WHAT’S BEHIND THE EMPLOYEES’ LENS?
– THE ROLE OF CORE SELF-EVALUATION

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Sep, 2011
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What makes a happy and productive employee?

You may say the pay, the leadership skill and style, the work environment, the organizational culture and group norm, the design of the role and so on. Yes, these are all shown to be contributing factors \[53\], but then why do some people in the same environment in the same role work better and more happily than others?

I. Core Self-evaluation (CSE)
– the dispositional root of satisfaction and performance

Academic researchers have been assuming that personality serves as one of the sources of job satisfaction since the early 1930s \[18,24\]. In the 1980s, studies revealed that individuals’ job and life satisfaction levels were relatively stable over time for as long as 40-50 years \[55\], and some personality traits successfully predicted job and life satisfaction and performance \[26,27,56\]. In particular, a powerful way personality attributes to individual differences in attitude and behavior is by setting different tunes to the way people see themselves and hold beliefs about their ability to function in the world, i.e., their self-concept or self-evaluation \[31\]. The variation in people’s self-concept will then lead to differences in their attitudes and behaviors toward people and events, the reactions they receive in return, and ultimately their job attitudes and performance \[31,32\].

Multiple traits were identified to influence people’s self-views, and they were frequently found to overlap and inter-correlate with each other. In 1997, in an effort to represent such traits with greater precision and conciseness, Judge, Locke and Durham \[31\] developed Core Self-evaluation (CSE), a composite factor that consists of four most-commonly studied, fundamental and non-context-specific self-evaluative traits to denote the “fundamental premises that individuals hold about themselves and their functioning in the world” \[28, p. 161\]. These four traits are: 1) self-esteem, the overall evaluation of one’s self-worth; 2) generalized self-efficacy, the global view of one’s capacity to allocate motivation, cognitive resource and action to achieve a goal across situations; 3) locus of control, the perceived degree of control of events; and 4) emotional stability (or low neuroticism), a property to be calm, secure and stable in reaction to daily events.

In general, CSE has been found to predict job satisfaction and performance through self-regulation and motivation mechanisms. Compared with low-CSE individuals, those with higher-rating in CSE tend to think more positively about their self-worth, believe they have the control over the situations, and are convinced about their capacity to allocate effort and resources to overcome
difficulties and achieve goals \[16\]. They are more likely to actively search for jobs during unemployment \[73\], set complex and challenging goals that fit with their self-views, show better planning to attain their goals \[28\], and exhibit less burn out \[3\] and work-family conflict \[19\]. In terms of job outcome, they generally achieve greater work effectiveness, are more likely to leave jobs that do not fit with their self-views, and report greater success and higher job satisfaction.

In addition, high-CSE individuals tend to react more constructively to performance feedback by showing stronger commitment and making greater effort for improvement, regardless of whether the feedback is more positive or negative than their self-view \[14\]. In contrary, individuals with low self-esteem tend to feel heightened anxiety after success due to the perceived demand from greater expectations and the inconsistency between reality and their own self-view \[25\]. However, low-CSE people do prefer negative feedback as being more coherent with their self-view and consider it more credible \[65\]. In addition, after the first two years at a job, pay seems to have less influence on low self-esteem individuals in predicting turnover, as they were found to stay longer than high self-esteem counterparts in jobs that have no salary increase. Moreover, low CSE people sometimes leave jobs despite a recent promotion or increase of pay \[64\].

Although the above-mentioned findings are correlational, from which direct causation cannot be inferred, the consistency among findings suggests that CSE plays an important role in many work-related aspects of individuals’ career life, ranging from the types of job selected to their reactions towards feedback and actual achievements on the job.

However, research evidence also suggests that CSE may not be a simple aggregation of sub-traits, as the four traits were found to contribute to the overall predictability at different levels, and exhibit changing relationship among each other across conditions \[25, 8\]. In fact, it is speculated that CSE might be a dynamic mechanism, in which each trait can be activated by situational factors to a varied extent and lead to context-specific combinations of attitudes and behaviors \[25, 33\].

Therefore, the more useful information to organizations is how this situation-personality interplay functions across circumstances. Main findings and implications are introduced below.

**II. The Interplay between Situation and Personality**

- the dynamic mechanism of CSE

CSE manifests individual differences in work-related attitudes and behaviors through dynamic interaction with factors outside the person. Two major categories of external factors were identified: feedback received from interpersonal interaction, and workplace environment perceived by the individual.

a. CSE and Feedback

According to self-verification theory \[60, 59, 61, 62\], people are innately motivated to not only seek
“truth” about the self, but also strive to verify and maintain a stable self-identity across contexts that echoes with their own self-views. Such psychological stability and coherence gives them confidence to define their existence and experience, to predict future events, and to guide social interactions; whereas their absences often create psychological turbulence [10, 38, 41, 47].

