Managing employee commitment in the not-for-profit sector: UWLSU Case Study

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Abstract
This research paper explores the topic of “Managing Employee Commitment in the Not-For-Profit Sector” within the context of a charity; The University of West London Students’ Union (UWLSU). The aim of this research paper is to explore how UWLSU manages employee commitment and will look at how leadership style and job satisfaction are used within UWLSU to manage employee commitment and the impact of these variables. The not-for-profit sector in the UK accounts for a significant proportion of employment yet it is highly under researched. Moreover, this research paper uses a qualitative research approach as this approach will help to study the subjective research variables in depth and provide a richer understanding and clarity of the research findings and is one of the only studies to adopt a qualitative approach to study the chosen topic and variables as studies on employee commitment typically follow a quantitative approach. Additionally, this paper has followed an interpretivist research philosophy and inductive research strategy. Moreover, the researcher has opted for a case study research design; using UWLSU as the case study. The sampling technique used in this research was purposive sampling as a small sample size of five managers was used. Due to the qualitative approach, semi-structured interviews were used in order to collect the data and analysed by using thematic analysis.

The results of the study show that UWLSU uses a democratic leadership style, which allows for collaborative work to take place and for the emotional engagement of employees which helps them to manage or increase organisational commitment. Moreover, UWLSU recognises that satisfaction drives performance and has a variety of methods to ensure employees are satisfied with their job, ranging from feedback/appraisals, placing an emphasis on making employees happy or feel good, emphasising social elements and more. The paper concludes with recommendations for UWLSU in order for UWLSU to continue to achieve high accolades and continue to grow further.

1. Introduction
The topic of this research paper is “Managing Employee Commitment in the Not – For – Profit Sector”, specifically within the context of the University of West London Students’ Union. The University of West London Students’ Union (UWLSU) is a non-for-profit organisation, with its primary focus being to provide services, both academic and non-academic, for the students of the University of West London (UWL) (UWLSU 2017). The aim of UWLSU’s current strategy, as per UWLSU 2018 Strategic Plan (2016, p.2) is to become “… the first modern uni with an excellent students’ union by 2018”. However, in order to achieve this, the primary aim must be broken down into multiple strategic objectives which, in this case, have been categorised by department. The strategic objective that this research is taking into consideration is the “People” objective which as per UWLSU 2018 Strategic Plan (2016, p.3) is “High performing, highly satisfied staff team able to achieve targets”.

In 2012, UWLSU’s engagement with students was less than 4% and their approval ratings were in the bottom quartile for the sector (UWLSU 2016). Through an organisational restructure, with a new management team brought in, UWLSU set out to establish a five year strategic plan with the ambition of becoming “… the first modern uni with an excellent students’ union by 2018” (UWLSU 2016). Today, UWLSU has increased its engagement with students from less than 4% to 60%, increased student satisfaction from 59% to 76% and is also the two time winner of the NUS “Highest Employee Engagement” award in 2015 and 2016 (NUS 2015 and 2016). In order to achieve these successes, UWLSU
obviously needs to have a highly committed staff team which are satisfied with their jobs and reinforced through effective and efficient leadership. It is evident in UWLSU’s achievements that a change in leadership and ensuring staff are satisfied with their jobs has had an impact on the organisation but it is unclear as to how this is managed to ensure consistency.

2. Literature Review

In relation to employee commitment, there are many factors that can be used to help manage or increase employee commitment (Saha 2016). This research paper has taken two variables into account; leadership style and job satisfaction and will be exploring how employee commitment is managed using these two variables. As there are a variety of definitions within the literature, the author has opted for the following operational definitions:

**Employee commitment:**

The emotional qualities of individuals. Employee commitment (and engagement) typically conceived as an individual’s psychological bond to the organisation including a sense of job involvement, loyalty and a belief in the value of the organization (Mullins, J.M et al 2016).

**Job satisfaction:**

A pleasurable or positive emotional state resulting from a person’s appraisal of his or her job or job experience (Rollinson 2008).

**Leadership style:**

A process in which leader and followers interact in a way that enables the leader to influence the actions of the followers in a non-coercive way, towards the achievement of certain aims or objectives (Rollinson 2008).

