

# Optimizing Perceived Organizational Support to Enhance Employee Engagement

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## ABSTRACT

Developing and maintaining an engaged workforce remains a critical objective for HR professionals as domestic and foreign competition stiffens. *Perceived organizational support (POS)*, involving the extent to which employees feel the organization values their work contributions and cares for their well-being, provides an important tool for this objective. Evidence-based research consistently shows that POS is linked to employees' increased psychological well-being and performance plus reduced absenteeism and turnover. We provide HR professionals, upper-level managers and frontline supervisors with tactics to enhance POS and its benefits for employees and their work organizations.

## Optimizing Perceived Organizational Support to Enhance Employee Engagement

Today's changing work environment, replete with job uncertainty and frequent mergers and acquisitions, contributes to a lack of trust and concern for the mutual welfare between employees and employers. Many employers have yet to fully understand the central importance of favorable relationships with employees to reducing absenteeism as well as enhancing dedication to organizational objectives and increasing performance.

For the benefit of employees and organizations alike, it is crucial for organizations to recognize employees as valuable sources of human capital. *Perceived organizational support (POS)*—an employee's perception that the organization values his or her work contributions and cares about the employee's well-being—has been shown to have important benefits for employees and employers. For instance, studies have found that employees with high POS suffer less stress at work and are more inclined to return to work sooner after injury (Shaw et al., 2013). In addition, high POS positively relates to performance (Kurtessis et al., 2015; Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002). For instance, traffic patrol officers with high POS made more DUI arrests (Armeli, Eisenberger, Fasolo & Lynch, 1998), and steel company managers and line workers with

high POS made more creative suggestions for improving operations (Eisenberger, Fasolo & Davis-LaMastro, 1990). Therefore, organizations can best serve their employees and their bottom line by developing policies and strategies that contribute to positive employee beliefs and attitudes about the organization.

Organizational support theory explains how POS develops and yields positive consequences for employees and organizations. The theory states that employees view their organization as having a disposition to view them favorably or unfavorably as reflected in the treatment it provides them (Eisenberger, Huntington, Hutchison & Sowa, 1986). POS provides employees with a simple way to understand their valuation by the organization and may vary from the view that the organization regards them very positively to the opposite extreme of disdaining them and wanting to get rid of them given the first opportunity.

According to organizational support theory, employees value POS partly because it meets their needs for approval, esteem and affiliation, plus provides comfort during times of stress. Therefore, when favorable supervision and HR practices lead to high POS, employees are more satisfied with their jobs, feel more closely connected with the organization, are more compelled to view organizational goals as their own and are more loyal and committed to the organization. In addition to meeting the employee needs as indicated above, POS signals to employees that the organization is ready to provide aid with one's job when needed and to reward increased performance. As a result, based on the norm of reciprocity (i.e., the moral obligation to respond favorably to positive treatment; Gouldner, 1960), employees with high POS are more

inclined to care about and further organizational goals. Thus, POS leads to increased employee performance and lessened absenteeism.

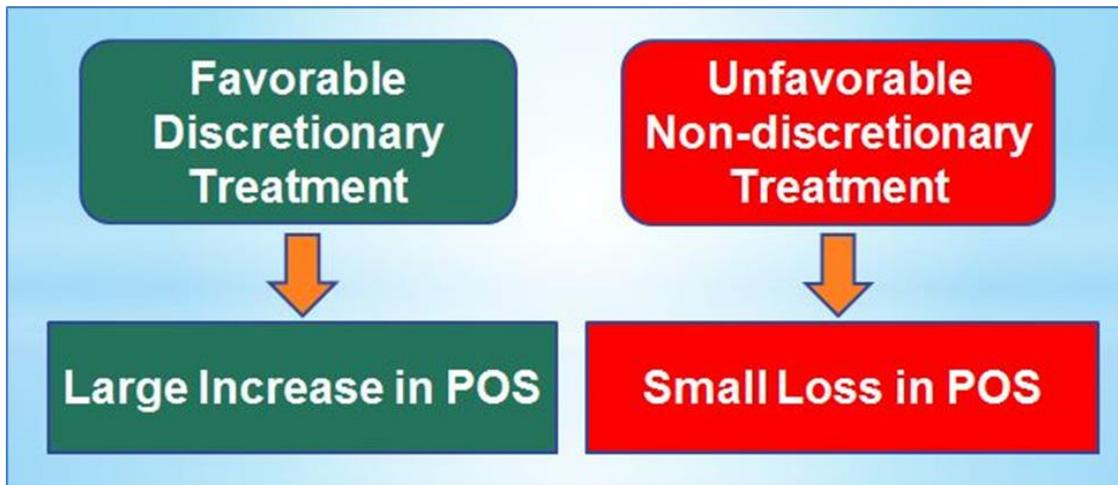
POS is strongly driven by effective leadership, favorable HR practices, desirable job conditions and fair treatment. When assessing their POS, employees pay particular attention to organizational practices over which the organization has considerable discretion, as opposed to organizational practices imposed by external constraints such as government regulations or market competition for employees. Higher-level managers enhance POS when they provide supportive policies and HR practices, whereas supervisors enhance POS through helpful and considerate actions. Though research consistently shows these factors are strongly related to POS, little has been written specifically for managers, HR professionals and supervisors concerning ways to enhance POS (Eisenberger & Stinglhamber, 2011). To fill this gap, we discuss eight tactics for optimizing POS.

