

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH ON THE SATISFACTION AMONG MEMBERS OF THE STYRIAN VOLUNTEER FIRE DEPARTMENT AND LEARNINGS FOR THE CORPORATE SECTOR

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Abstract. This research investigates the relationship between different leadership styles and member satisfaction in the context of the Styrian Volunteer Fire Department, motivated by the increasing importance of leadership development in today's complex business environment and the significance of employee satisfaction for organizational success. The study employs a comprehensive research approach, combining a literature review and qualitative research. Results indicate that democratic leadership is most prevalent, followed by transformational and authoritarian styles, while laissez-faire is less common. The findings provide insights into how leadership styles influence member satisfaction within the fire department. However, due to the unique nature of volunteer satisfaction, the findings for the corporate sector are limited. Future research should explore lessons the corporate sector can learn from fire department leaders and investigate factors influencing volunteer satisfaction.

Key words: leadership styles, satisfaction, volunteer satisfaction, voluntary fire department.

КАЧЕСТВЕННОЕ ИССЛЕДОВАНИЕ УДОВЛЕТВОРЕННОСТИ СОТРУДНИКОВ ДОБРОВОЛЬНОЙ ПОЖАРНОЙ ОХРАНЫ ШТИРИИ И ОБУЧЕНИЯ ДЛЯ КОРПОРАТИВНОГО СЕКТОРА

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Аннотация. Это исследование исследует взаимосвязь между различными стилями руководства и удовлетворенностью сотрудников в контексте Добровольной пожарной охраны Штирии. Исследование мотивированно растущей важностью развития лидерских качеств в современной сложной бизнес-среде и значением удовлетворенности сотрудников для успеха организации. В исследовании используется комплексный исследовательский подход, сочетающий обзор литературы и качественное исследование. Результаты показывают, что наиболее распространен демократический стиль руководства, за которым следуют трансформационный и авторитарный стили, в то время как принцип невмешательства встречается реже. Полученные результаты дают представление о том, как стили руководства влияют на удовлетворенность сотрудников пожарной службы. Однако из-за уникального характера удовлетворенности волонтеров результаты для корпоративного сектора ограничены. Будущие исследования должны извлечь уроки, которые корпоративный сектор может извлечь из опыта руководителей пожарной охраны, и изучить факторы, влияющие на удовлетворенность волонтеров.

Ключевые слова: стили лидерства, удовлетворенность, удовлетворенность волонтеров, добровольная пожарная служба.

Introduction

It has been confirmed in several analyses that there is a connection between leadership styles and satisfaction in business areas. Researchers have conducted extensive analyses, revealing that leadership behaviors can significantly influence job satisfaction and team performance. For instance, Braun et al. (2013, p. 42) from the University of Munich, Germany, as well as Saleem (2015, p. 568) from the University of Punjab, Pakistan, demonstrated that transformational leadership could bring about positive effects on job satisfaction and overall team performance.

Gashti et al. (2014, p. 42) from universities in different countries such as Malaysia, Iran, and India concluded that the traditional leadership style negatively affects employee satisfaction. Moreover, the research conducted by Spears and Alenick (2017) and Mosadegh and Yarmohammadian (2016) demonstrated that leadership styles, in general, are related to individual and team satisfaction. Most researchers and scientists generally agree that job satisfaction is related to the leader. This has been confirmed several times in the corporate sector.

Nevertheless, a notable gap in research becomes evident in the realm of volunteering, especially in specialized fields such as firefighting. An analysis of the

relationship between leadership style and satisfaction in volunteering has yet to exist. It is essential to consider that volunteering introduces a distinct set of challenges and motivations, setting it apart from conventional business contexts. On one side, it is different from the business field due to the tasks and the high stress in the operation, and on the other side, because members do it voluntarily and the motivation is mainly intrinsic. In general, there is a research gap between the fire department and leadership styles, as well as between the fire department and the satisfaction of its members.