**Leadership**

As defined by Rollinson (2004), leadership or leadership style is a process in which leader and followers interact, in a way that is not forceful in order to achieve organisational aims or goals. Examining the timeline of the history of research regarding leadership indicates that the current literature on leadership can be generally categorised into a number of important stages. Early research on leadership mainly focused on the individual, the “great man”, which was then later developed into focusing on the characteristics of successful leaders i.e. the personalities of successful leaders. This is categorised as trait theory. However, widespread criticism of the trait approach led to the emergence of what is known as style and behavioural leadership approaches. These approaches diverted the emphasis away from the characteristics of the leaders themselves and instead focused on the behaviour and style of the leader such as democratic or participative leadership styles, implying that these styles are more successful than trait theory styles. Similar to trait theories, style and behavioural theories were also criticised and researchers began to explore the importance of situational factors. This eventually gave way to the development of situational and contingency leadership theories, highlighting that leadership effectiveness is dependent on the evaluation and understanding of the situation and the factors surrounding the situation, showing that an effective leader will adopt the relevant leadership style according to the situation. Recent studies have returned to the idea of a single style of leadership being the best way to proceed with transactional and transformational leadership styles gaining popularity in recent years (Harris and Ogbonna 2000).

**Democratic Leadership**

As defined by Christy and Mullins (2016), the democratic style of leadership is another style where the focus of power is distributed across the whole group rather than solely resting with the leader. Various leadership functions are shared across members of the group thus bringing the manager down to a level that is more equal with the rest of the group. With democratic leadership, there is a greater focus on the people within the organisation which also allows for increased interaction within the group. The primary principles of democratic leadership are that democratic leaders tend to exhibit friendliness, helpfulness, and the encouragement of participation. Moreover, democratic leadership can be credited with increased productivity, satisfaction, involvement, and commitment. As opposed to autocratic leadership, where the assumption is that subordinates are not trustworthy, democratic leadership says
otherwise and additionally views subordinates as self-motivated, enjoy being given responsibilities and challenging work, and through the organisational climate, democratic leadership also helps to foster teamwork, high performance and satisfaction (Jones et al 2016). A critique of this style though is that it can be difficult to manage and inefficient when there is a wide range of opinions (Cutler 2014).

**Transactional Leadership**

As defined by Judge and Robbins (2015), transactional leadership places an emphasis on the clarification of goals and objectives, establishing them in order to motivate their followers. Centred on leader-follower exchanges, followers perform according to the command and direction of the leaders and subsequently, leaders positively reward the efforts made. Research on transactional leadership proposes that there are three key characteristics of this particular leadership style which are contingent rewards, active management and passive management. Tasks and the way the tasks are to be carried out are communicated to the group (active management) and are then monitored closely (passive management) and subordinates are then rewarded depending on whether or not the performance was satisfactory (contingent rewards). Moreover, on the basis of predetermined parameters, transactional leaders observe the performance of employees and if necessary, take actions to change follower’s behaviours so that they may increase their performance or perform as instructed. Through this practice, a relationship between leader and follower is established which allows for continuous learning and development, as well as a better understanding for the follower in regards to their place in the organisation. This can lead to employees feeling more committed towards organisational objectives (Mujtaba et al 2014).

**Transformational Leadership**

Christy and Mullins (2016) define transformational, or creative, leadership as a way of transforming the performance of an organisation. The attention is focused on creating a vision for the organisation and typically, transformational leaders possess the ability to appeal to the value of its followers in order to create a sense of justice, loyalty and trust throughout the organisation. Similar to the previously mentioned leadership styles, transformational leadership is based on four dimensions which are personality, communication, rational stimulation, and individualised thought. By increasing, or altering awareness of organisational issues, transformational leaders help to facilitate a new understanding of those issues, and subsequently, this encourages inspiration and anticipation in extra labour to achieve common, shared goals. Transformational leaders are able to influence the attitudes and beliefs of their followers, thus motivating followers according to interest of the leader with the objective of the continued improvement of the organisation. Subsequently, followers tend to feel more transformed and developed and through internal satisfaction and motivation, organisational commitment is achieved as employees begin to realise that the organisational environment is favourable for their development (Mujtaba et al 2014).

**Job Satisfaction**

Job satisfaction, as defined by Locke (1976, cited by Rollinson 2004), is a pleasurable or positive emotional state as a result of a person’s appraisal of their job or job experience. Originally viewed as a single, unified concept, job satisfaction is now commonly recognised as an intricate cluster of multiple attitudes towards different aspects of a job based on an individual’s expectations of work and their actual experiences (Rollinson 2004). As explained by Rollinson (2004), people have different expectations in what they expect from work thus creating a highly individualistic attitude cluster but research shows that there are five key factors to the attitude i.e. job satisfaction, which includes:

- The work itself;
- Pay;
- Promotion;
- Supervision;
- Co-workers;

