who have helped them
2. people should not injure those who have helped them.

As Scholl (1981, p.594) argues,

“If the norm of reciprocity holds, we would expect that the debt incurred through advance rewards would act to hold the individual in a particular system until the debt is repaid. Additionally, we would not expect individuals to leave if doing so would cause any harm to an employer who has helped them.”

Fair treatment, for example, generates a set of obligations. The obligations incurred by social exchange are not formally or openly known in advance, nor is their form specified. In other words, how and when to honour the claim are at the debtor’s discretion.
Schaninger and Turnipseed (2005) point out that social exchange implies that employees must give something back to donors (employers, supervisors or colleagues) who provide something that the employee finds valuable. Whereas employees value supportive decisions, fair treatment, and so on, employers value loyalty, organisational citizenship, and job performance. The literature provides strong empirical data showing that employers help build social exchange. When employers make supportive decisions (Kahumuza and Schlechter, 2008), treat their employees fairly (Lavelle et al., 2007) or fulfill their psychological contract (Dulac et al., 2008), this increases the willingness of employees to provide what the employer wants (Konovsky and Pugh, 1994; Masterson et al., 2000; Paillé et al., 2010). In the past ten years, the subject of the supervisor’s role has gained importance in the social exchange literature. Within the dyadic relationship between the employee and his or her supervisor, social exchanges are carried out in many ways. The literature on this exchange process indicates that employees who experience positive exchanges with their supervisor are more likely to demonstrate valued outcomes, such as making extra effort on the job. Although analysis of social exchange at the supervisory level is still a new field, the results of the empirical research published thus far are similar to what has been demonstrated at the organisational level. The supervisor offers proof of support to the employee, such as recognition (Cronin and Becherer, 1999), fair decisions (Lavelle et al., 2007) and recommendations for promotion (Roadhes-Shanock and Eisenberger, 2006). Correspondingly, the employee provides proof of willingness to perform at work through citizenship behaviour (Lavelle et al., 2009), attendance (Eder and Eisenberger, 2008), and extra effort (Aryee et al., 2002).

Modernisation of public administration involves improving the services provided to citizens who want to be treated as customers. Every public employee is involved, no matter the position they hold (blue collar or white collar), their rung in the hierarchy (manager or subordinate), or how directly they interact with customers (back office or front line). At the point of service delivery, managers can assess employees’ willingness to provide better service to the public in terms of their commitment to the customer (citizen). In keeping with the framework of SET, it seems reasonable to assume that managers can foster their employees’ willingness to demonstrate customer commitment by taking action and making decisions that help them perform their work. To sum up, the quality of social exchange between public sector managers and their subordinates shapes their willingness to deliver better service to the customers.

2.2 HRM practices as inputs in the exchange process at the supervisory level – capacity

It has been suggested that HRM practices that improve employee knowledge and skills lead to individual outcomes for employees such as increased satisfaction, decreased desire to quit, and increased productivity (Combs et al., 2006). Combs and colleagues also suggest the existence of a tacit exchange process through which employees’ exhibit desirable behaviours in exchange for improvement of their knowledge through training and professional development. However, such HRM practices are often implemented as strategic choices. In any given industry, the employer’s goal is to obtain a competitive edge over the competition. HRM practices that enhance the perception of good fringe benefits, better working conditions or more desirable work-life balance are used to attract more competent employees and to retain the most competitive employees. Thus, the choice of HRM practices is made at the senior management level as a function of the
desired strategic outcomes. In such cases, supervisors are simply cogs in the wheel, transmitting the instructions handed down from senior management to the employees under their supervision. Schuler and Jackson (2007) argue that factors such as the supervisor’s personality, the strength of the job market and the characteristics of the workforce within the work unit explain why, in many situations, the direct supervisor has the discretionary authority to emphasise one practice over another. Indeed, there is empirical evidence to support the contention that supervisors can act effectively at their level in the hierarchy to improve employee efficiency.

