



On the Basis and Predicament of Applying Organizational Support Theory to Chinese Public Human Resource Management

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Abstract

Organizational Support Theory emphasizes on the concerns and attentions of organizations to employees. It can arouse employees' a sense of obligation to help organizations to reach objectives, enhancing employees' emotional commitments to organizations, and make employees dedicate to organizations willingly. At present, this theory has already been studied and applied to Chinese enterprises' human resource development and management field. But seldom does it be referenced by the public management field. This paper, by introducing the Organizational Support Theory, tries to analyze the basis of taking reference from the Organizational Support Theory for Chinese public human resource management and the possible predicaments, with the hope of founding a base for further studies on this subject.

Keywords: Organizational support, Public sector, New public management, Government failure, Predicament

1. A brief introduction to organizational support theory

In 1986, Eisenberger and other scholars firstly advanced the concepts of Organizational Support Theory (OST) and the Perceived Organizational Support (POS) (Eisenberger, R., Huntington, R., Hutchison, S., & Sowa, D., 1986, p500-507). In their opinion, Organizational Support Theory means an explanation to organizations' promises to economy and emotion, considering the social exchange concept and the reward principle. According to this theory, organizations' concerns are important reasons for employees working for and dedicating to organizations. Organizations' promises to employees go first, then employees' commitments to organizations. With this basis, Rensis Likert advanced that leaders and members in an organization should form a mutual support relationship, according to the need of "self-fulfillment men". In his opinion, in any organization, if followers perceive the supports and concerns of leaders in work, and realize their values, they will response to the leaders' decision positively. Contrarily, if they do not perceive the concerns of leaders, or even have a sense of losing dignity and personal values, they will response to the leaders' decision negatively.

Perceived Organizational Support is one concept of Organizational Support Theory. It refers to employees' overall perception to organizations' concerns on their contributions and welfare. An element analysis finished by Rhoades and Eisenberger in 2002 show that three factors affect employees' perceived organizational support, namely fairness of procedures, support from leaders, and rewards and work conditions. Employees always take the way of leaders treating them as a reflection of organizational support. The rewards that associate with perceived organizational support in a positive correlation, supportive work conditions, and leaders' understanding and praise can drive employees to generate the perceived organizational support (Eisenberger, R., Fasolo, P., & Davis-La Mastro, V., 1990, p. 51-59).

Organizational Support Theory offers many new implications for human resource management field. It is an independent theory differing from the Psychological Contract Theory. Its meanings are: Firstly, make employees generate a sense of obligation to help organizations to achieve objectives; Secondly, improve employees' expectation for leaders' concerns and praises; Thirdly, enhance employees' emotional commitments to organizations, and strengthen organizations' cohesion and employees' stability; Fourthly, assist organizations to realize goals. Theoretically, these meanings cover almost any organization, including public sectors. At present, this theory has already been studied and applied to Chinese enterprises' human resource management field. Some researchers have introduced this theory to school human resource management, hoping to dealing with the teachers' career fatigue issue (Xinrong Liu, 2007; Yuping Cao, 2005). But seldom does it be referenced by the public management field.

2. Basis for referencing from organizational support theory for Chinese public human resource management field

In author's opinion, to reference from Organizational Support Theory for Chinese public human resource management is reasonable in theories and practices.

2.1 Theoretical basis ----- "New Public Management" Theory and "Government Failure" Theory

Since the 80s, 20th century, the "New Public Management" in England, America, and other western countries is a new public administrative theory and management mode. It is also a mainstream thought for the unprecedented administrative reform happened in western countries in recent years (Tianxiang Chen, 2007, p. 71-76). According to this management theory, the management methods that have already been employed successfully by private sectors, such as performance management, management by objectives, organizational development, and human resource development, can be appropriately applied to public sectors to improve the management efficiency and management level of public management. Pollitt, in his *Managerialism and the Public Services: the Anglo-American Experience*, mentioned: "New public management mainly consists of classical Taylorism management principles. It emphasizes on the implementation of commercial management theories, methods, technologies, and modes in the management of public sectors." The development of market economy continues to push China's public management socialization. To improve public service quality and public management efficiency has already become a need of the time, which makes "New Public Management" Theory serves as a theoretical basis for applying the Organizational Support Theory to public management field.

Buchanan's "Government Failure" Theory applies the traditional "economic man" assumption to government management. In his opinion, government managers, similar to parties in market transaction, pursue for maximum personal interests in all activities, what results in not all government activities effective (Junrong Zeng & Guoquan Chen, 2001, p. 61). According to his theory, abilities of government are limited. We must build up a competition-based limited government to replace the omnipotent "almighty government". Under the condition of market economy, the government, as an "economic man", should introduce advanced corporate management ideas and theories into government reform and management, for the sake of expediting the compatibility of government and market economy.

2.2 Practical basis ----- the association of management manners and private sectors has already become a trend for modern public sectors' human resource management reform, and to construct a high-efficient government has already become a need of the knowledge economic time.

Along with the continuous perfect and development of market economy, the statuses of government public sectors, market, and the public are changing. The relationship between government public sectors and social public becomes a relationship between public service providers and customers from a relationship between administrators and followers. Public sectors should redefine their functions and realize the marketization of some functions. Meanwhile, for necessary obligations and services, governments should give priority to social public interests. In this trend, the cost-efficiency concept, performance management, customer first idea, and to apply a competition and market mechanism to government public sectors and management have been adopted by many countries. To construct a high-efficient government has already become the need of the knowledge economic time. Therefore, referencing from the effective management methods in private enterprises for government public sectors has become a trend of modern public sectors' human resource management reform.