Table 1 below is an additional review of the significant studies on leadership behavior correlating to job satisfaction. For this purpose, the authors, the title, the findings with a direct quote, and the proven correlation are presented in tabular form.

Table 1 – Review of significant studies on leadership behavior and job satisfaction

| Researcher | Title | Findings | Proofed correlation |
|---------------------------------------|---|---|---|
| Braun, Peus, Weisweiler & Frey (2013) | Transformational leadership, job satisfaction, and team performance: A multilevel mediation model of trust | "We demonstrated that transformational leadership enhances job satisfaction and team performance at individual and team levels of analysis and directed attention to the relevance of trust among team members, in addition to trust in supervisors." (Braun et al. 2013, p. 42) | Positive correlation: transformational leadership & job satisfaction |
| Gashti, Torbehbar & Farhoudnia (2014) | The relationship between leadership styles, employee satisfaction, and loyalty | "There is a weak positive correlation between Transformational & Job Satisfaction scores ($r / 0 = .28$) and ($P < .05/0$), which states that an increase in Transformational score leads to greater job satisfaction." "Transactional & Job Satisfaction scores possess a weak negative correlation ($r / 0 = -.276$) and ($P < .01/0$), which states that an increase in Transactional score would lead to lesser Satisfaction." (Gashti et al., 2014, p. 42) | Weak positive correlation: transformational leadership & job satisfaction Weak negative correlation: Transactional leadership & job satisfaction |
| Saleem (2015) | The impact of leadership styles on job satisfaction and the mediating role of perceived organizational politics | "The result shows transformational leadership positively correlates with job satisfaction [...]. On the other hand, there is a negative association between transactional leadership and job satisfaction [...]" (Saleem, 2015, p. 568) | Positive association: transformational leadership & job satisfaction |
| Spears, Alenick (2017) | The influence of leadership style | "Results from this study demonstrate that leadership is | Positive relation: All |

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|----------------------------------|--|--|---|
| | on individuals' satisfaction on small teams | related to individual satisfaction on small teams. Specifically, all leadership styles (i.e., traditional, shared, and transformational) elicited team satisfaction." (Spears & Alenick, 2017, p. 11). | leadership styles & and team satisfaction |
| Amiruddin & Yudiarso (2023) | Application of Transformational Leadership Method to Increase Job Satisfaction | "The results obtained are that Transformational Leadership effectively increases job satisfaction ($d=0.68$; large effect size). [...] The transformational leadership style significantly affects job satisfaction in a good work environment, a good salary system, and certainty of the status of employees. It will be different if this leadership style is applied to organizations that still need a good work environment, a salary system that is not yet good, and the employee status is uncertain." (Amiruddin & Yudiarso, 2023) | Positive correlation: transformational leadership & job satisfaction |
| Mosadegh & Yarmohammadian (2006) | A study of the relationship between managers' leadership style and employees' job satisfaction | "Employees' job satisfaction was significantly correlated and was affected by the leadership style of managers especially employee-oriented dimension." (Mosadegh & Yarmohammadian, 2006) | Significant correlation: Leadership styles & and employee satisfaction |

Source: Own construction of the authors based on literature sources cited in the table.

Theoretical background

Job satisfaction

While numerous studies have explored the job satisfaction of paid workers, there needs to be more research examining job satisfaction in unpaid volunteer work (Galindo-Kuhn & Guzley, 2014, p. 45).

However, job satisfaction is the most significant researched area of organizational behavior (Akhtar, 2020). It is frequently studied in psychology, sociology, economics, and with a management perspective, mainly because many experts believe that job satisfaction trends can affect labor market behavior and influence work productivity, employee absence, and a company's turnover rate. Moreover, the variable is a solid predictor of individual well-being (Diaz-Serrano & Vieira, 2005, p. 1) and indicates when employees want to quit their current employment (Gaziloglu & Tansel, 2002).

In the literature, the term job satisfaction has various connotations by different authors. Hoppock (1935), an industrial psychologist, provided the first definition of

job satisfaction. He defined it as any combination of psychological, physiological, and environmental circumstances that satisfy employees with their jobs.