***1. Implement supportive workforce services that are discretionary—"Don't just do the things you are required to do."***

Favorable treatment received by employees from an organization can be of many different kinds, such as recognition for good work, opportunities for promotion and job security. However, such treatment does not necessarily translate into high POS. Employees understand that benefits received from the organization can arise from a variety of motives, not all of which are concerned with employees' welfare. Research found that when employees received favorable job conditions, POS was six times stronger if employees believed the organization had high control over the job

conditions (Eisenberger, Cummings, Armeli & Lynch, 1997). Therefore, employee perceptions of favorable treatment associated with organizational free choice have a powerful influence on POS.

**Figure 1**



For instance, highly successful companies often provide an array of excellent benefits (e.g., educational opportunities, retirement programs, time to work on personal projects) designed to attract highly motivated workers and keep talented employees from jumping ship to other organizations. One example is Google Inc., a leader in technological innovation. Because of its prestige, Google Inc. receives hundreds of thousands of applications for a much smaller workforce. Thus, employees understand that the many favorable HR benefits Google provides are largely voluntary, contributing to high POS.

In contrast, favorable treatment associated with perceptions of nondiscretionary treatment by the organization has little impact on POS. If employees believe that the organization is forced to provide increases in pay or benefits based on a

competitive job market, government regulations or public pressure, influences on POS will be minimized. For instance, in his 2015 State of the Union Address, President Barack Obama proposed to raise the minimum wage for government workers from \$7.25 to \$10.10 as a means to decrease poverty. As a result of this speech, many nongovernmental organizations began to consider raising their minimum wage policies as well. For example, Wal-Mart recently announced that it was raising its entry-level wage to \$9 per hour, which is well above the federally mandated minimum wage of \$7.25. As reported in *Forbes* magazine, owners and executives of Wal-Mart asserted that the decision to increase pay was made because the company cares about its workers, whereas some pundits argued Wal-Mart was responding to a tightened labor market and political pressure (Worstell, 2015). In response to Wal-Mart's increase in entry-level wages, *The Wall Street Journal* reported that a competing retailer, Target Corporation, was similarly raising its entry-level wages to \$9 per hour in an effort to remain competitive for low-wage workers (Ziobro, 2015). Therefore, if these increases in wages are deemed by employees to be driven by external pressures—as declared by some observers in the above examples—little increase in POS is likely.

In many cases, an organization's motivation for a new HR policy that provides more favorable treatment is unclear to employees. Consequently, employees may assume that the organization benefits in some way the employees do not know about or that there is a government mandate or other outside pressure about which they have not been informed. Therefore, by effectively conveying that favorable treatment on the part of the organization is voluntary, POS can be enhanced.

Conversely, emphasizing the nondiscretionary nature of negative treatment by the organization can reduce losses in POS. That is, when employees are not clearly informed of the factors that provide the organization with little choice for less-than-desirable treatment, employees may assume that the organization has chosen to take advantage of them. For instance, if employees do not receive a customary annual pay raise due to the organization's financial constraints, employees may believe the organization made a voluntary decision to generate greater profits at their expense. As a result, POS might significantly decline. Therefore, effective communication may not only help increase POS when the organization provides discretionary favorable treatment for employees, but also lessen a decrease in POS when the organization is forced to deliver unfavorable treatment.