Data obtained by Vartia (1996) suggest that supervisors have the power to influence and develop most of the environmental characteristics related to leadership style and supervisory practices within their work unit. Research suggests that by implementing management practices that focus on the physical work environment, the supervisor may help employees deliver better customer service. Empirical research also shows the positive impact of the working climate on the desire of employees to provide quality services. Working climate has been defined as the shared perceptions of employees about the practices, procedures and kinds of behaviour that characterise a particular workplace setting [Schneider, (1990), p.384]. It has been found that work facilitation also improves customer perception of service quality through improved service climate (Schneider et al., 1998). Certain work environment features, such as location (Schneider et al., 1992), equipment, procedures and technology (Schneider and Bowen, 1995) help facilitate service delivery in the eyes of both employees and customers. Employees are also reported to perform better when they perceive that the work environment supports their willingness to make an effort at work (Lee and Brand, 2005; Stone and English, 1998).

The influence of the physical features of the work environment on employee behaviour is well documented. Although based on empirical research conducted in the private sector, these findings provide insight into how public administration managers can increase their subordinates’ level of customer commitment, and thus respond to one of the requirements of modernisation, namely, the improvement of customer service.

Côté (2006) indicated that this new role for public sector managers can be fostered by the development of managerial skills, at the same time allowing managers to use their creativity and innovation skills – skills which are particularly useful to managers when their resources are limited. Amabile et al. (2006) have shown how supervisors contribute to creating better work environments which help employees be more creative. According to Amabile and her colleagues, when superiors encourage their subordinates to develop new ideas, they are helping improve productivity. More recently, de Jong and den Hartog (2007) examined the influence leaders have on employees’ individual innovative behaviour. They identified 13 behaviours leaders may exhibit which foster idea generation (namely, intellectual stimulation, stimulating knowledge diffusion, and task assignment), application behaviour (organising feedback, rewards and providing resources), or both (innovative role-modelling, providing vision, consulting, delegating, support for innovation, recognition, and monitoring). In the context of modernisation of public administration, complicated by a scarcity of resources (Borins, 1995; Côté, 2006; Dinsdale, 1997; Savoie, 1995), the approach used by de Jong and Den Hartog (2007) helps shed light on how supervisors can encourage employees to suggest and implement new ideas.
Little research involving public employees has examined how the characteristics of their physical work environment influence employees’ willingness to demonstrate effort. The findings of Klitzman and Stellman (1989) indicated that, for their sample of public employees, “physical environment factors appear to exert a stronger influence on office satisfaction than on symptoms of psychological distress or on global job satisfaction, while psychosocial working conditions are more strongly related to job satisfaction”. Given that Klitzman and Stellman’s study used supervisor support as one of several aspects of psychosocial working conditions (which also included workload demands, job decision-latitude, job future, hostility and co-worker support), it was not clear what role supervisors played in employee well-being. Ergonomic design of office settings has been shown to be directly associated with employee attitudes and health-related outcomes among municipal clerical employees (May et al., 1997). Good ergonomic design increased job satisfaction and decreased both somatic complaints (headaches, trembling or sweating hands, dizziness, stomach aches, trouble sleeping or eating, and physical exhaustion) and persistent pain (discomfort felt in various part of the body). Using a sample of employees at a Canadian healthcare organisation (a parapublic agency), Rousseau and Aubé (2010) reported that environmental factors in the workplace (lighting, temperature, sound and air quality) may affect the degree to which supervisor support increases employees’ affective commitment to the organisation. Finally, in one of the few studies involving French-Canadian government employees, Demers and Gow (2002) report that, according to one-third of the managers they surveyed, good working conditions and a good workplace environment were motivating factors that fostered and strengthened employee willingness to make an effort to provide good service to citizens. In summary, HRM practices provide employees with the capacity to deliver better service to customers.

2.3 Purpose of the study

Based on prior research, we assumed that social exchange between the supervisor and his or her subordinate is one possible way to develop and support customer commitment among public employees who work in direct contact with citizens. We therefore posited that the more employees feel supported by their supervisor, the more effort they will make on behalf of customers. The following relationships were thus expected.

Hypothesis 1 Management practices are positively related to employees’ perception that the supervisor cares about them.

Hypothesis 2 When employees feel supported by their supervisor, they are committed to the supervisor.

Hypothesis 3 The exchange process between the supervisor and the employee increases employee willingness to demonstrate commitment to the customer.

