THE PERCEPTION OF THE EMPLOYEES ON THE CONDUCT OF THE HIERARCHICAL SUPERIOR

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Abstract: *In order to ensure the retention and improvement of the quality of work, it is important, in the current global context, that companies ensure a positive perception of employees about their work, the company and, in particular, the hierarchical superior. Thus, by adopting appropriate behavior by the hierarchical superior, he can facilitate the development of beneficial behaviors among employees. Moreover, for the company, the attitude of the subordinates towards the behavior of the hierarchical superior can represent a method of measuring his legitimacy, through which measures can be developed that lead to an increase in organizational efficiency, but also a landmark in making forecasts related to the evolution of the employee in company. Through the present study, we aim to identify the most attractive attributes of a hierarchical superior, so as to answer the research question: what is the profile of the ideal hierarchical superior? The research was carried out using a quantitative method, having as an instrument an online questionnaire. We used descriptive statistics, frequency analysis, T-test and Anova in the data analysis process. We believe that the results of this study can be a benchmark in behavioral analysis for employees holding management positions, and for organizations, a tool by which they can be evaluated.*

Keywords: hierarchical superior, conduct, organizational behavior, managerial typology, human resources

1. Introduction

The present paper focuses on an essential aspect of organizational dynamics - the perception of employees towards the behavior of the hierarchical superior. In this context, the term "conduct" refers to a person's behavior and course of action, while the concept of "perception" is defined as how a person interprets and understands a certain phenomenon or behavior (on this topic, for more details, see Otovescu,2008, 2021).

Perception, although a subjective process, plays a crucial role in shaping employee attitudes and behaviors. In a corporate environment, they are essential for the efficient functioning of the organization, maintaining team cohesion and achieving the company's goals and vision. The behavior of the hierarchical superior, and especially the way it is perceived by subordinates, can have a significant impact on their motivation and efficiency (Escribá-Carda et al., 2017; Kalkavan & Katrinli, 2014; Kuroda & Yamamoto, 2018).

This paper aims to explore the relationship between subordinate and hierarchical superior. The results can be used by companies to correctly evaluate employees with managerial positions (who report to other employees), because the employees' perception of the superior is directly correlated with his legitimacy (Douthit & Majerczyk, 2019).

In addition, it is important to note that the term "hierarchical superior" includes the concepts of management and leadership. Although there are significant differences between the two - the leader is the one who sets the vision and focuses on long-term results, inspires and takes risks, playing an important role in terms of coordination (Den Hartog & De Hoogh, 2024), while the manager focuses on the present, on medium and short-term results, seeks order and limits risks (Ielics, 2019) - in common parlance, the two notions are often used interchangeably. For people who are not specialized in the field, both the leader and the manager are perceived as hierarchical superiors. Therefore, to avoid any confusion, this paper will address the two dimensions as a whole, analyzing the impact of superior behavior on employee perception in a comprehensive way.

2. The importance and effects of perception towards the hierarchical superior

According to studies, it has been found that employees' perception of the company, their superiors, their work and their results are closely related, according to several studies (Escribá-Carda et al., 2017; Kalkavan & Katrinli, 2014; Kuroda & Yamamoto, 2018). This perception not only influences how employees view their role and contribution to the organization, but is also considered an important metric for quality of work life. Research indicates that employees' perception of aspects such as the workplace, the department, the manager or the organization can be used as an effective method to improve the quality of professional life (Research Clue, 2017), and the influence and support of the superior have an important role in the evolution of the employee in the company (Seibert, Akkermans & Liu, 2024).

A subordinate's positive perception of a hierarchical superior can bring multiple benefits to the organization. First, studies have shown that a positive perception of one's superior can lead to increased autonomy and motivation at work (Deci, Olafsen & Ryan, 2017). Improving the relationship between the subordinate and the hierarchical superior can lead to increased results and an improvement in the quality of the employee's professional life, providing him with a more positive and motivating work environment. Also, a valuable relationship based on respect and trust between the two can generate beneficial behaviors such as comfort, a positive attitude and increased commitment to work tasks (Stringer, 2006), which can contribute to increased productivity. This relationship is all the more important in a highly digitized organization because, in the virtual environment, hierarchical superiors have an important information and communication role (Whillans, Perlow & Turek, 2021), because a negative perception can lead to inhibition of interaction with him, which can negatively affect the employee's performance.