People use the reactions received from social interaction and consequences of events as feedback of their self-verification effort and the basis for future behavioral adjustment [67, 68]. In order to establish and maintain a stable self-view, three types of strategies are commonly observed [68]:

**Strategy 1 – identity negotiation.**

When people enter into new social relationships, especially face-to-face interactions [6], their priority is to establish an agreement about each other’s identity and highlight their own uniqueness [6, 19, 45, 60, 59]. People achieve this goal by behaving in the way that can lead others to see them in the way consistent with their own self-evaluation, exhibiting identity cues such as dressing style, and also selectively interacting more with those who seem to adopt views congruent with their self-evaluations. When feedback suggests that such agreement has been successfully established, people generally report heightened feelings of coherence and predictability [60, 68]. In group settings, successful self-verification predicts greater feelings of connectedness to the group, less emotional conflict, and higher group-level productivity of creative tasks due to increased individual contribution [60, 68].

However, when feedback disagrees with their self-view, people evaluate the feedback and its source in terms of importance, relevance and credibility. If they consider the feedback and/or its source being low on these criteria, they will then carry on with the pre-existing self-view and use identity negotiation actions to lead others readjust their perceptions [67].

**Strategy 2 – appraisal effect.**

On occasions when the situational factors override individual motivation to maintain congruence between social feedback and self-view, such as when the feedback and its source are of high importance, relevance, and/or credibility [44, 66], these incoherent appraisals will be more or less integrated into one’s updated self-views and leads to behavioral change. Such a phenomenon is especially typical in group settings. According to the Appraisal Effect Theory [59], group members like those who are more similar to the group prototype [20, 21], and their behavior and attitudes in the long-run can lead individual members to tag greater importance to self-views that are valued in the group and agree with the group prototype, but give lower importance to those characteristics that are unimportant to the group [59].

Research showed that this partial-conformity to group expectation also improves group outcomes, but only with less-creative projects in which effectiveness is achieved by having the majority following the lead of a few people. Moreover, the appraisal effect is found to be nearly 50% less frequently used with much smaller influence on group performance than that of congruent other-evaluation and self-verification among members [68].
Throughout the process of “seeking truth” about the self, it is a natural human tendency to selectively seek, encode, recall and interpret information that confirms one’s pre-existing beliefs about external things and the self [52–74]. Studies show that people rate sources of self-view congruent feedback as more credible than those offering disagreeing feedback [59–69], and they tend to overestimate the extent to which friends and acquaintances’ appraisals agree with their own self-view [59]. The type and amount of feedback people recall are also largely channeled to boost their self-evaluation [17, 12, 37, 51, 63]. In particular, feedback recalled by high and low self-esteem individuals was found to be inflated in positive and negative directions respectively [67]. Moreover, overly high or low CSE was also found to bias the estimation on one’s capacity and planned effort, and thus led to undermined performance [36].

b. CSE and Environment

People actively adjust their behavior and attitudes in achieving coherence between social feedback and CSE [16, 39]. Besides, environmental factors also directly trigger different aspects of CSE via the “trait activation mechanism” [15, 46, 43, 70].

A study in 2009 [84] revealed how perceived organizational politics and employee-rated leadership effectiveness influence employee performance and satisfaction, and how such impact varies between high and low CSE individuals:

First, the perceived degree of organizational politics generally harmed employee motivation and performance, as a highly political work environment indicates a lack of clarity in guidelines for conduct, performance recognition and reward mechanisms [17–73]. This demotivating impact was particularly strong for high-CSE individuals, who once realized the difficulty to verify their positive self-views, would respond with reduced effort and thus impaired performance; while low-CSE employees were less likely to be affected by situational factors on their performance.

Second, high-CSE individuals tend to expect others to be equally self-regulated, capable and effective [31]. Thus when working with leaders they considered as effective, high-CSE employees showed greater commitment and exhibited stronger performance in return [49]. In comparison, low-CSE individuals generally showed lower performance regardless of how they viewed their leader, as their own dispositions blocked performance in terms of motivation and self-regulation [31].

c. The Role of Cultural Values

It is true that most human psychology is universal, but culture has also been found to play an important role in shaping one’s self-view [11–15, 48, 49]. Research often compare samples from collectivism cultures such as East Asian countries versus individualism cultures such as the U.S. [11, 35, 50], and found that people in both cultural-frames base their self-views on, and act to maintain the view.
towards the cultural ideal [40, 49, 72].

In particular, Westerners tend to adopt one consistent view on the self, and thus have greater motivation to resolve discrepancies between social feedback and their self-view, and tend to attribute behavioral fluctuations to external factors rather than part of the self. In contrast, East Asians, due to their cultural backgrounds that stress collective norms and harmony, are more prone to adjust their self-views and behavioral patterns in response to demands from others and the context [19, 54].