This set of hypotheses reflects the proposed relationships among the variables in the research model (Figure 1).
3 Methodology

3.1 Study participants

Data were collected from employees at a public agency created by the Government of Quebec in December 2004 to improve the delivery of public services to both citizens and businesses. The agency’s main objective is “to offer citizens and business throughout Quebec a one-stop service to simplify access to a wide range of public services”. Furthermore, “as a government sponsored provider of public services”, the agency “is committed to meeting the legitimate expectations of citizens and businesses”. The agency employed 943 people at the time of the survey. Among them, 296 were in front-line contact with customers, and the remainder were in back-office positions. Only the front-line employees were approached to participate in the study. Of the 296 questionnaires distributed, 228 completed and useable questionnaires were returned for a 77% response rate. Our final sample thus consisted of 228 public employees working in contact with customers, including 174 women (76.3%) and 52 men (22.8%) and two who did not declare their gender. The average age was 30.6 years (SD = 9.5 years) and the average overall professional experience was 7.0 years (SD = 9.1 years). Although the distribution of men and women is highly skewed in this sample, it is consistent with data from the government of Quebec, which generally employs more women than men (Secretary of the Conseil du Trésor, 2010).

3.2 Measurements

Perceived supervisor support was measured using a short version of the survey of perceived organisational support (SPOS), as was used by Stinglhamber et al. (2006). Four high-loading items (α = 0.90) from the SPOS were chosen and adapted to capture perceived support at the supervisory level (e.g., “My supervisor really cares about my wellbeing”). To measure commitment to the supervisor, the three-item scale (e.g., “I really feel a part of this work group”) developed by Bentein et al. (2002) was used (α = 0.93). To measure commitment to the customer, a short version of the six-item scale (e.g., “I really feel as if my customers’ problems are my own”) developed by Redman and Snape (2005) was used (α = 0.72). Three human resource practices related to improving the physical work environment were measured using scales specifically created for this study. Working environment (α = 0.79) was measured with three items (e.g., “I find my workspace meets my needs”). Work tools (α = 0.83) was measured with three items (e.g., “I have the tools to do my job”). Workplace (α = 0.74) was measured with three items (e.g., “The environment around my workplace is nice”).

3.3 Procedure

The data were analysed using a two-stage process, in keeping with the recommendations of Anderson and Gerbing (1988). First, the measurement model was examined to evaluate the independence of the constructs. Second, structural equation modelling (SEM) was used to analyse the data. To interpret the data, the chi-square statistic and several other fit indices were used, including the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), whose expected value should ideally be less than 0.05 (Schermelleh-Engel et al., 2003); and the Comparative Fit Index (CFI) and the
non-normed fit index (NNFI), whose values should be greater than 0.95 (Hu and Bentler, 1999).

4 Results

4.1 Measurement model

The measurement model including six factors (perceived supervisor support, commitment to the supervisor, commitment to the customer, work environment, work tools and workplace) fit the data well ($\chi^2 = 186.70$, $df = 125$, $p < 0.000$; CFI = 0.97; NNFI = 0.97; RMSEA = 0.04).

Table 1  Measurement model (N = 228)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Loadings</th>
<th>CR</th>
<th>P Jöreskog</th>
<th>AVE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Commitment to the superior</td>
<td>.92</td>
<td>.87</td>
<td>.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 I feel respect for my superior</td>
<td>.902</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 I personally appreciate my superior</td>
<td>.942</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 I am proud to work for my superior</td>
<td>.852</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived superior support</td>
<td></td>
<td>.90</td>
<td>.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 My superior appreciates my contribution</td>
<td>.938</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 My superior considers my aspirations and values</td>
<td>.870</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 My superior really cares about my well-being at work</td>
<td>.856</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HRM practices (work environment)</td>
<td></td>
<td>.75</td>
<td>.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 I have a good working space</td>
<td>.581</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 I find my workspace meets my needs</td>
<td>.826</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 I think the common areas meet my needs</td>
<td>.721</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HRM practices (work tools)</td>
<td></td>
<td>.84</td>
<td>.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 I have the tools to do my job</td>
<td>.731</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 The tools at my disposal are working well</td>
<td>.841</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 In case of problems with my working tools, organisation and rule quickly</td>
<td>.824</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HRM practices (workplace)</td>
<td></td>
<td>.91</td>
<td>.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 My workplace is easily accessible</td>
<td>.925</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 The environment around my workplace is nice</td>
<td>.922</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 I like working there</td>
<td>.456</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commitment to the customer</td>
<td></td>
<td>.76</td>
<td>.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 The customers I deal with in my job</td>
<td>.768</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 I really identify with my customers</td>
<td>.519</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 I am proud to work with my customers</td>
<td>.849</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1 shows the composite reliability (CR), which estimates the extent to which a set of latent construct indicators share their measurement of a construct; average variance extracted (AVE), which is the proportion of the total variance due to the latent variable; and Jöreskog’s $\rho$ for each construct. Recommend threshold values for CR and AVE are...
Managing commitment to customer in the public sector

