

The Effects of Bargaining Unit Status and Union Membership on Local Government Employee Public Service Motivation

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Abstract: A challenge public organizations face in motivating their workforces is the strong union influence. In 2018, the United States Supreme Court abolished agency fees in the public sector, changing the landscape of union membership. In examining the unique motivational factors of public sector employees, Perry and Wise developed a theory called public service motivation (PSM). Using PSM as the theoretical framework, the purpose of this study was to examine the effects of bargaining unit status and union membership on the PSM levels of employees. Results of this study provide insight into motivational factors of public service employees and provide implications and recommendations for practice and future research in the field of human resource development (HRD).

Keywords: Public Service Motivation, unions, bargaining unit, union membership, human resource development

Managing employees in the public sector requires a highly engaged workforce to ensure success, necessitating that leaders in the public sector understand and address the unique factors that make increasing engagement in the public sector challenging (Lavigna, 2014). These factors include economic competition for talent from the private sector, lower pay than the private sector, inadequate training budgets, pressures emphasizing productivity yet lacking incentives, and a cultural legacy of devalued work (Costick, 2006). Due to these challenging factors, understanding employee motivation is critical for public organizations to best recruit, develop, and retain highly motivated public employees.

To understand employee motivation in the public sector, it is important to understand the values of public employees. Perry and Wise (1990) began researching these values and found that a distinct public service ethos existed in public service employees, which was different from that of private sector employees. Public sector employees, more than private sector employees, value interesting work and have a stronger desire to help others, be useful to society (Frank & Lewis, 2004), and possess a special motivation to serve the public (Delgaauw & Dur, 2008). This unique sense of “public service motivation” developed into a formal theory called Public Service Motivation (PSM). PSM contains four specific motivational factors unique to the public sector: attraction to policy making, commitment to the public interest, compassion, and self-sacrifice (Perry, 1996).

Because a prominent challenge public organizations face in motivating their workforces is a strong union influence (Lavigna, 2014), understanding the effects of bargaining unit status and union membership status on employee PSM are important considerations for human resource development (HRD) professionals in municipal government organizations. Understanding these effects can enable HRD professionals to implement training and development initiatives steering recruitment and hiring, employee motivation and retention, and career transitioning. These

training and development initiatives can be aimed at management, employees, as well as unions, to foster a more motivated workforce and increase knowledge pertaining to the motivation of public service employees.

The strong union influence in the public sector, which affords employees many protections, is one of the most prevalent challenges in motivating public service employees. More than 34% of public sector employees are in unions, which is more than five times higher than the private sector (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2018). Furthermore, on June 27, 2018, the United States Supreme Court in *Janus v. American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME)* affirmed the First Amendment rights of employees and abolished agency fees in the public sector. The *Janus* ruling is one of the most impactful labor rulings over the past 40 years and presents several new challenges in the relationship dynamics between employees, unions, and management. Because employees in bargaining unit positions no longer pay previously required agency fees (fair share), a financial burden is now forced upon unions and requiring them to work harder to prove their value to employees with less financial backing (Semuels, 2018).

The purpose of this quantitative survey study of local government employees in a city in New Mexico was to examine the effects of bargaining unit status and union membership on the PSM levels of employees. This study sought to find out how bargaining unit status and union membership status affected PSM levels of employees. For employees who are in bargaining unit positions, this study explored whether differences in PSM levels existed between union members and non-members. Results of this study provide insight into motivational factors of public service employees, thus informing the field of HRD and steering the training and development needs of public service organizations with the overall goal of providing the best possible services to citizens.

Research Design

Because this study sought to use quantitative analysis to describe attitudes and opinions of participants, a quantitative survey design was appropriate (Creswell, 2014). Utilizing a total population sampling technique, subjects included all non-first responder or public safety employees in a city in New Mexico, that is, all employees other than those in the police department, fire and rescue department, 911 communications, or municipal court.