Job satisfaction is a multifaceted construct that includes feelings about extrinsic and intrinsic job elements such as payment, benefits, work conditions, supervision, relationships with co-workers, etc. (Misener et al., 1996). Considering different literature reviews, satisfaction is not a unidimensional aspect. Multiple factors can lead to satisfaction and dissatisfaction (Azash & Thirupalu, 2017, p. 118). Moreover, Wanous & Lawler III argued that no unified desirable measurement exists because job satisfaction is directly related to the complexity of human feelings (Wanous & Lawler III, 1972, p. 104).

The European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions (Azash & Tirupalu, 2017, p. 9) agreed that there are several ways in which job satisfaction can be measured and that there needs to be a consensus about the optimal way to measure it. They stated that there are two different ways in which job satisfaction can be measured. On the one hand, there is general job satisfaction, where the overall satisfaction is measured. On the other hand, partial job satisfaction is where the satisfaction of different aspects of their job, such as working conditions, income, etc., is investigated.

Moreover, Locke (1976) developed the Value Perception Theory with the central concept that the value provided by a job influences employees' job satisfaction. He stated that an employee's perspective toward their work strongly correlates with overall job satisfaction. In addition, he defined five job facets that relate to job satisfaction: supervision satisfaction, pay satisfaction, promotion satisfaction, co-worker satisfaction, and work itself satisfaction.

McKinsey Quarterly stated that managers play a crucial role in employee workplace satisfaction. They highlight two aspects: good work organization and psychological safety. A good work organization makes employees' jobs meaningful and provides context, guidance, tools, and autonomy to minimize frustration. Psychological safety leads to the absence of interpersonal fear, so emotional health becomes increasingly important (Allas & Schaninger, 2020).

However, commonalities can be observed in the work experience of all workers, regardless of whether they are paid or unpaid. Both remunerated and voluntary workers are entrusted with tasks expected to be carried out to the best of their abilities. They interact with the organization and fellow individuals within it. Additionally, both paid and unpaid workers hold certain expectations regarding the benefits their participation will yield, although the nature of these expectations may vary. However, these similarities alone are inadequate to presume that job satisfaction operates identically in paid and unpaid work environments (Galindo-Kuhn & Guzley, 2014, p. 45).

Styrian Volunteer Fire Department

Overall, the volunteer principle is one of the main pillars of the Austrian civil defense system. Due to the high level of volunteer performance in Austria, it is possible to maintain one of the world's densest emergency services networks. One of these volunteer aid organizations is the Austrian Federal Fire Brigade Association, abbreviation ÖBFV, which stands for 'Österreichischer Bundesfeuerwehrverband' (Bundesministerium et al.).

The ÖBFV was founded in 1889 in Vienna and is the umbrella organization of the Austrian state fire brigade associations and the municipalities with professional fire brigades. The main tasks are the coordination of the entire Austrian fire brigade in the areas of organization, education, technology, and equipment. In addition, the Austrian Federal Fire Brigade Association represents the interests of the Austrian fire brigades at European and international levels and intensifies international cooperation between fire brigade organizations. In total, ninety-nine percent of firefighters in Austria provide their service voluntarily, the rest on a full-time contract (ÖBFV, n.d.).

The Styrian Volunteer Fire Department is part of the Austrian Federal Fire Brigade Association. With the current status of January 2023, the Styrian Volunteer Fire Department has 691 volunteer fire brigades, 74 company fire brigades, one professional fire brigade in Graz, and two university fire brigades (ÖBFV, 2023).

According to § 10 para. Seven of Steiermärkisches Feuerwehrgesetz – StFWG voluntary fire departments are corporations under public law, professional fire departments are institutions of the municipalities, and company fire departments are institutions of companies or a legal entity (RIS - Steiermärkisches Feuerwehrgesetz - Landesrecht Konsolidiert Steiermark, Fassung Vom 18.04.2023, n.d.).