Another example of how organizations can show employees that they value their contributions and care for their well-being in a discretionary way involves employee assistance program (EAP) services. It has been reported that two-thirds of medium-sized businesses offer EAP services, leaving a sizeable portion of businesses that do not. EAP services, such as professional counseling and behavior intervention programs, are designed to help employees with personal problems that may adversely affect employee performance and well-being. Research involving case studies indicates that EAP services often improve occupational, social and psychological functioning (Jacobson, Jones & Bowers, 2011). Because EAP services are voluntarily undertaken by organizations, the implementation or upgrading of such services can effectively contribute to POS.

***2. Be fair and equitable in the making, monitoring and enforcement of all management practices.***

Fair organizational procedures and policies yield major contributions to POS because such procedures and policies are often viewed as strongly under the control of the organization and central to employees' long-term interests (Kurtessis et al., 2015; Moorman, Blakely & Niehoff, 1998). In this way, organizations that treat their employees fairly and equitably convey a sense of concern for their well-being. As a result, as shown by a great deal of evidence, fair treatment is among the strongest drivers of POS (Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002). Types of fair treatment include: (1) procedural justice, which involves the fairness of processes used to determine how resources such as pay, promotions and job assignments are distributed; (2) distributive justice, which concerns the fairness of the outcomes themselves; (3) interpersonal justice, which involves the fairness in the treatment of employees, such as with respect and dignity; and (4) informational justice, which involves the provision of necessary job-related information (Colquitt, Conlon, Wesson, Porter & Ng, 2001).

Research suggests three useful ways to promote justice perceptions: (1) rewards and resources should be distributed fairly across employees and the rationale for the ways they are distributed should be effectively communicated; (2) employees should be provided with opportunities for active involvement in the development and application of organizational procedures and policies; and (3) supervisors and other representatives of the organization should treat employees with respect and sensitivity. These

procedures should influence employees' perceptions of organizational fairness and, as a result, serve to enhance their POS (Colquitt et al., 2001).

**Figure 2**



***3. Set achievable goals and reward proportionately.***

Appropriate rewards and recognition for the achievement of high performance are strong drivers of POS. When rewards and recognition for high performance are appropriately provided, organizations promote an environment that employees can expect to gain rewards for high performance. This expectation indicates that the organization values employee contributions and, thus, not only increases employees' willingness to perform at a high level but also serves to enhance their POS (Eisenberger, Rhoades & Cameron, 1999). However, it is important to note that to develop and maintain employee expectations that high performance will be appropriately acknowledged, rewards and recognition should be provided for achievable high performance. That is, some organizations place unrealistic demands regarding high performance, thus leading to increased employee stress and decreased

self-efficacy and, in turn, lower POS. Accordingly, rewards and recognition should be based on reasonable expectations concerning what employees can achieve given their current circumstances.

**Figure 3**



In addition, many employees are disillusioned by a lack of differentiation between high and low achievers (Eisenberger & Stinglhamber, 2011). This lack of performance differentiation leads employees to question the sincerity of organizational claims to appropriately acknowledge superior performers. For instance, the failure to provide positive feedback or reward to differentiate better performance for a given employee signals to the employee that the organization is paying little attention to his or her performance. Thus, positive feedback and tangible rewards for high performance can be valuable tools for enhancing POS. However, the policy for high reward for good performance can be carried too far. Rewarding only a few top performers can be devastating for the POS of the remaining group members. The right balance involves

rewarding and recognizing all group members for good performance coupled with greater rewards and recognition for the higher achievers.

A compensation strategy that is gaining momentum in organizations and could serve as a strong contributor to POS because of its versatility to appropriately reward and recognize high performance is the “total rewards” system (Heneman & Coyne, 2007). Such a compensation system includes various kinds of rewards and recognition available to the organization, including pay, performance feedback and social recognition. Evidence suggests that a combination of rewards and recognition is more effective when used together rather than separately (Stajkovic & Luthans, 2001).

***4. Offer individualized benefits—“Learn and provide the type of support your workers and workforce needs.”***

Benefits that are tailored to employees’ individual needs more strongly convey the organization’s positive valuation of employees (Gouldner, 1960). Research found that the perceived usefulness of benefits designed to help employees balance their work and family responsibilities was positively related to POS (Lambert, 2000). This example demonstrates how organizations can increase POS by accommodating the specific needs of their employees. However, providing selective opportunities to some employees at the expense of other employees may create resentment among those left out. Therefore, organizations should attempt to provide benefits that will meet the specific needs of a considerable diversity of employees. Targeting benefits to the specific needs of an organization’s workforce is a step in the right direction to increasing employee POS.