On the other hand, the employee's positive perception of the superior can provide the organization with important information related to possible problems or improvements (Morrison, 2014), along with an insight into the legitimacy of his role and can be a result of positive psychological capital, which can bring other benefits, such as resilience, effectiveness, high performance and job satisfaction (Luthans & Youssef-Morgan, 2017). Monitoring employees' feelings about it through surveys or assessments can help companies better understand how superiors are perceived and adjust their control systems in line with organizational culture and employee expectations. Understanding these perceptions can help increase organizational effectiveness by better aligning management practices with employee needs and values (Douthit & Majerczyk, 2019).

The superior's behavior plays a crucial role in the subordinate's professional life within the company (Katsaros, Tsirikas & Bani, 2014; Kalkavan & Katrinli, 2014; Roberts & David, 2020). It is essential that subordinates perceive the conduct of their superiors in a positive way, as this can bring multiple benefits. When employees perceive the behavior of their superiors to be consistent with the organization's values and goals, they are more likely to dedicate their resources and work devotedly to achieve those goals, which can positively influence the organization's productivity and performance (Research Clue, 2017).

In contrast, a negative perception of the illegitimacy of the superior's role can have negative repercussions on work relations and organizational effectiveness. When employees perceive that their superiors are not performing their roles legitimately or are not acting in the best interest of the organization, team dysfunction may occur and overall productivity may be affected (Douthit & Majerczyk, 2019). Therefore, promoting positive behavior from superiors and effectively managing employee perceptions are critical to organizational success and well-being.

3. **The traits of the hierarchical superior**

The importance of the superior's traits for the present study lies in the fact that they can best describe his behavior. For example, an incompetent superior will act in an incompetent manner, while a competent one will act according to this characteristic/label. And these characteristics can have various effects on subordinates. A concrete example is a thorough, perfectionist hierarchical superior who closely supervises the work of subordinates and can be a stress factor for employees (Cascio & Montealegre, 2016), while a fair superior can increase employees' trust in him (Zhou & Hoever, 2014). In 2002, Furnham conducted a study on employee perceptions of peers, superiors, and subordinates. The goal was to determine the most desirable characteristics for each category previously specified. Although there were psycho-temperamental traits universally desired by the three groups – honesty, competence – there were, of course, specific traits as well. In the case of the hierarchical superior, Furnham summarized that: among the most desirable characteristics are orientation towards the future, liveliness and impartiality (Furnham, 2002).

Other studies, such as the one carried out by the researchers Aliekperova & Aliekperov (2023), also addressed the issue of the traits of the superior person from a hierarchical point of view. This study included the assessment of traits identified in other research, such as sociability, decency, integrity, efficiency, etc. The results of this study showed similarities with Furnham's research in that some of the traits classified as the most important are intelligence, competence or responsibility, which is why we expect to see such similarities in the present research.

In addition to psychological characteristics, socio-demographic traits could also influence employee behavior and perception. People are more likely to positively perceive in-groups than out-groups or to act in a certain way depending on the space of origin (Tajfel & Turner, 2004; Hobcraft, 2006; Furunes & Mykletun, 2010; Chi, Maier & Gursoy, 2013; Tinker, & Fearfull, 2007). However, it is important to consider that these traits do not always determine perception or behavior. In another study conducted by Furnham, it was observed that participants did not show an obvious preference for male or female superiors, or younger or older superiors. However, we must bear in mind that there is the possibility of dissimulation on the part of respondents, as gender or age discrimination is prohibited (Furnham, McClelland & Mansi, 2012).

4. **The typology of the hierarchical superior**

In addition to the appropriate traits, it is necessary for superiors to use an appropriate leadership style (or at least to be aware of their own leadership style), as this aspect can have positive effects on employees. For example, an inclusive leadership style could help interdisciplinary teams overcome the negative effects of status differences by facilitating members' collaboration to improve processes (Nembhard & Edmondson, 2006). That is why it is important to take into account behavioral theories, such as the Blake-Mouton model; model that aims at the dynamics of interactions within a team and demonstrates its usefulness when it is aimed at continuous quality development (Molloy, 1998). Also, according to this model, when there is a balanced focus on both people and results, employees are more engaged and productive. Thus, this model provides insight into leadership style and its impact on team productivity and motivation and represents a logical continuation in the evolution of management thinking and is considered one of the best practices for managers and leaders (Islam & Jee, 2019).