However, in this research, only 691 volunteer fire brigades are considered because members of the other three categories are influenced by other motivational factors than completely voluntary members. Altogether, there are 51.614 members, whereas 40.107 are active, 5.407 are firefighter youth, and 6.100 are in reserve (ÖBFV, 2023). Active members have reached the age of 15 and are physically and mentally fit for the fire department and against whom there are no reasons for exclusion in the sense of § 22 of the Landtags-Wahlsordnung 2004, LGBI. Nr. 45. In any case, active membership ends upon reaching the age of 70 (RIS - Steiermärkisches Feuerwehrgesetz - Landesrecht Konsolidiert Steiermark, Fassung Vom 18.04.2023, n.d.). Only the active members are considered for this research since the firefighter youth and the reserve are not allowed to work in operations.

The Styrian Fire Brigade Association is divided into 17 fire brigade unions, which have been formed in the area of each political district.

Table 2 – Number of volunteer fire brigades per district

| District / Area | Number of volunteer fire brigades | District / Area | Number of volunteer fire brigades |
|------------------------|--|------------------------|--|
| Weiz | 57 | Judenburg | 24 |
| Voitsberg | 28 | Hartberg | 43 |
| Radkersburg | 54 | Fürstenfeld | 27 |
| Mürzzuschlag | 23 | Feedback | 72 |
| Murau | 25 | Deutschlandsberg | 64 |
| Liezen | 89 | Bruck-Mur | 26 |
| Leoben | 26 | Graz-Umgebung | 59 |
| Leibnitz | 56 | Graz | 1 |
| Knittelfeld | 17 | Total of | 691 Volunteer Fire Brigades |

Source: W. Strohmaier, personal communication, February 17, 2023

According to training documents, which are instructed at the fire department and civil defense school, the following expectations are placed on a supervisor in the fire department: namely, that the leaders are trained, a contact person for both professional and personal concerns, assist members in their development and act as a mediator when problems arise. The leader should be available in any case of problems within the group and outside and help find solutions (Schubert, 2010, p.5).

There are four different leadership functions during operations. The leaders of each level receive commands from the level above. The highest authority is the leader of the operation (AG Heft 122, 2016, pp. 10). The number of leadership levels varies depending on the size of the operation. However, in general, the management pyramid can be compared with the classic organizational structure of a company. The head of operations is comparable to the director or CEO. The platoon commander is the department head, and the group commander can be matched to a team leader (AG Heft 122, 2016, p. 18).

All leadership functions aim to use the right resources at the right time, in the right place, concerning the rules and regulations for operational tactics (AG Heft 122, 2016, p. 10ff.). A leader can usually lead up to a maximum of five units; therefore, these units are delimited in resources or location.

Research question, methods of work, and research approach

The following research questions have been defined for this research: What valuable lessons can be derived from leaders in the voluntary fire department for the corporate sector? This is an open inquiry about what the corporate sector can learn from this leadership analysis and the leaders of the voluntary fire department.

In a Harvard Business Review, Peter F. Drucker stated in 1989 that businesses can learn a lot from nonprofits, especially in the most crucial area: the motivation and productivity of knowledge workers. He indicated nonprofits are pioneers, and businesses must learn policies and practices from volunteers (Drucker, 1989, p. 88).

Qualitative research generally involves collecting and analyzing non-numerical data such as text, videos, etc. The primary sources for this research are scientific articles, publications, books, and reputable online sources to ensure high-quality research. Various search engines such as Google Scholar, ScienceDirect, Researchgate, JSTOR, and EBSCO are used to investigate the topics of leadership, satisfaction, and the relationship between those two variables.

To establish the contextual background of the Styrian volunteer fire department, extensive research is conducted on official websites, internal documents, and public libraries. In addition, contact is made with the Federal Fire Council, Willibald Wurzinger, to obtain necessary information, and the Provincial Fire Commander, LBD Reinhard Leichtfried, has authorized this work. Furthermore, the EDP officer provided crucial data, including the e-mail addresses of 691 Styrian volunteer fire departments, which were used for survey distribution.