As such, an exhaustive list and relevant information regarding the types of benefits being offered by employers can be found in a recent survey report by SHRM (Lee, Alonso, Esen, Schramm & Dong, 2014). Although health care and retirement plans are offered by a substantial majority of employers for full-time employees, opportunities for other benefits are less frequent. For example, only half the organizations surveyed offered undergraduate educational assistance and one out of five offered matching for charitable contributions. Research suggests that flexible benefits plans, which emphasize individualized choice, can increase employees' satisfaction with the system (Barber, Dunham & Formisano, 1992). Providing a customized menu of benefits to meet employee needs as they progress through different career and life stages conveys the organization's concern with employees' personal welfare and, subsequently, may advance POS.

***5. Support supervisors so they will foster POS in their subordinates.***

Supervisors, who act as representatives of the organization responsible for directing, evaluating and coaching subordinates, play a key role in seeing that the goals and objectives of higher management are effectively implemented. Supervisors have been found to repay the organization for their own POS by carrying out their jobs more effectively, including more supportive supervision of subordinates. In turn, subordinates who feel supported by their supervisors report increased POS and engage in more voluntary behaviors helpful to the organization (Shanock & Eisenberger, 2006). Therefore, treating supervisors favorably increases their POS and, importantly, this can cascade down to subordinates.

Evidence-based research shows that drivers of POS for supervisors are similar to those for lower-level employees. These drivers include supportive treatment from higher-level organizational representatives, perceptions of fairness and reward expectations (Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002). Consequently, such favorable treatment of supervisors can have a positive impact not only on supervisors but on their subordinates as well.

### ***6. Train subordinates to be supportive.***

Because supervisors have more power over subordinates than subordinates have over supervisors, most leadership research neglects the possible influence of followers as a group over their supervisor. Considering that subordinates contribute to their supervisors' objectives and emotional needs, supervisors form a general view concerning their valuation by subordinates.

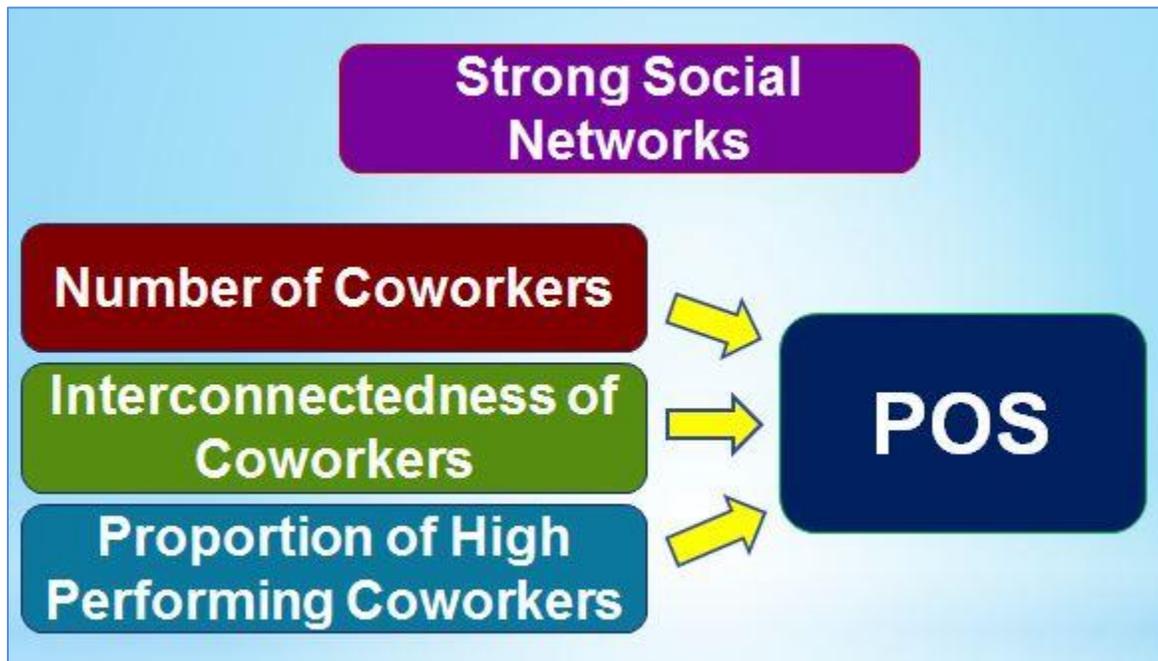
Recently, organizational support theory was extended to include supervisor perceptions about the group support they receive from their subordinates (i.e., *perceived subordinate workgroup support*; Eisenberger, Wang, Mesdaghinia, Wu & Wickham, 2013). Based on the norm of reciprocity (Gouldner, 1960), supervisors who perceived that they had a supportive workgroup were found to be more inclined to treat the workgroup more favorably. As a result, subordinates rated their supervisors as providing more caring leadership. Moreover, the supported supervisors reported being more satisfied with their jobs and showed higher levels of performance. These findings indicate the value of training subordinates regarding the benefits of demonstrating