**Importance of Job Satisfaction in the Education Sector**

The increasing importance and interest of job satisfaction can be attributed to the basic assumption that a satisfied employee is, by default, effective and productive. However, contemporary
research demonstrates that job satisfaction is highly complex thus placing an importance on further exploration of job satisfaction and its potential effects, specifically in three key areas; employee turnover, employee absenteeism, and employee productivity (Rollinson 2004). Tett and Meyer (1993, cited by Rollinson 2004) explain that within the existing literature, there is credible evidence that in organisations where the level of job satisfaction is high, labour or employee turnover is reduced. However, this cannot be considered to be a direct relationship i.e. between job satisfaction and employee turnover as there are additional factors that contribute to employee turnover. Therefore job satisfaction, as an experience of work, can thus be credited with making it less likely for an employee to leave the organisation even if there are other available opportunities (Rollinson 2004). Much like turnover, job satisfaction again has an impact on absenteeism, although Steele and Rentsch (1995, cited by Rollinson 2004) explain that the effect is significantly stronger, as when job satisfaction begins to decrease, absenteeism increases. Moreover, there is a debate within the current research as to whether or not job satisfaction leads to high employee productivity. The notion that job satisfaction does lead to high employee productivity offers an appeal to managers as there is an implication that rewards somewhat play a negligible part in increasing employee productivity. However, Podsakoff and Williams (1986, cited by Rollinson 2004) argue that rewards do have an impact on employee productivity and that job satisfaction plays a mediating role i.e. the provision of rewards leads to job satisfaction which subsequently increase employee productivity.

As the context of this research is set within the University of West London Students’ Union, a not-for-profit organisation, it is important to understand that non-profit organisations account for an increasingly significant percentage of employment and production within the economy (Benz 2005). Moreover, operating within the education sector as a non-profit organisation, it is crucial to understand the importance of job satisfaction within the education sector. Higher education institutions are not exempt from the problems that emanate from low levels of job satisfaction amongst staff. Within the educational sector, leaders have begun to increase the number of research studies in an attempt to identify the factors that affect job satisfaction thus highlighting its importance within the higher education sector (Danish et al 2010).

**Employee Commitment**

As an attitude, organisational or employee commitment is held as an organisational wide attitude that an employee holds (Rollinson 2004). As defined by O’Reilly (1996, cited by Christy and Mullins 2016), employee commitment can be summarised as the emotional qualities of individuals. Employee commitment, also known as organisational commitment, is typically perceived as an individual’s psychological bond to the organisation which includes having a sense of job involvement, loyalty and a belief in the value of the organisation. There are a number of fundamental influences on the extent to which an employee would be committed to an organisation. Firstly, work ethic differs between individuals, meaning that their level of commitment to the work itself and their level of involvement or concern for their work would vary. Secondly, the individual’s behaviour and level of commitment is additionally affected by the psychological contract and the degree to which, both the individual and the organisation, perceive the level to be fair. Lastly, with regards to the relationship that the employee holds with the organisation, employees may have an approach of ‘what’s in it for me?’. Subsequently, a key influence of the level of commitment is the reward systems utilised by organisation and the satisfaction of employee needs and expectations of work, ranging from economic rewards, intrinsic satisfaction or social relationships (Christy and Mullins 2016).

**Three Component Model of Commitment**

A popular theory relating to employee commitment within organisations is the three-component conceptualisation of organisational commitment created by Allen and Meyer. The three approaches outlined in the model are labelled as affective, continuance and normative. Between these three approaches, there is a common link that indicates the likelihood of turnover is low but the nature of this link differs (Allen and Meyer 1990).

**Affective Commitment**

McBain (2005) defines affective commitment as an employees’ attachment to, identification with, and involvement in, the organisation. Regarded as the most prevalent approach to organisational
commitment within the existing literature, affective commitment provides a richer sense of emotional attachment. Cooper (2001) says that affective commitment consists of the notion of having a desire to remain in the organisation because of the employees’ positive attitude towards the organisation which has developed as a result of his or her experience. This commitment is a result of the norms of the organisation and the extent to which the employee can relate to and agree with these norms in comparison to their own personal norms and belief system (Cooper 2001).

Continuance Commitment

Continuance commitment, also known as cognitive commitment, can be defined as the commitment that is based on the perceived costs that employees associate with leaving the organisation (McBain 2005). Cooper (2001) states that this approach is the outcome of incentives and contributions between the employee and the organisation; if this contribution is contingent upon continued employment within the organisation, commitment increases as the employee will perceive the act of leaving the organisation as costly thus resulting in continued employment.