The qualitative content analysis of the two open questions in the survey is based on Philipp Mayring's approach and summarizes the findings. After extensive research and consideration, the following assumptions were made for the sample size calculation: In this research, a low effect size of 0.2 is appropriate, Alpha is set at 0.05, and the level of power is 0.95. A sample size of 262 participants is calculated with the entered values. Since 601 people participated and 338 completed the survey, it can be ensured that the questionnaire results are representative.

Results

In total, 69 out of 339 participants who completed the survey answered the open question about what they like most and least about their leader and what improvements they suggest for general services. At the same time, seven participants stated that they had nothing to comment on. This means that 62 responses are left for analysis.

For this purpose, the answers were summarized into categories, and thus, a summary content analysis was created. However, since three questions were asked in one, sometimes only parts of these were answered, and sometimes it needed to be clearly stated whether the participant saw the behavior as positive or negative or whether the answer was meant as a suggestion for improvement. Therefore, four columns were created for the analysis: positive behaviors, negative behaviors, suggestions for improvement, and no indication. These were then analyzed in a Microsoft Excel list with a categorical allocation.

The positive behaviors, improvements, and no data columns can be compared very well. Therefore, the five responses to negative conspicuities are presented first. This is done by describing all five negative comments and noting in brackets their total satisfaction, i.e., how satisfied they are with the leader and how well they feel they are being taken care of:

1. A higher-ranked firefighter is listened to more than, for example, a probationary firefighter with good ideas. (Satisfaction level: 8/10);
2. Lack of patience. (Satisfaction level: 6/10);
3. Stubbornness on some topics. (Satisfaction level: 8/10);
4. Excessive alcohol consumption. (Satisfaction level: 8/10);
5. Poor appearance (body language, communication skills), absenteeism, does not value proper adjustment. (Satisfaction level: 8/10).

Discussion

The expertise and knowledge of leadership behavior in general service were viewed positively. This was mentioned as a positive 13 times in total. In second place is good and open communication, which was considered positive seven times, was made as a suggestion for improvement four times, and was revealed four times, but cannot be clearly assigned and therefore falls into the group 'no indication'. Another frequent aspect emphasized is camaraderie, which was mentioned seven times. Also stated several times were the inclusion of all comrades, trust, calmness and patience, delegation and distribution of tasks, goal orientation, and attentive listening.

Regarding suggestions for improvement, enhanced communication was mentioned four times, better distribution of tasks and increased attendance three times, trust, quicker decision-making, and improved leadership behavior two times. Additionally, respect, promotion of young comrades, command language, exercises, punctuality, support, a shared vision of further training, and proactive follow-up were mentioned.

The distribution of responses compared to general services looks different. Most mentions still go to expertise and knowledge with five comments and sound and open communication with seven comments. In comparison, camaraderie was only mentioned once under suggestions for improvement. The delegation and correct distribution of tasks, as well as the calmness and patience of the leader, were significant for the participants. A big difference from the general service is that here, the necessity of clear instructions and task explanation was mentioned five times, which was never mentioned in the general service. Some other positive characteristics mentioned are responsibility, overview, openness, willingness to make decisions, support, acceptance of own mistakes, solution orientation, support of younger comrades, and consideration of qualifications.

In total, ten responses were given regarding suggestions for improvement. Faster decision-making, support for younger comrades, and clear instructions and explanations of tasks were named twice. Improved communication, camaraderie, trust, distribution of tasks, assertiveness, exercises to prepare for operations, and improved leadership behavior were mentioned once each.

In summary, the analysis revealed positive and negative aspects of leadership behavior within the Styrian Volunteer Fire Department. While specific improvements were suggested, overall satisfaction levels were relatively high, emphasizing the importance of expertise, open communication, camaraderie, trust, and effective task delegation in enhancing leadership behavior.