The model, also known as the "Managerial Grid", highlights two dimensions of a leader/manager: concern for people and concern for results (Blake, Mouton, 1964). Depending on the position on the graph formed by these two aspects, we identify five classifications: the motivator (sound), the accommodating (accommodating), the administrator (status quo), the indifferent (indifferent), the dictator (dictatorial). These typologies are influenced by the

personality of the leader and his level of experience in the field (Ielics, 2019). The choice of a specific style depends both on the leader and on the needs and dynamics of the team he is coordinating. For example, a passive style may be more effective when the team is already experienced and autonomous, while an assertive style would be more appropriate for giving instructions to inexperienced employees or in situations where firmer guidance is needed. Also, addressing these typologies is important, because depending on the typology approached by the manager, employees can work and develop in optimal conditions, leading to organizational resistance (Hobfoll, Halbesleben, Neveu & Westman, 2018).

5. Research methodology

Because we aimed for the data to be as representative as possible, it was necessary to obtain as many answers as possible from as many respondents as possible. That's why we used the sociological investigation method, having the questionnaire as a research tool. In terms of sampling, we originally considered quota sampling. However, taking into account the fact that we used the snowball method, along with the online questionnaire, some categories were more accessible than others. The majority of respondents are largely young, with higher education, from Timișoara, which provides a certain profile to the respondents and, at the same time, certain limitations to the study.

For the questions concerning the opinion towards the behavioral dimensions of the hierarchical superior, we used a Likert scale from 1 (Very little extent) to 5 (Very large extent). As for the traits of an ideal hierarchical superior, they were taken from the research Rating a boss, a colleague and a subordinate, developed in 2002 by Furnham A. However, we note that we did not use all the traits used by the British researcher, because the study it also targets the ideal characteristics desired in co-workers and subordinates, not just superiors. Thus, we identified a set of 15 characteristics, from which we asked respondents to choose only 5 and rank them according to importance. As for the last scale, it measures the respondents' perception of the managerial typology adopted by the hierarchical superior, being a Likert scale from 1 (Totally untrue) to 5 (Totally true). This scale was developed starting from the set of characteristics of the Managerial Grid typologies, found in the work of Professor Ielics B., Management and leadership in organizations (2019).

6. Objectives, hypotheses, data collection and limitations of the study

The general objective of the research aims to identify the most attractive attributes of a hierarchical superior, through which to identify a prototype of the ideal hierarchical superior.

Following the operationalization of the general objective, we formulated the following secondary objectives:

1. Exploring the demographic characteristics of subordinates and their impact on the perception of the hierarchical superior, especially by gender and age.
2. Exploring the demographic characteristics of hierarchical superiors and their impact on subordinates' perception of them, particularly by gender and age.
3. Analysis of respondents' preferences on the traits that are perceived as most desirable for an ideal superior.
4. Investigating the relationship between the managerial style perceived by subordinates and their satisfaction with the behavior of the hierarchical superior.
5. Identifying the profile of the ideal hierarchical superior, respectively the profile of the most undesirable hierarchical superior.

To support the general objective, we formulated the following specific objectives and hypotheses:

O1. Capturing the characteristics of the ideal hierarchical superior, from the employees' perspective.

I1.1. There are similarities between the traits of the ideal hierarchical superior identified with previous studies.

O2. Identifying the link between the adoption of a specific managerial style and the perception of subordinates towards the conduct of the hierarchical superior.

I2.1. There is a statistically significant, directly proportional link between the motivating managerial style and the employee's perception of the superior's behavior.

I2.2. There is a statistically significant, inversely proportional relationship between the dictatorial managerial style and the employee's perception of the superior's behavior.

O3. Identifying the differences in employees' perception of their hierarchical superiors, depending on their socio-demographic characteristics.

I3.1. There are statistically significant differences between male and female employees regarding subordinates' perception of superior's behavior.

I3.2. There are statistically significant differences between rural and urban employees in terms of their perception of their supervisor's behavior.

