Conflict of Values: Effect on Employee Behavior in the U.S. Retail Industry

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How do you feel being assigned to manage the leather accessories section of your store, when you personally despise animal slaughter for leather? How do you feel when asked to recruit candid-looking candidates without confirming eligibilities? These represent situations where a person's personal values and beliefs conflict with those of an organization. In this context, an organization is an environment with a group of people present together due to professional commonalities. The issue of personal values conflicting with those of an organization is not new and has been researched over time. Such conflicts often arise when an individual's objectives for psychological success do not align with organizational needs (Argyris, 1964) or personal preferences do not align with official requirements (Aram, 1976). Irrespective of the cause(s), conflicts between an organization and its employees need to be avoided, as both an environment and its people are determinants of organizational behavior (Lewin, 1951).

A review of literature suggests that most studies have looked at this conflict between the organization and its employees from an organization's perspective, focusing on how conflict affects organizational goals and performances (Aram, 1976; Argyris, 1964). However, little research is available on the effect of such conflicts on an employee within the organization. To fill this gap in research, the purpose of this study was to investigate (a) whether such value conflicts still exist in organizations, (b) whether such conflicts affect an employee, and (c) how employees react to such conflicts. This study focused on retail organizations, as the retail industry in the United States has been the largest employment sector for the past few years (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015). However, Williams and Connell (2010) have referred to retail jobs as "bad jobs" (Levy, 1998, p. 87) due to their poor employee appreciation, lower wages, and poor growth opportunities. Considering the retail industry's tremendous employment opportunity as well as its negative reputation, this study focuses on the retail sector as an interesting area to study for conflicts in between personal and organizational values.

For the purpose of the study, semi-structured interviews were conducted with fashion retail employees during Spring 2015. Semi-structured interviews helped researchers ask open-ended questions for in-depth responses (Wengraf, 2001). A total of 16 female participants, aged between 20 and 37 and employed as sales associates and assistant store managers, were interviewed. Each interview was conducted in a personal setting at a location convenient for both researcher and participant for approximately thirty minutes. Interviews were continuously transcribed along the data collection process and analyzed for any recurring themes. Data analysis generating no new themes indicated information saturation.

Data analysis generated three major themes: (a) conflict between personal values and beliefs with those of organizations and their expectations, (b) feeling sick and upset, and (c) quit or

change jobs with negative attitude as they perceived companies as being "not a good fit" for them. For example, three participants explained concern about "companies' over-expectations" for convincing customers and issuing them credit-cards. Some participants had difficulty agreeing with companies' "unsaid hiring strategy" based on aesthetics and appearances, such as "how that girl looks", "she looks nice with her style statement. Hire her!" Yet other participants reported of being "required to criticize my friends and coworkers" as organization's evaluation of employee performances. These expectations conflicted with their personal beliefs, such as, "I know credit cards are debt pools", "I myself do not want to own so many of them", "this is not how I would choose to do it", "It [criticizing friends] was insane, I always tried ways to avoid it". These personal values conflicting with those of organizations' affected participants, such that, they "struggled and hesitated", "felt upset" to approach every customer for the same, "I hate it", "I felt cheated by the company, they didn't even explain it to me about this part of the job", "it was stressful", and "felt sick and disturbed" with such "crazy expectations". Participants felt "required", "forced" to match to these conflicting organization needs. Most participants reported of quitting their jobs, while few others reported of "struggle", "compromise" to continue with their jobs.

This study shows that conflicts do arise between employees' personal values and those of organizations, such that these conflicts adversely affect employees and how they perceive an organization. This study indicates some common value conflicts popular in the retail industry. It also reports how these affect individual employees and make them struggle to continue employment. Thus, retail companies might want to consider such conflicts and their causes to better handle employee turnover rates. Considering how both employees and organizational environments are important determinants of organizational behavior, companies might want to strategize their businesses to acknowledge such conflicts, as conflicts in mutual expectations might adversely affect the common organizational goals. Future research extending this study to other job sectors of a supply chain and applying to other industries might generate interesting observations to better strategize course of business activities.

<p style="text-align:center">References</p>

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