Findings and Recommendations for the Corporate Sector

Based on the literature research and the findings of this master's thesis, the following findings can be derived for the corporate sector:

1. Recognition of a high satisfaction level. One key takeaway for the corporate sector is recognizing that high member satisfaction levels can exist within an organization. Understanding this is important because it challenges the assumption that a strong correlation between leadership styles and satisfaction is always necessary. The voluntary fire department's analysis highlights that satisfaction can be maintained at a high level, even without a strong relationship. This finding suggests that other factors contribute significantly to member satisfaction, such as the nature of the work, camaraderie, shared purpose, etc.

2. Motivation. The findings from the literature review on volunteer satisfaction emphasize the importance of understanding the motivations of volunteers. The functional approach and the Volunteer Functions Inventory highlight various motivations that can underlie volunteering, such as values, understanding, social, career, protective, and enhancement functions. These motivations cannot be reduced to simplistic categories such as altruism or egoism. The corporate sector can benefit from adopting a motivational approach to understand better the sustained willingness to engage and the high satisfaction levels observed among volunteers in the fire department. Understanding these motives can help organizations tap into their employees' intrinsic motivation and engagement.

3. The importance of context and relevance of volunteer functions. The diversity of functions fulfilled by volunteering demonstrates that volunteers' motivations are complex and go beyond simplistic categories. The personal relevance of volunteer functions may change over time, and different functions may motivate sustained engagement. The corporate sector can learn from this by recognizing that employees' motivations and needs may vary and evolve. Creating a work environment that addresses diverse motivations and allows employees to find meaning, autonomy, and connection can contribute to their satisfaction and long-term commitment.

4. Importance of communication, work assignments, and support. The Volunteer Satisfaction Index, introduced by Galindo-Kuhn and Guzley, identifies

critical elements associated with volunteer job satisfaction. These elements include communication quality, work assignment, participation efficacy, support, and integration. The corporate sector can apply these insights by improving organizational communication, providing meaningful and personalized work assignments, fostering participation efficacy, offering support and empowerment opportunities, and promoting employee integration. By addressing these aspects, organizations can enhance employee satisfaction and engagement.

5. Self-determination and basic psychological needs. The findings related to self-determination theory and the basic need theory highlight the importance of fulfilling the three basic needs: competence, autonomy, and relationships. Organizations should create contexts that enable satisfying these needs, promoting self-determined motivation and enhancing satisfaction and well-being. The corporate sector can learn from this by creating a work environment that provides opportunities for personal growth, autonomy, and meaningful relationships. Organizations can foster self-determined motivation and increase employee satisfaction and commitment by focusing on these aspects.

6. Broadening the focus. The corporate sector can benefit from broadening its focus beyond leadership styles to enhance employee satisfaction. While leadership styles are important, other factors, such as organizational culture, job design, communication, and recognition, can significantly impact employee satisfaction. The voluntary fire department analysis underscores the need to consider a holistic approach to enhancing satisfaction and creating a positive work environment.

7. Adaptation and situational leadership. Organizations in the corporate sector can learn from the voluntary fire department's ability to maintain high satisfaction levels despite a weaker correlation with leadership styles. This finding suggests that organizations should be adaptable and flexible in their leadership approaches. They should consider a range of leadership styles and adapt them to different situations, such as general services and operations in the fire department.

8. Intrinsic motivation and employee engagement. The analysis reinforces the importance of intrinsic motivation and employee engagement in driving satisfaction. In the voluntary fire department, the high level of satisfaction may be attributed to the intrinsic motivation of members driven by a genuine passion for serving their community. The corporate sector can learn from this by fostering a sense of purpose, autonomy, and meaning in employees' work. This can lead to higher satisfaction levels, even if the direct correlation with leadership styles is not substantial.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the corporate sector can gain valuable insights from the leadership analysis conducted in the voluntary fire department. By recognizing the high satisfaction levels among firefighters and the diverse motivations that drive volunteer engagement, organizations can adopt a motivational approach, create a supportive and empowering work environment, and fulfill employees' basic

psychological needs. These efforts can increase satisfaction, engagement, and long-term commitment, ultimately benefiting the employees and the organization.

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