Normative Commitment

The third and final component of employee commitment is normative commitment; a less common but equally viable approach, normative commitment, also referred to as obligation, is based on the employees’ feelings of loyalty and responsibility (McBain 2005). Allen and Meyer (1990) explain that employees’ that exhibit normative behaviours do so because they perceive it to be the correct and moral thing to do.

Relationship between Leadership Style and Job Satisfaction

Within the existing literature, there have been various studies that have examined the relationship between leadership style and job satisfaction; several researchers (J. Chen & Silverthorne, 2004; Heischmidt & Henson, 2008; Noelker, Ejaz, Menne, & Bagaka, 2009, cited by Handsome 2009) have been able to establish that leadership does indeed have an influence on several work related attitudes including job satisfaction. Moreover, Solansky (2008, cited by Handsome 2009) postulated and found that the style of leadership has an effect on the attitudes, beliefs, and behaviour of employees. The majority of the research around the relationship between leadership style and job satisfaction examine the relationship using transformational, transactional or democratic leadership styles indicating a strong relationship between these particular styles and the effects that they have on job satisfaction.

Relationship between Leadership Style and Employee Commitment

Undoubtedly, the existing literature on the relationship between leadership style and employee commitment consistently shows that there is a positive relationship between these two variables specifically in regards to democratic, transformational and transactional leadership styles having the greatest positive impact on employee commitment (Keskes 2014). Further studies conducted by Khan et al (2011) further reinforced the notion that leadership style has a positive relationship and is a significant influence of employee commitment; indicating that the outcome of using of a democratic leadership style is that organisational commitment will be considerably higher than employees that are led under authoritative and non-interference leadership styles Chun et al (2006, cited by Asgari 2014). Moreover, previous research also indicates that leaders who encourage participation in decision making, take consideration of employees into account, and gave due consideration to employees’ learning and development all resulted in followers having higher levels of employee commitment (Keskes 2014).

Relationship between Job Satisfaction and Employee Commitment

Lastly, regarding the relationship between job satisfaction and employee commitment, studies conducted by Biggs and Swalies (2006) as well as Fu, Deshpande, and Zhao (2011) (cited by Aina 2013) illustrate that there is a positive correlation between these two variables; employees who are satisfied with their jobs are more inclined to remain committed to the organisations. As suggested by Britt and Jex (2008, cited by Aina 2013) employees that are found to be committed to their organisations tend to possess certain personality traits such as being more goal-orientated and tend to spend little time achieving goals, thus saving organisational resources. Likewise, researchers such as Robins (2003) and McShane & VonGlinow (2000) (cited by Babalola 2016) have also reported findings that indicate a clear relationship between job satisfaction and employee commitment; therefore it can be typically assumed that if an
employee is satisfied, then the employee will be committed to the organisation (Miarkolaei and Miarkolaei 2014).

Research Gap
The not-for-profit sector forms a significant proportion of employment in the UK but it is still highly under-researched (Alatrista and Arrowsmith 2004). Additionally, there is no research on students’ union with regards to managing employee commitment and this research could provide a starting point for further extensive research. As there is currently no research that examines students’ unions in particular, this allows the research to contribute to the existing literature and again could be the starting point that prompts further research. Moreover, the majority of studies concerning employee commitment, leadership style, and job satisfaction tend to be quantitative, thus providing statistical data on the topic; there is a lack of qualitative research, and exploring these subjective topics in depth could help to provide a richer understanding and clarity.

3. Methodology
An interpretivist philosophy has been adopted in order to allow for a deeper, richer understanding of the findings and the chosen subjective research variables. As this research is concerned with exploring an existing phenomenon from a different perspective the research uses the inductive strategy. The chosen research approach is qualitative as the author wanted to gain a more detailed, descriptive understanding of the chosen topic as the majority of the literature and previous studies on employee commitment, leadership style and job satisfaction tends to come from quantitative studies. A case study design was chosen due to its ability to produce insights from intensive and in depth research, thus leading to thorough, empirical conclusions and development of theory.

4. Analysis and Findings
The sampling technique that was used was purposive sampling; as the research design is a case study, purposive sampling paired well with this. As a very small sample size of five participants was used, it was critical that specific participants were selected that were particularly informative in order to maximise the probability of answering the research questions and meeting the research objectives (Saunders et al 2016). The sample consisted of employees from UWLSU who currently hold a management position. In order to collect the data, each participant was emailed individually; inviting them to participate in the research and once they gave their consent, a date and time was agreed. All five of the interviews happened in person, face to face in the form of a one to one semi-structured interview; using a set of open questions in which there were a number of themes i.e. employee commitment, leadership style and job satisfaction.