0.70 and 0.50, respectively (Hair et al., 1998). Fornell and Larker (1981) recommend that Jöreskog’s ρ should be above the 0.70 threshold. Given that the values obtained were above the recommended cut-off values, we were able to conclude that the measurement model provided evidence of the reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity of our measures.

Table 2 shows the mean and standard-deviation for each construct as well as pair-wise correlations. The correlation between the measures of commitment to the supervisor and perceived supervisor support was high (r = 0.77, p < 0.01). To determine if separating these two constructs was appropriate or not, two structures were compared. In the first structure (one-factor), the commitment to the supervisor and perceived supervisor support items were aggregated. In the second structure (two-factor), the commitment to the supervisor and perceived supervisor support items were loaded on their respective factors.

Table 2  Correlation matrix

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>.77**</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Work environment</td>
<td>.23**</td>
<td>.30**</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Work tools</td>
<td>.27**</td>
<td>.33**</td>
<td>.56**</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Workplace</td>
<td>.33**</td>
<td>.32**</td>
<td>.38**</td>
<td>.34**</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 CCustomer</td>
<td>.20**</td>
<td>.17**</td>
<td>.15*</td>
<td>.13*</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Mean 24.14 29.48 21.13 21.98 21.78 27.64
SD 5.94 8.94 7.63 6.78 7.74 2.79

Notes: **p < .01, *p < .05, CSupervisor – commitment to the superior, Perceived SS – perceived superior support, CCustomer – commitment to the customer

While the one-factor structure provided a poor fit of the data [$\chi^2 (15, N = 228) = 250.94, p < 0.000, CFI = 0.85, NNFI = 0.79$], the two-factor structure yielded a good fit to the data [$\chi^2 (12, N = 228) = 29.23, p < 0.004, CFI = 0.98, NNFI = 0.98$]. These results suggest that commitment to the supervisor and perceived supervisor support are distinct constructs.

4.2 Structural model results

This section discusses SEM analysis of the model presented in Figure 1. One purpose of this study was to examine the effects of HRM practices on employees’ commitment to the customer through social exchange at the supervisory level. We compared three competing models. Table 3 summarises results of comparison. Following the approach of Anderson and Gerbing (1988), the same measurement model was used for all three structural models. The proposed research model (Model 1) examined:

1. the paths linking HRM practices and perceived supervisor support
2. the path linking perceived supervisor support and commitment to the supervisor
3. a path linking commitment to the supervisor and commitment to the customer.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Model research</th>
<th>Model 2</th>
<th>Model 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Standardised paths coefficients</td>
<td>t values</td>
<td>Standardised paths coefficients</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work environment → Perceived superior support</td>
<td>.110</td>
<td>1.229</td>
<td>.177</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work tools → Perceived superior support</td>
<td>.192*</td>
<td>2.075</td>
<td>.190*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Workplace → Perceived superior support</td>
<td>.260**</td>
<td>2.859</td>
<td>.254**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived superior support → Commitment to the superior</td>
<td>.808***</td>
<td>14.904</td>
<td>.798***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commitment to the superior → Commitment to the customer</td>
<td>.306***</td>
<td>3.955</td>
<td>.305***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work environment → Commitment to the superior</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>−.078</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work tools → Commitment to the superior</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Workplace → Commitment to the superior</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.080</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work environment → Commitment to the customer</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work tools → Commitment to the customer</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.031</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Workplace → Commitment to the customer</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.081</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chi-square</td>
<td>237.28***</td>
<td>234.99***</td>
<td>229.85***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Degree of freedom</td>
<td>144</td>
<td>141</td>
<td>138</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CFI</td>
<td>.96</td>
<td>.96</td>
<td>.96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NNFI</td>
<td>.96</td>
<td>.96</td>
<td>.96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RMSEA</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.05</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: **p < .000, *p < .05
In Model 2, paths linking HRM practices and commitment to the supervisor were added. In Model 3, paths linking HRM practices and commitment to the customer were added. Table 3 shows the results for the three competing models and the standardised path coefficient (SPC) for each relationship. The chi-square difference test suggested that Model 2 did not improve the fit compared to the research model $[\chi^2_{diff} (3) = 2.29, \text{NS}]$. Similarly, Model 3 did not improve the fit compared to the research model $[\chi^2_{diff} (6) = 7.43, \text{NS}]$.

