

MOBTC 2018

Follower Dependency and Ethical Decision-Making: A Scenario-Based Exercise

Abstract: The influence of a leader and power dynamics can significantly impact decision-making on behalf of subordinates. This session activity is designed to introduce the idea of follower dependency in organizational settings and outline its impact on ethical and independent decision-making. Session attendees will learn about factors that impact follower dependency through a variety of decision-making scenarios, discussing possible outcomes in a group format. Feedback from this session experience will be solicited to help inform classroom applications.

Keywords: follower dependency, decision-making, scenario exercise

- **Introduction.** Provide a brief introduction that establishes a need for this type of exercise and identifies the target usage. Include potential course applications and explain for whom the exercise is designed: early undergraduate, late undergraduate, graduate, etc.; traditional, non-traditional, cross-cultural, etc.).

This exercise is designed to introduce the idea of follower dependency in an organizational setting and its impact on ethical and independent decision-making. Subordinates over-dependency on their leaders and its impact on appropriate decision-making are under-examined within the field of organizational behavior. Given the complexities and situationally specific components that contribute to decision-making, students can begin to understand these dynamics through realistic hypothetical situations. This exercise is designed to be used in an organizational behavior course at the undergraduate level in a traditional classroom setting.

- **Theoretical Foundation/Teaching Implications.** Briefly specify the relevant background literature that the exercise is based upon and how your session contributes to effective teaching and learning in the field of management.

Kark, Shamir, and Chen (2003) define follower dependence as a subordinate's "motivation and self-esteem depend on receiving recognition and approval from the leader" (p. 246). This characteristic can imply that a follower is unable to make decisions, embark on new tasks, and proceed with work without guidance from his/her leader. Being reliant on a leader is expected and perhaps even valuable during the early stages of a new work role. However, follower dependency could negatively affect ethical decision-making if the ethical choice requires independence from a leader's conclusions. Hill and King (2012) found that individuals with greater self-concept clarity (Campbell, 1990) and self-monitoring abilities (Snyder, 1987) were less likely to be dependent upon their leader. Recognizing the factors that contribute to follower dependency is an important first step to consider the appropriate course of action without negative bias or interference from influential others. The helpful or harmful effects of follower dependency are often situationally dependent. Thus, applying this concept using a scenario-based activity can help students learn and appreciate the nuances involved in a variety of organizational circumstances.

- **Learning Objectives.** Specify the learning objectives for the exercise by articulating the expected changes in knowledge, attitude, or skill that are associated with participation in the activity. What teaching topics are relevant to your session?

This scenario exercise allows students to contemplate independent vs. dependent decision-making, along with factors that influence follower dependency. Specifically, students should gain an understanding of these factors and begin to recognize when follower dependency may interfere with ethical decision-making. When confronted with ethical dilemmas, recognizing follower dependence can be critical to enable individuals to make appropriate decisions. The influence of a leader and power dynamics can lead to decision-making which may not be congruent with an individual's expectation. Identifying these dynamics in advance in a safe learning environment can allow for greater critical evaluation when students are confronted with real-life scenarios in organizations.

- **Exercise Overview.** Provide an overview of the activity/exercise, including the logistics of running the exercise (e.g. timing, materials, class size), the flow of the exercise, variations or alternate applications, debriefing guidelines (e.g. questions to ask, how students generally respond). The goal is to give the reviewer enough information so that they understand what the activity is that you plan to present in your session.

The decision-making scenarios are included at the end of this document. Depending upon the size of the class, you can go through these scenarios in small groups (3-4 students) or as a class as a whole. 60 minutes is usually sufficient to introduce the topic and move through the scenarios. Specifically in this session, I will allocate 15 minutes to introduce the topic, 30 minutes to discuss the scenarios in small groups, and 15 minutes to debrief the exercise and gain insight from session participants. Although I use this activity to illustrate the potential application of follower dependency, this activity can also be used to launch discussions of ethical decision-making in a variety of settings.

- **Session Description.** Provide an overview of what you will actually do in the MOBTS conference session. Include a timeline for the session and how participants will be involved. Remember, reviewers are looking for participant engagement in these sessions.

During the session, the topic of follower dependency and its impact on decision-making will be introduced. Session participants will go through the decision-making scenarios, discussing each of the four scenarios in small groups and then sharing their conclusions and possible outcomes with the remaining participants. Time will be allotted for reflections and reactions to the exercise as a whole.

Dependency and Independent Choices Scenarios:

What would you do?

1. Your employer will reimburse you for parking expenses without providing a receipt or documentation (up to \$25 a month.) You present your supervisor with a receipt for \$20 for a cake he instructed you to purchase for a company anniversary party. He responds, “indicate a \$20 parking expense for this month.”
2. You secured a new client at the advertising agency you work for. You need your boss’s help to work out some of the technical aspects of the deal. Your boss says she will split the commission with you, but when the deal closes, she keeps the commission for herself. When you inquire about it, she says it was more work than she anticipated and will split the commission next time.
3. At a financial firm, your client threatens to sue you for investment losses. You executed trades instructed by your supervisor. Your firm looks into the case, determines you should settle with the client, and offers to split (50-50) the liability settlement with you.
4. Most of the employees of your organization identify as being a part of one political party, which is different than your political party. Your supervisor says the organization is open to all beliefs, but employees frequently make disparaging remarks about politicians in your party. You find this occurrence to be distressing, but are afraid to speak up, for fear it will negatively affect your job and working conditions.

References

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- Hill, S., & King, A. (2012, April). *Follower dependency: The role of personality, self-concept clarity, and self-monitoring*. Interactive poster presented at the 27th annual meeting of the Society of Industrial and Organizational Psychology, San Diego, CA.
- Kark, R., Shamir, B., & Chen, G. (2003). The two faces of transformational leadership: Empowerment and dependency. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 88(2), 246-255.
- Snyder, M. (1987). *Public appearances, private realities: The psychology of self-monitoring*. New York: W. H. Freeman.