Moreover, recent studies on individuals with collectivism cultural-roots living in individualism cultural contexts further revealed that these bicultural individuals were able to adopt ideology frames in both cultures, and switch between different self-views on an “if-then” basis depending on the context. Within each context, their self-views tend to be relatively stable over time [15, 22, 23].

In addition, similar patterns were also identified in cross-cultural differences of emotional response, as positive and negative emotions are negatively related in Westerners, but are positively correlated in East Asians. Bicultural individuals again adopt and switch between both structures depending on which culture-frame they are using. Such switches can be triggered by identification with a particular cultural group, or by merely speaking a particular language [1, 40].

III. Implication

In sum, the theories and findings introduced above provide a basis for organizations to understand employee motivation, attitudes and behaviors from a more individual-oriented perspective. The key message is that individual behaviors and attitudes are joint products of the interaction between environmental factors and personality, thus there is always space to use organizational cues such as rules, training, feedback system, norms and culture to bring out greater synergy. Below are a few suggestions as idea sparks for Human Resource practitioners:

1) Recruitment and selection

Although some researchers [34] suggest giving priority to high-CSE job candidates, organizations should take a balanced perspective and weigh personality with other individual qualities such as knowledge, skills, and experience. Moreover, recruitment decisions should also consider whether the job and the organizational environment can provide sufficient motivational cues, especially to high-CSE individuals as they are more responsive to external cues.

In order to enhance recruitment accuracy, it is important to provide realistic job information, such as types and amount of training or adjustment facilitation, job stability, career development choice, and level of demand on personal capacity. Such information provides cues for individuals to judge the fit between the job and their self-view, and also motivates high-CSE candidates with opportunities while calms low-CSE applicants with facilitation and clear role expectations.
2) **On-boarding**

The new entry phase is a good opportunity to establish an occupational identity that fits with organizational expectations. Research shows that organizations can effectively help newcomers to achieve smoother role and social adjustment by providing well-planned and scheduled training or on-boarding program, assigning buddies or mentors as role models, clearly communicating roles and expectations, providing tools and materials that help job-related learning, and creating social opportunities within and across functions to let newcomers establish their identity and familiarize with the social environment. Moreover, newcomers’ value, contribution and initiative in coping should be positively recognized. As to low-CSE newcomers, providing more assurance on their worth and capacity, and setting stage-wise objectives can be helpful for their adjustment [2].

3) **Communication and performance review**

Effective communication and performance feedback on a regular basis can help individuals to anchor and adjust their self-appraisal and effort, while frequent exposure to evaluation criteria also familiarizes them with organizational values, culture, and expectations.

During feedback delivery, individual differences should be considered for greater effectiveness. Low-CSE individuals may be overwhelmed by negative feedback or expectations behind positive feedback; whereas high-CSE employees may overestimate their capacity and worth in the face of positive feedback and thus allocate insufficient effort and resources. Moreover, self-view-incongruent feedback without clear evidence, importance and improvement directions may be filtered out from information processing, or fail to lead to improvement.

Therefore, a good strategy for communicating feedback is to also provide behavioral evidence, significance of consequences, and expectation for improvement or even benchmark behavior. In this way, feedback becomes task-focused and improvement-oriented rather than a threat to individual identity, and cannot be ignored as incongruent with or irrelevant to one’s self-evaluation.

4) **Diversity**

In the era of globalization, a multi-cultural work environment has become increasingly common, particularly in New Zealand where the majority sources of skilled immigrants are collectivism cultures such as India, China and Philippines [14]. The idea that bicultural individuals are more flexible to adopt context-specific value frame signifies possibilities for organizations to establish unified work-oriented value and employee identity on the basis of respecting cultural taboos and rituals.

In doing so, organizations could foster internal communication to let employees get to know each other at personal level, so as to correct superficial stereotypes and biases; provide unified employee identity cues such as uniforms, mottos, and multi-cultural sports teams; and most importantly, demonstrate consistency and fairness in terms of communication, performance appraisal and reward regardless of one’s cultural roots so as to avoid activating cultural-specific self-views.
IV. Ethics & Limitation

All scientific research findings are constrained by limitations and boundaries. Thus caution must be drawn on generalizing the ideas introduced above. First, the majority of the findings were correlational in nature. This indicates that personality trait does not cause behavior or attitude, but just predicts them to a certain degree. There are always other factors acting in the process. Therefore, it would be highly arbitrary to conclude that employees with certain personality traits, such as high level of CSE, will certainly perform better and feel happier than those with lower CSE. Nor would it be appropriate to base any personnel decisions solely on personality test results.

Second, most research mentioned in this document were conducted with North American population. To what extent can the results be generated in New Zealand context is yet unknown. This also calls for future research not only to develop new premises, but also to testify fundamental assumptions with the New Zealand population, especially with unique Maori and Pacifika cultures.

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