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REVIEW





Sense of Belonging: A key construct in leadership management

Sentido de Pertenencia: constructo clave en la gestión del liderazgo

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: the central construct of this research is the Sense of Belonging, which seeks to explain the psychological connection that exists on the part of the worker towards the organization. The sense of belonging is a basic need every human has since he or she feels like part of a group. There are essential elements for developing a Sense of Belonging, for example, feeling valued, needed, and accepted by other people or the perception that one's characteristics are similar or complementary to those of the people who belong to the group. This research aims to make a theoretical review of the Sense of Belonging to locate the theories and perspectives.

Method: the study is qualitative and involves a bibliographic and documentary review of books, articles, and reports related to the Sense of Belonging obtained from the main academic portals and repositories. A hermeneutic approach was followed to interpret the data.

Results: organizations are facing changes from different perspectives. Globalization, Information and Communication Technologies, society's habits, and the COVID-19 pandemic have changed how organizations are run and rethinking strategies for managing human talent. Factors such as leadership style, communication strategies, remote work schedules, salaries and wages, the use of new technologies, and possible uncertainty about their job can influence their disposition, performance, productivity, and mental health.

Conclusions: sense of Belonging is important for the worker's mental health and social well-being. It is associated with psychological and social functioning, reflected in their well-being.

Keywords: Sense of Belonging; Organizational Culture; Work Environment; Well-Being; Job Satisfaction; Organizational Commitment.

RESUMEN

Introducción: el constructo central de esta investigación es el Sentido de Pertenencia, el cual busca dar una explicación a la vinculación psicológica que existe de parte del trabajador hacia la organización. El Sentido de Pertenencia es una necesidad básica que tiene todo ser humano, puesto que éste se siente parte de un grupo. Existen elementos esenciales para el desarrollo del Sentido de Pertenencia, por ejemplo, sentirse valorado, necesitado y aceptado por otras personas o la percepción de que sus características son similares o complementarias a las de las personas que pertenecen al grupo. Esta investigación tiene por objetivo hacer una revisión teórica del Sentido de Pertenencia a fin de ubicar las teorías y perspectivas.

Método: el estudio es de tipo cualitativo que supone la revisión bibliográfica y documental de libros, artículos e informes relacionados con el Sentido de Pertenencia, los cuales son obtenidos de los de los principales portales y repositorios académicos. Como diseño de investigación se siguió un trabajo hermeneútico a fin de interpretar los datos.

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Resultados: las organizaciones están enfrentando cambios desde diferentes perspectivas. La globalización, las Tecnologías de la Información y Comunicación, hábitos de la sociedad y la pandemia Covid-19, cambiaron las formas de dirigir las organizaciones y a replantear las estrategias para gestionar el talento humano. Factores como el estilo de liderazgo, las estrategias de comunicación, horarios de trabajo remoto, sueldos y salarios, el uso de nuevas tecnologías y la posible incertidumbre por su puesto de trabajo, pueden influenciar su disposición, desempeño, productividad y salud mental.

Conclusiones: el Sentido de Pertenencia es un elemento importante para la salud mental y el bienestar social del trabajador, que se asocia al funcionamiento psicológico y social; y esto se ve reflejado en su bienestar.

Palabras clave: Sentido de Pertenencia; Cultura Organizacional; Clima Laboral; Bienestar; Satisfacción Laboral; Compromiso Organizacional.

INTRODUCTION

Today, the world faces changes that reveal a new context for adapting a lifestyle that allows us to live and grow in a community.(1) In this sense, one of the main axes for human development is work since, thanks to it, human beings can satisfy their basic needs, aspire to better living conditions, interact with other human beings, feel linked to a group, develop skills and knowledge, and find meaning in life. (2)

When discussing the relationship between worker and institution, the Organizational Culture (OC) in which the individual operates must be analyzed and how it can positively or negatively affect the worker and the organization. (3) OC directly influences the behavior, attitudes, and effectiveness of workers. OC can act as a social control system that can influence the attitudes and behaviors of workers through the values and beliefs that operate in the institution.⁽⁴⁾ In this context, it must also be considered that work allows the worker to generate income to satisfy his basic needs and improve his living conditions. (5) On a psychological level, work is a source of interaction with others, allows the satisfaction of belonging needs, generates satisfaction, and can constitute a source of growth or negatively influence the individual. (6)

While it is true that OC is a field of study that has gained strength since the 1970s, various authors have conceptually and empirically addressed its formation and development. (7) In this conceptual context of OC, a diversity of theoretical approaches can be found, such as anthropological, sociological, communication sciences, administration, and social psychology. (8)