Subjects responded to a survey that consisted of the Perry (1996) PSM Measurement Scale, which was authorized for use by Perry. The Perry PSM Measurement Scale is a 24-item Likert-type scaled survey, and is the predominant instrument used to measure PSM (Belle, 2013). Bargaining unit status was divided into two groups, reflecting whether employees' jobs are in a bargaining unit. If employees were in a bargaining unit, they were asked whether they were dues paying members or not, reflecting their union membership status. The quantitative analysis results showed the variances between groups, revealing how the various groupings compared to each other, with the intent of generalizability to other similar populations.

Importance of the Study

Because one of the largest motivational challenges public organizations face is the influence of unions (Lavigna, 2014), understanding the motivation of employees in this regard is critical for public employers and specifically HRD professionals, but limited research has been done in these areas. Also, due to the U.S. Supreme Court's 2018 *Janus* decision's resulting in public sector bargaining unit employees' no longer being forced to pay agency fees, a blank canvas presently exists regarding how union membership status affects bargaining unit employees' PSM levels. Furthermore, additional research is needed examining PSM as a dependent variable, thus exploring its causal factors (Bozeman & Su, 2014). This study began to fill in the knowledge gaps that exist pertaining to the effects of bargaining unit status and union membership status on PSM levels of employees, especially given the recent *Janus* decision.

Finally, while the topics explored presented great opportunity to fill in research gaps and begin new lines of research, this study was also the only such study geared toward gleaning insight for HRD practitioners. While much PSM research claims to provide insight for human resources management (HRM) practitioners, there is no mention in the literature regarding how PSM can inform HRD practices. Thus, this study began to address ways in which knowledge of PSM can inform the HRD profession and the practices of HRD professionals, such as training and workforce development initiatives, which train employees, supervisors, and managers on the recruitment, retention, and career transitioning of public service employees.

Data Analysis and Results

Data were collected from all city departments in the organization, except for departments providing public safety. These included police, fire, and rescue; 911 communications; and municipal court. Electronic and paper surveys were used for employee participation, and 179 employees participated in the study.

Hypothesis 1 posited differences in employees' PSM levels based on whether their job existed in a bargaining unit or not. The null hypothesis that bargaining unit status does not affect PSM levels of local government employees in a city in New Mexico was rejected because a significant main effect existed between the two levels of bargaining unit status $F(1, 171) = 5.213, p < .05$. Bargaining unit employees had a mean of 3.382, while non-bargaining unit employees had a significantly higher mean of 3.552 (Sig. = .024, $p < .05$).

For employees in a bargaining unit, Hypothesis 2 posited differences in employees' PSM levels based on whether they were union members or not. The null hypothesis, in this case, could not be rejected because a significant main effect was not present between the two levels of union membership status $F(1, 106) = .334, p > .05$. Union members had a mean of 3.360, while non-union members had a higher mean of 3.423, showing that bargaining unit employees who are not union members reported higher levels of PSM than bargaining unit employees who are union members; however, the difference did not rise to a level of significance ($p < .05$).

Implications and Recommendations

Given that this study was the first to specifically address the effects of bargaining unit status on employees' PSM levels, it remains unclear if bargaining unit status itself is the driver of PSM levels, if it is the nature of the positions rather than bargaining unit status that affects PSM levels, or if a multitude of other organizational factors exist. The results of the current study indicate that bargaining unit employees have significantly lower PSM than non-bargaining unit employees. Furthermore, within a bargaining unit, although not significant, union members have lower PSM than non-members. The results of this study indicate that many questions remain regarding the drivers of PSM. Despite these lingering questions, the findings of this study had implications for HRD professionals.

Recommendations for Future HRD Practice

Taking the results of this study into account and understanding, it is important to maximize motivation throughout the career cycle of employees; several recommendations for future practice exist for HRD professionals. The first steps in maximizing PSM in public organizations are attracting, recruiting, and selecting the right employees. Attracting and selecting employees with high PSM levels harnesses the desired PSM qualities and places employees in environments where they can perform well (Christensen, Paarlberg, & Perry, 2017). HRD professionals can play an integral role in ensuring these processes are used to maximize PSM. Through training and development initiatives geared towards managers responsible for hiring new employees, organizations can bring in employees who possess the qualities and characteristics desired, including adequate or high PSM levels. Such training may consist of teaching hiring managers and supervisors how to develop job descriptions, ask interview questions targeting PSM values, conduct job interviews overall, administer pre-hire tests, and sell prospective employees on the attributes of the organization in ways that focus on the qualities of PSM.