Thematic Analysis: Decision Tree
The data analysis procedure used was thematic analysis which is typically used in qualitative research. The essence of this approach is to search for themes within the data that has been collected. Thematic analysis offers a methodical yet adaptable and usable approach to analyse qualitative data, thus allowing for acute descriptions, explanations and formation of theories (Saunders et al 2016).
Figure 1

- Similarities (+)
  - Strategic
  - Democratic
  - Charismatic
  - Individualised
  - Performance-based
  - Situational
- Differences (-)
  - Effective way of leadership, specifically in this sector and organisation
  - Allows for emotional engagement, which gives UWLSU an edge
  - Helps to manage growth
  - Can go wrong

Figure 2

- Similarities (+)
  - Social element
  - Emphasis on making employees feel good/are happy
  - Feedback/appraisals
  - Clarity of strategy, purpose and role within organisation
  - Emotional rewards
- Differences (-)
  - Diversity
  - Satisfaction in UWLSU does not come from pay
  - Opportunistic rewards
  - Competitive rate of pay (based on sector)
5. Discussion and Conclusion

Relating back to the established research questions and objectives, it is important to summarise the research findings in order to determine whether the research questions have been answered and if the research objectives have been met. Based on the analysis of the collected data, there are several research findings. The research findings show that the leadership style of UWLSU is Democratic. Regarding its effectiveness in managing employee commitment and how it helps UWLSU to manage employee commitment, the findings show that this particular leadership style is highly useful in the not-for-profit sector especially within organisations such as Students’ Union as it allows for emotional engagement with employees and can help to manage growth. With a democratic leadership style, organisational work becomes collaborative allowing for a shared sense of purpose amongst colleagues which helps UWLSU to manage employee commitment.

Moving on to job satisfaction, some of the ways in which UWLSU ensures its employees are satisfied include placing an emphasis on making sure employees feel good and are happy, the use of feedback/appraisals, ensuring that employees have total clarity of strategy and where the employee fits in that strategy in terms of role and purpose, and the use of emotional rewards. Contrastingly, as evidenced in the literature, pay can be used as a factor in ensuring an employee is satisfied but within the context of the not-for-profit sector, UWLSU in particular, satisfaction does not come from pay. UWLSU recognises that satisfaction drives performance and therefore satisfied employees are able to achieve more. People within the not-for-profit sector tend to be socially motivated and subsequently, job satisfaction and employee commitment are intrinsically linked. Job satisfaction in particular, can be the deciding factor as to whether somebody stays with their role or leaves the organisation; this relationship is highly evident in Students’ Union. Additionally, with a satisfied employee comes a committed employee and as a result, that employee will think less about the resources that they are dedicating towards the organisation. Regarding how job satisfaction and leadership impacts employee commitment within the not-for-profit sector.
sector, the findings show that there is a clear relationship between the three variables and that leadership style and job satisfaction are useful in managing employee commitment.

Managerial Implications

The results of this study offer useful, practical insights that could assist the senior management team (SMT) and central management team (CMT) at UWLSU; as UWLSU has demonstrated exponential growth in last five years, understanding some of the reasons for the success behind this growth can help them to continue to be successful and to grow further. This study could help managers to understand the importance of using the right leadership style and the importance of job satisfaction and the effects that these two variables can have on employee commitment. The study found that in particular, there is a highly sensitive relationship between job satisfaction and employee commitment; that satisfaction results in commitment and knowing this, UWLSU can strategically work to ensure its employees are highly satisfied in order to increase commitment. Regarding leadership style, UWLSU can use this study to work and ensure that there is consistency in leadership as the organisation evolves and grows over time as lack of consistency in leadership can decrease employee commitment.

6. Limitations

There are several research limitations that should be taken into consideration when reading this study. Firstly, with regards to employee commitment and looking at how leadership style and job satisfaction are used to manage employee commitment, it is important to note that these are not the only two variables that can be used in managing employee commitment; rather there are many other variables that contribute to employee commitment which this study has not looked at. Moreover, due to time constraints, a small sample size was used for the data collection; if there had been a longer time period to conduct the research, the author would have opted for a larger sample size in order to gain a wider range of results.

7. Further Research

This study looked at how leadership style and job satisfaction impact employee commitment and how they can be used to manage employee commitment. However there are other factors that can be looked at in relation to employee commitment such as motivation, strategy, communication, employee brand, culture, diversity and more. Future research should consider looking at these factors within the context of the not-for-profit sector as it is highly under researched even though it forms a significant proportion of employment. Additionally, future studies should consider continuing to use a qualitative research approach like this study in order to gain a richer, deeper understanding of these complex and subjective variables.

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