However, current times highlight the need for a deeper and more comprehensive analysis that allows us to identify the variables that influence the worker and how these influence their sense of belonging, Job Satisfaction (JS), productivity, and occupational health. (9) In the context of culture and work environment, the goal is to make personality a profitable economic and psychological resource for companies and increase workers' productivity, satisfaction, and happiness. (10)

It is estimated that organizations that have well-defined strategies to attract, retain, and develop their collaborators tend to build a solid OC. (11) In this regard, OC is: "a model of basic assumptions invented, discovered or developed by a given group, as it learns to deal with its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, which have exerted enough influence to be considered valid and, consequently, to be taught to new members as the correct model to perceive, think and feel those problems".(12)

To understand OC, elements such as values, symbols, beliefs, norms, conduct, understandings, and behaviors of workers must be taken into account; these, over time, become a work style, a way of facing problems, and a guide for making decisions. (13) Within OC, internal elements include: "common language and conceptual categories, group limits and criteria for inclusion and exclusion, power and hierarchy, intimacy, friendship and love, rewards and punishments, ideology and religion". (14)

As can be seen, OC is an intangible that is gaining increasing interest. (15) On the one hand, organizations must evolve and adapt to global, economic, and health changes to remain in the market and be more profitable; on the other hand, organizations require a solid OC and proper management of human capital that is capable of attracting, retaining, and developing more competent, committed workers who provide results at an individual and collective level.

After presenting the elements that makeup OC, it is important to point out the various variables that can influence the work environment, which can be identified as the Work Environment (WE). WE is "the set of perceptions a person has regarding their workplace". (16)

WE has dimensions that have been addressed by different authors. These authors point out that the WE dimensions are Communication, Recognition, Interpersonal Relationships, Decision Making, Physical Environment, Commitment, and Adaptation to Change. (17) In addition, the dimensions that make up WE are Physical Environment, Structural environment, Social Environment, Personal environment, and Variables. (18)

Correct WE management can promote JS, motivation, collaboration, productivity, and worker commitment

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to achieving results. In addition, it can improve indicators of absenteeism, staff turnover, and mental health. WE, culture, and leadership are also dimensions that can directly influence worker health. (19)

In 2010, the World Health Organization (WHO) published a guide and a website for managing psychosocial risks at work.⁽²⁰⁾ The WHO points out that thanks to extensive research, the factors that can represent a serious risk to workers' health were identified, such as task content, workload and pace, work schedule, control, environment and equipment, organizational culture and function, interpersonal relationships at work, role in the organization, and the relationship between work and home.⁽²¹⁾

The central construct of this research is the Sense of Belonging (SB), which seeks to explain the psychological connection that exists on the part of the worker towards his or her company or organization. SB is a basic need every human has;⁽²²⁾ likewise, SB assumes that the human feels part of a group.⁽²³⁾ There are essential elements for the development of SB in the institution: the following: feeling valued, needed, and accepted by other people, groups, or environments; in addition, the perception that their characteristics are similar or complementary to those of the people who belong to the group.⁽²⁴⁾

When reviewing these definitions of SB, it can be seen that many variables can influence the worker's feelings, thoughts, and actions. Since SB is an important element for the worker's mental health and wellbeing. This research aimed to make a theoretical review of the Sense of Belonging in order to locate the theories and perspectives.

METHOD

The study is qualitative and involved a bibliographic and documentary review of books, articles, and reports related to the Sense of Belonging, which was obtained from the main academic portals and repositories such as Scopus, Redalyc, Scielo, and Dialnet, among others. (26)

As a research design, a hermeneutic approach was followed to describe and interpret the information coherently and to approach the information revealed by the authors. (27)

RESULTS

Basic Terms Related to the Sense of Belonging

Organizational Culture

OC is defined as "the pattern of basic premises that a given group invented, discovered, or developed in the process of learning to solve its problems of external adaptation and internal integration and worked well enough to be considered valid and, consequently, to be taught to new members of the group as the correct way to perceive, think and feel about these problems. (14)

OC also refers to the combination of shared stories, expectations, unwritten rules, and social customs that affect members' conduct and behavior; it has also been pointed out that OC is a series of underlying beliefs, which, although not explicit, are always present in perception, action, and interrelations.

Work Environment

The WE is defined as a set of workplace characteristics perceived by the individuals who work there, and it serves as a primary force that influences their work behavior. (28) Another definition identifies WE as the perceptions shared by the members of an organization regarding work, the physical environment in which it takes place, the interpersonal relationships around it, and the various formal regulations that affect said work.