3. Possible predicament for referencing from organizational support theory for Chinese public human resource management field

Although many fields have tried to adopt this theory, it is hard to take reference from Organizational Support Theory for Chinese public sectors' human resource management. Possible predicaments are mainly:

3.1 The "goal lost" caused by the inherent commonweal of public sectors' human resource development and management

Public sector management has characters of commonweal and public law. In detail: (1) Public sectors aim at pursuing for social benefits. (2) Public sectors emphasize on dedication. (3) Public sectors give priority to group interests rather than personal interests. Correspondingly, workers in public sectors, as individuals, pursue for personal interests, whose activities give priority to self needs. According to Maslow's Hierarchy Theory of Needs, workers, as individuals, need for physical, material, and psychological satisfaction, from the lower to higher level. These needs are personal and different for individuals. It means to unify organizational objectives and personal goals in organizations will face more challenges. The commonweal character of public sector management will obstruct the satisfaction of personal needs in a sense. Frequently, workers in public sectors have to give up personal goals and needs in order to follow organizational objectives or obey the dedication idea. Therefore, to apply "Organizational Support Theory" to public sectors will face a "goal lost" predicament.

3.2 *The incentive problem caused by the inflexible personnel flow in Chinese public sectors' human resource management*

For a long period, Chinese public sectors are conservative in the flow of human resource. The inflexible flow mechanism becomes a prominent problem. The flow mechanism includes horizontal and vertical aspects. In the horizontal aspect, many public sectors still adopt the lifelong employment system for civil servants. The more popular, the more primary the public sector is. Under this system, there are no reasonable rules for hiring or dismissing workers. A tag "enter easily but quit hardly" is popular among public workers. Work performances can not be reflected materially in appraisals. As a result, public workers will possess an idea of "same for the good and the bad", which will kill workers' trusts in organizations and disturb an effective application of personnel incentive theories. In the vertical aspect, after continuous reform and adjustment, the promotion rules for Chinese civil servants have been gradually turned into "associating promotions with performances" from former "according to work experiences and ages". Many local governments issue some management methods for personnel flow. However, because of more workers and less positions, the vertical flow is still inflexible. According to Temporary Regulation of Civil Servants, state administrative sectors adopt a position assorting system. Civil servants' positions are assorted into leading positions and non-leading positions, including fifteen levels that are relevant to twelve positions respectively. In practice, some civil servants are engaged in fields of commerce and industry, taxation, quality supervision and inspection, and environment protection. They are responsible for social management and market supervision. Because of more civil servants worked in these fields but less position for relevant agencies, promotions become more difficult. According to data from Chenzhou Personnel Information Website, 70% of civil servants are primary clerks or senior clerks. Most of them merely become senior clerks from primary clerks during their 30-40 career years (Zeng Wu, 2008). Incentive objectives are realized by the flow of employees to a great degree (such as effective introduction, promotion, or degradation). As employees find that their expected personnel flow does not happen, they may reject organizational decisions and lost the perceived organizational support.

3.3 *The damage to fairness caused by "authority control" of public management*

For powers, scholars hold different ideas. Max Weber defines it as "a possibility of one person or some persons in certain social activity fulfilling a will without regard to other participators' resistance". Thomas Hobbes regards power as "a current way to obtain any future evident interest". Dennis H. Wrong thinks "power is certain people's ability of affecting others". Although these definitions focus on different points, they reveal the nature of power from different angles. That is, power is a kind of strength, which can or may generate certain expected conditions or results.

Public management is a set of institution, system, and mechanism arrangement that help government-centered public sectors to integrate social resources to realize effective governance over social public business. It means public management should aim at serving the society. However, the realization of this goal must rely on the implementation of effective governance methods. Governance needs security, not only material security and institutional security, but also power security. Power is a deterrent force. In public management field, its deterrent force is endowed by the state, which can eliminate confusions by effective controls at different levels, guaranteeing the stability of the state. Machiavelli in his *The Prince* demonstrates the necessity and importance of power in state governance. Power is a primary element for state existence and operation. The management without power is unimaginable. Therefore, in order to reach the goal, public management has to rely on the participation of power. However, in practice, due to subjective factors' effects, power is inevitably abused for getting personal interests. Suppose the "Organizational Support Theory" has been used for reference or formally applied to public management field to deal with problems in public sectors' human resource management. With this assumption, the application of "Organizational Support Theory" in public sectors is also a part of executing public management, which has to depend on power either. Therefore, it can not avoid an abuse of power. Finally, it may arouse a sense of unfairness and frustrate employees.

At present, Organizational Support Theory has not been used or popularized in Chinese public management field. In author's opinion, since we encourage the socialization of public management and emphasize on services today, the application of this theory in public sectors' human resources management field will energetically drive the public management reform. The key is to find out a way stepping out the predicament and in accordance with development needs.

4. Conclusion

To sum up, Organizational Support Theory is an incentive theory for human resource management that emphasizes on employees' perceived organizational support and consistency of organizational objectives and personal goals. This theory is to make employees work for organizations willingly by giving them perceived organizational support, which is common in almost all organizations. To use this theory for reference in public sectors' human resource management field has theoretical and practical basis. However, because of public sectors' commonweal character, paramountcy of state power, and the aging incentive mechanism, to use Organizational Support Theory for reference in Chinese public sectors' human resource management still faces some difficulties that affect its positive effects.

In author's opinion, the essence of Organizational Support Theory is good for organizational development and realization of organizational objectives. The main reasons for predicaments are executors and relevant institution makers' subjective motives, ideas, attitudes, ethics, and morals in executing the theory. No matter what it is the predicament caused by characters of public management or the predicament caused by self mechanism of human resource management, the key for the solution is to improve the self qualities of organizational members. According to the requirements of present Chinese administrative ethics construction, to integrate "external control" with "internal control" effectively and improve overall quality of civil servants can help to find out a way out of predicament.

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