support for their supervisors, thus promoting a virtuous cycle of support between subordinates and supervisors.

**7. Promote strong social networks.**

Workplace social networks provide a web of interpersonal relationships that offer information about how to become a successful organization member as well as provide friendships that make work-life more pleasant (House, Umberson & Landis, 1988). New employees who become strongly embedded in a social network generally adapt more successfully to their work environment. Because employees view their fellow employees as stakeholders in the organization, a supportive, strong social network contributes to POS.

**Figure 4**



Research indicates that several aspects of an employee's network contribute to POS: (1) the number of co-workers in the network; (2) the number of mutual contacts among network members; and (3) the proportion of high-performing co-workers in the network (Hayton, Carnabuci & Eisenberger, 2012). These findings suggest that POS can be enhanced through programs that promote workplace social networks such as mentoring, team projects and informal social gatherings. Moreover, considering the popularity of social media, HR departments may want to implement an enterprise social networking system similar to Facebook, such as Yammer, for employees to share workplace experiences and knowledge.

***8. Begin organizational support prior to the start of employment.***

Pre-employment treatment by the organization establishes employee expectations concerning future treatment, including organizational support. *Anticipated organizational support* refers to the extent to which prospective employees expect they would be valued and cared for by the organization if they became employees. As a result, job applicants with high anticipated organizational support continue to show high POS as employees and establish more effective relationships within the organization following employment (Zheng et al., 2013).

**Figure 5**



There are several ways to promote anticipated organizational support. For instance, research found that the anticipation of favorable HR benefits (e.g., dependent care assistance and flexible scheduling) increased anticipated organizational support (Casper & Buffardi, 2004). Therefore, an emphasis on future supportive treatment may be established by providing an introduction to the favorable benefits of working for a given company. In addition to tangible benefits, the manner in which the interview process is carried out can demonstrate the organization's positive valuation of potential employees (Smither, Reilly, Millsap, Pearlman & Stoffey, 1993). Although job interviews often need to deal realistically with unpleasant as well as favorable aspects of the job to prevent later unpleasant shocks, interviewers can promote anticipated organizational support by setting applicants at ease by acting in a courteous, friendly and respectful manner. Moreover, to display fairness, interviewers should pay careful attention to what applicants have to say, allow them to have full opportunity to discuss their strengths and answer questions they may have. Additionally, responding to

applicants in a timely manner throughout the employment process demonstrates that the organization considers them important.

### **A Recap of the 8 Tactics for Enhancing POS**

- Implement supportive workforce services that are discretionary—“Don't just do the things you are required to do.”
- Be fair and equitable in the making, monitoring and enforcement of all management practices.
- Set achievable goals and reward proportionately.
- Offer individualized benefits—“Learn and provide the type of support your workers and workforce needs.”
- Support supervisors so they will foster POS in their subordinates.
- Train subordinates to be supportive.
- Promote strong social networks.
- Begin organizational support prior to the start of employment.

### ***Conclusion***

The eight HR tactics we have presented will encourage employees to perceive that the organization values their contributions and cares for their well-being. POS has benefits for employers by enhancing employees' positive beliefs and attitudes about the organization. As a result, employees are more likely to be emotionally committed to the organization, inclined to increase performance and less likely to be absent or leave the organization. Further, POS contributes to employees' psychological well-being, including increased happiness and reduced stress. Based on an accelerating amount of research on organizational support theory, our recommended practices for promoting POS are a work in progress. Although in the future we aim to provide a more

extensive and detailed set of tactics for practitioners, we hope that the current set of practices will be put to good use. We welcome your feedback, suggestions and advice concerning the practical applications of POS.

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