Well-Being

Well-Being is an optimal psychological experience and functioning. (30)

Human Talent Management

Set of actions that involve processes to attract, incorporate, maintain, and develop the talent of workers based on organizational objectives. (31)

Job Satisfaction

JS is defined as workers' favorable or unfavorable perspective about their work, expressed through the degree of agreement between people's expectations regarding work, the rewards it offers, interpersonal relationships, and management style. (32) JS is linked to the general attitude that the individual has towards his or her work. (33)

Organizational Commitment

Organizational Commitment is defined as a psychological state that characterizes the relationship between a person and an organization, which has consequences regarding the decision to continue with it; it is also

defined as "the willingness to remain in an organization due to personal interest, as well as a dedication to organizational goals and values". (34)

On the other hand, Organizational Commitment symbolizes the degree to which an individual identifies with an organization and is committed or involved with its goals. (35)

Healthy Work Environment

It is a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being, not simply the absence of disease. (20)

Theories of the Sense of Belonging

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Theory

From a psychological point of view, SB is a basic human need, which is explained through the Hierarchy of Needs Theory. (22) Every human being must satisfy his needs, which operate in a hierarchical way. This suggests that, in order to aspire to the level of security, the physiological level must first be satisfied, and so on until reaching the stage of self-actualization.

Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory is based on the fact that all subjects have needs, motives, desires, or preferences and have a hierarchy level. Every human being constantly seeks to satisfy his or her needs, which are arranged hierarchically. (22) It is what is called the Pyramid of Needs, which is classified into five categories:

- Physiological (food, water, sleep, sex, shelter)
- Security (physical and family protection, employment, income, health, stability)
- Belonging (affection, love, relationships, group work)
- Recognition (esteem, value, status, reputation, freedom)
- Self-realization (achievement of one's potential)

Motivation arises when a human experiences desire, longing, will, craving, or lack of something specific. Once the basic needs (physiological category and security) are covered in the aforementioned hierarchical order, the aspiration is to the higher categories (belonging, recognition, and self-realization category), with the self-realization category being the highest hierarchical level and the central axis of the theory. (22) Self-realization is "the realization of the person's potential, becoming fully human, becoming everything that the person can be, and contemplates achieving a full identity and individuality". (22) Maslow incorporated 16 characteristics of self-realized people; (36) these are:

- They must have a realistic point of view on life.
- Acceptance of themselves, others, and the world around them.
- Spontaneity.
- Orientation toward solving problems rather than thinking about them.
- Need for privacy and a certain degree of detachment.
- Independence and ability to function on their own.
- Non-stereotypical view of people, things, and ideas.
- · History of profound spiritual experiences.
- Identification with humanity.
- Intimate and loving relationships with some people.
- Democratic values.
- Ability to separate means from ends.
- Sense of humor without cruelty.
- · Creativity.
- Nonconformity.
- Ability to rise above their environment rather than adapt to it.
- Needs for transcendence and contribution to humanity.

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Theory, based on humanistic/existential psychology, has foundations in social sciences and clinical psychology. Furthermore, it is linked to research in work motivation since the latter seeks to identify the needs that drive the worker's behavior. (37) Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory is one of the main theories in motivation, business management, and organizational behavior. (38)

All human beings have the motivation to belong to other groups, develop interpersonal ties, and maintain them over time. (39) SB is made up of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral elements and is related to health and well-being. Once the need for belonging is satisfied, there is a direct association with the individual's well-being and mental health. (40)

SB is the worker's perception regarding the degree of pride derived from his/her connection with the organization. (41) Considering the aforementioned approaches, human beings need to be part of a group where they feel safe and identified; furthermore, this is part of human nature. (22)

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Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory

The factors that influence JS differ from those that generate Job Dissatisfaction (JD). (42) The Two-Factor Theory groups variables associated with JS called the "Work Motivation Factor," and, on the other hand, groups variables associated with JD called the "Hygiene" Factor. (42) The variables associated with the Motivation Factor are related to JS, and these are:

- Achievement.
- Recognition.
- · Challenging tasks.
- Responsibility.
- Promotion/development opportunities.

On the other hand, the variables associated with the Hygiene Factor are related to JD, and these are:

- Policies.
- Administrative practices.
- Supervisory style.
- Interpersonal relationships.
- Physical conditions.
- Security.
- Benefits.
- Salary.