Overall, the research model provided a good fit $[\chi^2 (127, N = 228) = 193.08, p < 0.000; \text{CFI} = 0.97; \text{NNFI} = 0.97; \text{RMSEA} = 0.04]$. Hypothesis 1 postulates that HRM practices affect perceived supervisor support. The results showed that work tools (SPC = 0.223, $p = 0.038$) and workplace (SPC = 0.149, $p = 0.004$) were positively related to perceived supervisor support. Hypothesis 2 postulates a positive relationship between perceived supervisor support and commitment to the supervisor, which was confirmed by the results (SPC = 0.808, $p = 0.000$). Finally, Hypothesis 3 postulates a positive relationship between commitment to the supervisor and commitment to the customer, which was also confirmed (SPC = 0.306, $p = 0.000$). Thus Hypothesis 1 to 3 were all supported.

5 Discussions

5.1 Overview

For public employers, the modernisation of public administration involves updating HRM practices to improve customer service, which is a necessary condition for bringing public services and citizens closer together. The changing role of the supervisor is one element in achieving the goals of this modernisation process. Applying a social exchange framework to the supervisory level, the goal of this paper was to examine whether the supervisor helps to support commitment to the customer by contributing to shaping and stimulating the work environment. Using a sample of public employees working in front-line positions, survey data were collected and analysed in order to better understand how practices related to the physical work environment contribute to providing better customer service. Overall, the findings supported the study’s hypotheses and were consistent with the premises of SET. When public sector managers show an interest in the physical work environment, their subordinates feel supported and are more likely to deliver better service to customers (citizens). To our knowledge, this is the first empirical study that links HRM practices (capacity) and relationships of social exchange at the supervisory level (willingness) to fostering commitment to the customer among front-line public employees.

5.2 Contribution of the study

This study contributes to the literature on the effect of service innovation on performance by focusing on the role of public sector managers in helping their subordinates deliver better service to customers (citizens). As such, the study extends previous research in three ways.

Firstly, as Bouckaert (2007) recently stated, “The culture of the market state results in a dominant value of competition. This market state culture and its competing values will
determine the attitudes and the behaviour of all actors involved”. Market state culture refers to an approach in which public employees regard citizens as customers. Establishing this culture in public administration necessitates profound changes among public employees, such as the development of greater responsiveness to the users of public services (Pollitt, 1995). The literature on management in the public sector emphasises that modernisation has brought to light the important role played by supervisors (Côté, 2006; Demers and Gow, 2002; Dinsdale, 1997; Holmes and Shand, 1995). The modernisation of public administration underpins the quest for efficiency, which involves ‘doing more with less’ (Borins, 1995), however, this challenge can be problematic when supervisors themselves are held to objective result requirements. Under such circumstances, creativity and innovation can help compensate for a lack of resources. Dinsdale (1997 p.382) indicated that in public administration, managerial cultures “that support quality service, creativity and innovation, diverse organisational structures, devolved authority, and various market-type mechanisms provide little or no guidance as to what the government ought to do about these issues”. The role of the supervisor is well documented in the public administration literature (Arnaboldi et al., 2010; McGurk, 2009). However, to date little research had examined the connection between the supervisor, HRM practices and the commitment to the customer among French-Canadian public employees. A study that collected data from public sector managers demonstrated that good working conditions and a positive workplace environment helps foster the willingness of employees to deliver a quality service to citizens (Demers and Gow, 2002). The study by Demers and Gow did not provide data on the nature of the working conditions. The current study takes the research one step further. By focusing on three physical characteristics of the workplace (tools, space and environment) that the supervisor can affect in concrete ways, our findings shed light on the role of the supervisor in the process of modernisation in public administration, within a context where improved customer service is a result requirement and resources are limited. The results highlight how supervisors help foster their subordinates’ willingness to show commitment to the customer (citizen) by improving the physical workplace through their choices regarding the working environment, work tools and workplace.