With future research providing insight into the reasons why bargaining unit employees may have lower PSM than non-bargaining unit employees, HRD professionals can develop PSM in new bargaining unit employees through several initiatives. These can include new employee orientation programs that display how the work employees provide directly impacts the lives of the citizens they serve and explain how employees' work contributes to the mission of the organization. In addition, HRD can form alliances and collaborate with unions, and use bargaining unit employees within these training and development initiatives, which would serve to strengthen PSM levels in the employees assisting in conducting training, in addition to bolstering PSM in the new employees receiving the training.

Once employees with desired PSM levels are hired into an organization, maintaining PSM for all employees is important. Socialization in organizations plays a major role in fostering PSM in employees (Paarlberg & Lavigna, 2010), and managers can nurture PSM in employees through job design, rewards, and performance feedback (Gould-Williams, 2016). These methods should strategically align employee values and organizational ideologies, which will positively affect employee PSM levels (Paarlberg & Lavigna, 2010; Wright, 2007). Furthermore, initiatives and practices that do not foster PSM or negatively affect PSM, such as pay-for-performance programs fostering extrinsic motivation rather than the characteristic of intrinsic motivation present in PSM should be considered for removal.

HRD is critical to maintaining and fostering PSM within employees after they are hired into public organizations. Continuous training and development throughout employees' careers should be centered on how their work provides value to the citizens they serve and how their work is linked to and supports the organizational mission (Paarlberg & Lavigna, 2010). Additionally, HRD can also develop future and current organizational leaders by teaching them how to model and communicate desired public service values (Christensen, 2017).

Another strategy to nurture and maintain PSM throughout careers is for HRD to develop and deliver ongoing periodic training for employees, provide updates on current and future organizational projects and initiatives such as the organization's strategic plan, and communicate how all employees have a direct impact on the success of such projects and initiatives. Furthermore, bargaining unit employees can take prominent and active roles in these HRD initiatives by assisting in the delivery of training in efforts to foster, solidify, and maximize PSM across the organization and especially among bargaining unit employees.

Recommendations for Future Research

The current study was the first attempt at specifically addressing how PSM is affected by bargaining unit status and union membership status, and many questions are still to be answered. One of the largest challenges in PSM research is the fact that PSM has been used as an independent variable rather than as a dependent variable to understand the causes of PSM (Bozeman & Su, 2014). While this study addressed this gap in PSM research, more gaps exist, including more qualitative studies on PSM (Perry & Vandenabeele, 2015) and studies aimed at finding PSM's causal factors (Vandenabeele, 2011). To glean an understanding of PSM's causal relationships, more longitudinal research is needed because cross-sectional survey data provide information only on the direction of causality rather than on conclusions regarding causality (Vandenabeele, Brewer, & Ritz, 2004).

Qualitative research to understand the drivers of PSM in employees is also needed (Perry & Vandenabeele, 2015). Pertaining to the current topics, qualitative studies examining how bargaining unit status and union membership status affect PSM levels would be useful in continuing to fill knowledge voids pertaining to these PSM constructs. Understanding the reasons for these differences, including attitudes' towards unions by non-bargaining unit employees and bargaining unit employees, would work towards finding out if unions are responsible for these differences, perhaps based on their real or perceived protections of employees.

In addition to longitudinal and qualitative research, more research along the lines of the current study is needed to be able to generalize about the factors affecting PSM levels. Although the current study may be generalizable to the organizational population which was studied, further similar studies in other local government organizations in the region and country, in addition to other governmental organizations such as state and federal governments and non-governmental public organizations, would be valuable. Such research would allow cross-comparisons and allow conclusions to be further drawn in attempts to fill gaps in the knowledge regarding PSM and its causal factors.

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