In this context, Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory clearly orients institutions to implement strategies to increase workers' JS. (43)

Vroom's Expectancy Theory

The work context also includes Vroom's Expectancy Theory. (44) The proposal assumes that the worker directs his effort towards the tasks he believes will give him the best results and achievements he wishes to obtain. The worker is conscious (rational), (44) and his behavior is motivated by three perceptions:

- Valence: value assigned to the result of a job.
- Expectancy: probability assigned to the relationship between more significant effort and more excellent performance.
- Performance: probability assigned to the relationship between more excellent performance and better results.

From the cognitive perspective of motivation, the expectancy theory seeks to predict the strength the worker feels is linked to the institution and his desire to remain for a long time. Therefore, the Vroom model is the most accepted and researched version of labor. (45)

Approaches to the study of the Sense of Belonging

Belonging is identifying an individual with a group or a particular environment, which creates a commitment to personal and group development and where one lives. Likewise, SB is intangible and qualitative. (46)

When SB is analyzed from a perspective of conditioning and needs, it is seen that human behavior is directly conditioned by the individual's perception of whether or not a need is satisfied, in addition to the emotional experience. (47) The satisfaction of the real needs of each individual is proportional to the interpretation and feeling that he or she assigns; in other words, if the individual feels and thinks that this need has not been satisfied, a bond, identification, or sense of belonging cannot be generated. (48)

From a sociological point of view, SB is understood as the individual's perception of how much he or she feels integrated into a group; that is, there is a subjective, affective, and behavioral experience. (49) When discussing group cohesion in the academic context, elements such as commitment or the intention to belong or leave the group are also added. (50) In this sense, there are some approaches to the study of SB; these are:

- Psychological-Social: it integrates all the processes related to group affiliation, emotional stability, and feeling as if one is part of the group. Feeling part of a group or institution is one of the three basic and essential psychological needs for human development, along with autonomy (being able to do) and the level of competence (knowing how to do). (51) This psychological dimension refers to feeling self-confident, valued, and needed by the group or system. (52)
- Affective dimension. It integrates the feelings associated with integration, support interactions, and individual positioning in the group. From this interaction, cognitive and affective elements emerge that configure collectivity and social cohesion and determine ways of acting, behaviors, and expressions.

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- Physical or contextual dimension. It refers to the characteristics of the environment related to functionality and comfort. This dimension comprises the physical environment and its meanings in general. In this sense, spaces, the physical environment or place, can influence mobility, creativity, competence, and productivity. (52) In addition, the physical environment can influence and stimulate the positive and collective experiences of the worker.
- Academic. It integrates specific aspects of student life, opinions of the program, and the academic climate inside and outside the classroom. The academic environment must promote the student's identification and interaction on an affective and social level. (54,55)

Perspectives on the Sense of Belonging

Ontological perspective

From an ontological perspective, the construct of belonging is defined as a continuous interaction of the individual with his peers, coinciding with the way of being people and the way of doing activities and using common elements to integrate values, needs, and attitudes. Likewise, the SB integrates the feeling of appropriation and identification with a territory, which, through socialization activities with the community, can build meaning and make the individual feel part of it. The SB and identity are reflected in the values, customs, and manifestations built by feeling part of a group, family, or nation. (56)

Academic perspective

From an academic point of view, the SB can be analyzed from different perspectives. The SB and the permanence of students throughout the academic cycle bring a diversity of positive effects on the student, the family, and the institution in the context of higher education. (57) In addition, three categories influence the student's SB. (58)

- Personal: family background and dispositions.
- Relational: relationship with peers and teachers.
- Institutional: institutional climate and internal culture.

In the academic field, the concept of SB has also been investigated and is frequently associated with student performance, absenteeism, and well-being; likewise, school violence and perception of justice can directly influence the student's well-being. (59) The perception that the student may have about security, happiness, and justice is part of the SP construct.

In the academic context, the quality of interpersonal relationships between students and teachers, listening, and respect are key indicators for students to identify with the institution and increase their well-being. Bourdieu developed the concept of esprit de corps, which he called "a feeling of solidarity with the group or community, which is made up of appreciation, perception, thought and action". (56)

It should be noted that students who have a strong SB towards the educational institution do so because they share values such as collaboration, effort, discipline, and merit, to the point of calling this educational community a "second family." The above gains strength if it is considered a process of identification between student and school and from the perspective of belonging to a family. (60)

The SB is currently considered a phenomenon of interest to all academic actors to build coexistence and interaction spaces that benefit the student, the family, and the educational institution. (61)

SB is also a set of perceptions, values, and wills shared by the group and is an essential factor of social cohesion. (62) In this context, it is important to reformulate educational and labor institutions so that they function as mechanisms of social mobility, the creation of values, and the development of wills. (63)