Secondly, while substantial research on public employees has been conducted using a SET framework, most of these studies have focused on the organisational level of analysis. As reported by Boyne et al. (1999), the public sector tends to be more concerned with caring and fostering wellbeing in the workplace. Accordingly, SET might serve as a particularly fertile framework for research in the public sector. This study focused on the supervisory level of analysis. Our intention was to take into consideration a particular requirement of modernisation in public administration, namely, the need to decentralise decision-making by moving it closer to the point of service delivery (Holmes and Shand, 1995). Our findings suggest that strengthening the role of the immediate supervisor will help meet this particular requirement. Consistent with Cropanzano and Mitchell (2005) – who note that in a relationship of social exchange, something must be given and something returned – our findings indicate that perceived supervisor support (the gift) fosters commitment to the customer (the counter gift) through a commitment to the superior. Our findings are an important contribution to understanding whether the process of social exchange helps enhance the commitment to the customer among public employees. As explained above, Peccei and Rosenthal (1997) argue that employee predisposition to demonstrate commitment to the customer depends of both willingness and capacity. Our findings suggest, first, that the willingness of public employees to show
commitment to citizens (customers) is secured through a process of high social exchange with their superior and, second, that their capacity to show commitment to citizens (customers) is developed through improving their physical work environment. Second, as explained above, one of the goals of modernisation of public administration was to increase efficiency and thus one of the constraints imposed on government employees was the expectation of producing more work with fewer resources. This scarcity of resources encourages public employees to be creative and innovative. Our results indicate that, when resources are limited, the outcomes of social exchange between managers and their subordinates may itself be likened to a resource. Therefore by focusing on social exchange (in this case, between manager and subordinate), our findings contribute to understanding how the goal of delivering better services with scarce resources can be achieved.

Thirdly, the overall findings of this study are important, because – in light of the new challenges to be met by the public sector – public employees in contact with citizens (customers) can be viewed as boundary-spanners. Given that more and more public organisations must compete with private companies, public employees should view citizens as customers. This is an important challenge for the future, for both public employees and citizens. Our results suggest that improving the physical work environment increases commitment to the customer. Groth et al. (2005) argue that “in the absence of objective criteria for judging service quality and employee performance, customers often use tangible cues (e.g., physical environment) to evaluate service quality”. Groth and colleagues refer to consumer situations involving an interaction between the customer and a salesperson for a private company. In the specific context described by Groth et al., the services marketing literature indicates that the physical environment in which the sale takes place is as important as the quality of the product or the perceived competence of the salesperson. In other words, any action or decision that might help increase the commitment to the customer also helps make it clear to the customer that the sales force has made an effort to deliver better service. In markets with stiff competition, such actions and decisions have a positive effect on customer reaction. As mentioned above, the modernisation of public administration introduced the principle of competition between the private and public sectors. In this context, a high level of customer commitment shows citizens that public servants are dedicated to meeting the new requirements of public service that is, treating the citizen as a customer. Therefore, it is particularly important that the immediate superior be able to make decisions concerning management of the physical work environment. This allows employees who are in contact with customers (citizens) to do so in ideal working conditions.

5.3 Practical implications

The results of this study have useful implications for public organisations, as they provide further evidence of the importance of considering the physical work environment with regard to employee willingness to provide better service. Treating the citizen as a customer has become a major challenge – one which, while widespread in private organisations, requires that public organisations appropriate the main characteristics of the market culture. Our findings suggest that the immediate superior can play an important role in meeting this challenge. Consistent with the main premises of social exchange, when offered a stimulating work environment, employees reciprocate by
exhibiting a strong commitment to customers. This finding underscores the importance of decentralising and transferring some decision-making to supervisors of front-line employees. Improving the physical work environment is one way of helping employees enhance their effectiveness at work. However, this is but one of many ways of increasing employee willingness to deliver high quality services to customers (citizens). Some research suggests that the amount of interaction with customers also plays an important role. For example, Donavan et al. (2004) found that the positive effect of customer orientation on responses to some job-satisfaction items is stronger for service workers who spend more time in direct contact with customers than for workers who spend less time with customers.