Institutional perspective

From the institutional perspective, identity is another element linked to SB. Identity corresponds with participation, communication, decision-making, and permanence in the company. (64) In addition, this SB relationship is variable and can change due to circumstances. SB has been defined as a feeling of attachment and connection of the individual with a group or a particular environment. (52) From this, interactions generate positive attitudes and feelings towards the group and the institution that promotes identity. (65)

Another element within the institutional perspective is Work engagement, which is defined as a positive affective state of plenitude where the worker shows dedication, vigor, and concentration on his tasks and responsibilities. (66) In this sense, the elements of Work engagement are:

- Vigor: it is represented by a high level of energy, disposition, and will of the worker to persist, achieve work goals, and overcome obstacles.
- Dedication: it is mainly associated with a feeling of importance and challenge, where the worker is enthusiastic and proud to perform his duties.
 - Absorption: it is related to high levels of concentration and depth when performing duties. The

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worker feels that time passes quickly.

Another element that is identified in the institutional perspective is Warr's vitamin model, which identifies nine organizational factors that directly influence the psychological well-being of the worker: (67)

- Clarity of tasks and institutional role.
- Autonomy.
- Social contact (opportunity for social interaction).
- Diversity of tasks.
- · Communication and feedback.
- Fair salary.
- Physical safety.
- Socially valued. Recognition.
- Supervisor support.

Finally, the element with a collective focus is identified, which refers to three types of resources that influence the worker:⁽⁶⁸⁾

- Task resources: task clarity, work role, autonomy, variety of tasks, information, and feedback.
- Organizational resources: training and career development processes, work/private life reconciliation strategies, organizational communication, culture, values, and objectives.
 - Social resources: relationships with bosses, peers, subordinates, and clients.

DISCUSSION

Public and private institutions are facing changes from different perspectives. Globalization, Information and Communication Technologies (ICT), society's habits, and the COVID-19 pandemic have changed the ways of managing institutions and rethinking strategies for managing human talent. It is understood that institutions that wish to remain in the market must focus on being flexible, adapting, and becoming more efficient, all aiming to stay current and competitive.

The changes outlined have a direct influence on the worker's way of thinking, feeling, and behaving in the institution. Factors such as leadership style, communication strategies, remote work schedules, salaries and wages, the use of new technologies, and possible uncertainty about their job position can influence their disposition, performance, productivity, and mental health.

In this environment, the study of SB is important, especially in aspects such as the mentality, aptitude, motivation, and feelings that the worker experiences regarding their workplace. (69) The findings allow obtaining truthful information to make better decisions and develop human capital management strategies, which positively influence workers and the objectives of the institution.

Today, OC should be considered one of the most important assets of an institution, whether public or private. OC should be conceived as part of an internal strategic design to guide management, that is, to give direction to the institution based on objectives and strategic planning.⁽⁷⁰⁾

The conceptual foundation of OC integrates various disciplinary perspectives, such as Social Psychology, Anthropology, Sociology, and Communication and Administration Sciences. (8)

Given the diversity of perspectives associated with OC, it can be analyzed as one more variable within the scope of the institution or as a whole; that is, every institution is a culture, which is made up of the interactions and perceptions of each member.⁽⁷¹⁾ OC is "the set of important values, beliefs, and understandings that members have in common; in addition, defined ways of thinking, feeling, and behavior are offered that guide decision-making".⁽⁸⁾

By recognizing the institution as a culture, we must also take into account the WE and how it influences the workers' motivation and perception of their functions and the institution in general. (72) Considering that the WE integrates dimensions such as structure, leadership, communication, power, security, and axiology, it can be assumed that depending on the type of management of these dimensions, it can influence the worker's SB. (73)

The psychological link between the worker and the institution can be analyzed through the SB construct from a comprehensive perspective that allows for a broad dimensioning of the factors that can influence SB. (74) SB is the sense of personal participation in a social system where people feel themselves to be an indispensable and integral part of the system; (75) in addition, there are two dimensions: on the one hand, valued participation, which has to do with the experience of feeling valued, necessary and accepted; and on the other hand, adjustment, which has to do with the person's perception that their characteristics are articulated with the system. (24)

CONCLUSIONS

SB is a basic human need related to the sense of personal involvement in a social system, which makes the

person feel that he or she is an indispensable and integral part of that system. In addition, SB is an important element for the mental health and social well-being of the worker, which is associated with psychological and social functioning, and this is reflected in his or her well-being.

From this perspective, some essential elements for developing SB are identified: the experience of feeling valued, needed, and accepted by other people, groups, or environments and the perception by the person that his or her characteristics are similar to or complement those of the people who belong to that system.

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