Other authors stress the desire to help others as a major motivation for employees. Thus, Perry and Wise (1990) have advocated public service motivation as a primary steering mechanism to help public administration reach high performance levels. Based on empirical data, Lewis and Franck (2002, p.402) have asserted that “the overall quality of the public workforce is determined by governments’ ability to attract, hire, and retain high quality employees”. Such an approach would necessitate using an appropriate selection process to recruit prospective or current public employees for work in direct contact with customers. Public administrators may be able to use the willingness of current or prospective employees to serve the citizen as a customer as a means of increasing efficiency. Identifying customer orientation as a personality trait thus becomes an important element in the recruitment and selection process. For many public servants, the desire to help others is an important factor in their choice of a career in the public sector (Cohen and Vigoda, 1998). Because this type of public service motivation can be seen as an altruistic work value (Lyons et al., 2006), and because helping others is a form of citizenship behaviour, the literature on OCB may provide useful insights. For example, Organ et al. (2006, pp.224–226) have suggested that “if OCBs are as important to job success as task performance is, we would want them to be weighted equally in the selection process”. This would presuppose that job analysis has been properly conducted before undertaking recruitment. Interviews, paper-and-pencil tests, job sampling, and assessment centres were proposed by Organ and colleagues as means “to assess a candidate’s propensity to engage in these behaviours” (such as helping others). In summary, job analysis and selection procedures should both facilitate the fit between individual skills and the requirements of front-line positions and also allow new hires to perform their work better. Furthermore, while it is important to identify customer orientation, jobs that involve considerable contact with customers are demanding and require voluntary support from employees rather than obligatory support. Another way to improve the characteristics of the physical environment is to involve employees and customers by soliciting their personal experiences.

5.4 Future research

Future research should naturally take into account the limitations of prior work. This study focused on the development of the work tools, workplace and work environment as management practices. These practices concern the physical work environment. Other management practices could also be examined. For example, additional research might examine how training of public employees influences their personal decision to deliver better service. The service marketing literature indicates that both employees and customers are affected by physical surroundings. Bitner (1992) developed a framework
for examining the environment-user relationship in service organisations. According to Bitner (1992, p.68), “decisions about the physical facility can have an impact on human resource goals (e.g., worker retention, worker productivity), operations goals (e.g., efficiency, cost reduction), and marketing goals (e.g., consumer attraction, consumer satisfaction)”. Future research could thus explore how the elements of Bitner’s framework help improve the delivery of quality service.

Furthermore, as Vigoda-Gadot and Golembiewski (2001) have stated, “the conventional perspective of NPM [new public management] calls for a massive implementation of business standards in the public sector by strategies of privatisation, outsourcing, performance indicators, and orientation to quality service”. However, more recently McGurk (2009) demonstrated the difficulties and limitations related to implementation of private-sector management practices in public administration. Future research could thus explore

1 how supervisors in public institutions can effectively appropriate management practices prevalent in private business

2 whether, once they have been incorporated into the manager’s repertoire, these practices affect the day-to-day performance of their subordinates.

Finally, this study also opens an avenue of research which is a more methodological in nature. We used advanced statistical tools to demonstrate the effect on customer commitment of management practices concerned with improving the physical work environment through the supervisor’s role. The application of a qualitative validation method could improve understanding and strengthen the demonstrated connection between HRM practices and factors involved in the social exchange process.

6 Conclusions

The main objective of this study was to contribute to the public management literature by demonstrating the important role played by the immediate superior in fostering commitment to the customer. To achieve this, SET was used as a framework for investigating how perceived support and commitment at the supervisory level help to improve commitment to the customer among public employees. Our findings should contribute to a better understanding of SET in the study of public employee outcomes.

References


Managing commitment to customer in the public sector


P. Paillé et al.


Managing commitment to customer in the public sector


Notes

1 Reproduced with the permission of the government of Quebec.