Regarding the data collection process, we used the snowball method. Thus, we sent the questionnaire for completion to several acquaintances whom we asked to forward it on. We also sent it, through the e-mail platform, to other students, with the specification that it is only aimed at people who have a hierarchical superior and with the request that they send it forward for completion. Data collection extended over a period of approximately 1 month, and after that, we managed to collect a number of 316 valid responses.

In this work, we encountered several limitations, the most important being related to data collection. It was a challenge to obtain a representative sample for the study population, given the diversity of socio-demographic characteristics. Despite this obstacle, we made efforts to ensure as good a representativeness as possible by applying a weight when there were significant discrepancies. This was particularly the case with the gender and age distribution of employees.

Another limitation of the study is related to the subjective nature of perception. Subordinates' evaluation of superiors can be influenced by a number of factors, such as the recency effect (the tendency to give more importance to recent events), the halo effect (the tendency to let a single characteristic influence the overall evaluation), and the error of contrast/similarity (comparison with other superiors or oneself). These phenomena can distort objective reality and introduce a bias into our results.

Additionally, it should be noted that we used only one data collection instrument, which may limit the complexity and depth of information obtained. In the future, it would be useful to use more data collection methods and tools, such as interviews, observations or focus groups, so as to obtain more detailed information, in order to obtain a completer and more nuanced picture of the studied phenomenon.

7. Research results

Following the data collection process, we obtained a number of 316 respondents, aged between 18 and 62 years. The mean is 25.52 years, while the median and mode are 21 and 20 years, respectively (60 respondents), which means that most of the respondents are young. Of these, 79.7% (N = 252) are female, while only 19% (N = 60) are male. Also, 64.2% (N = 203) come from the urban environment, and 35.4% (N = 112) belong to the rural environment. Regarding the distribution by level of education, it varies from secondary education to postgraduate studies. However, most respondents state that they have completed 12 classes (61.4%, N = 194 respondents). A natural result, taking into account the fact that half of the people who answered the questionnaire do not exceed the age of 21 (see table 1).

Regarding the hierarchical superiors of the respondents, according to the people who responded to the questionnaire, they fall between the ages of 18 and 76, with the majority being 40 years old (median = 40). The majority are male (N = 167, mean = 52.8%) and come from the urban environment (N = 185, mean = 74.2%). From the point of view of the level of education, 63.9% of them graduated from higher education (N= 202), 8.2% from high school education (N = 26), and 26% of the respondents did not know or did not want to reveals the level of education

of the hierarchical superior (N = 82). The remaining 1.9% graduated from other categories of education (secondary school, post-secondary school or foreman technical school, etc.) (see table 1).

**Table 1: Descriptive analysis on the socio-demographic characteristics
of the respondents and their superiors**

Subordinate				Hierarchical superiors			
Attribute		N	Mean	attribute		N	Mean
Age	18-24 years old	240	73.6	Age	18-24 years old	9	2.85
	25-34 years old	38	11.7		25-34 years old	68	21.52
	35-49 years	38	11.6		35-49 years	222	70.25
	50-64 years	10	3.1		50-64 years	26	8.23
	over 65 years	0	0		over 65 years	1	0.32
Sex	Male	60	18.99	Sex	Male	156	49.37
	Female	252	79.75		Female	142	44.94
environment	Rural	112	35.44	environment	Rural	62	25.94
	Urban	203	64.24		Urban	177	74.06
Education	Secondary education	194	61.39	Education	Secondary education	26	11.11
	Higher education	108	34.18		Higher education	202	86.32
	Other studies	14	4.43		Other studies	6	2.56

To verify the first hypothesis, we performed a frequency analysis on all characteristics of an ideal hierarchical superior. Depending on how often they were chosen by respondents, the first three places are occupied by intelligence (N = 152), respectful behavior (N = 146) and competence (N = 142) (see chart 1). At the opposite pole, in the last places, are imposing character (N = 40), the tendency to be direct with subordinates (N = 49) and impartiality (N = 55).

Following a weighted mean, we was also able to obtain a ranking based on how important those traits were to the respondents. Thus, in the first three places we find competence (mean = 3.85), intelligence (mean = 3.54), respect (mean = 3.15). Conversely, the top three least important traits desired in an ideal superior are ambitious (mean = 2.47), tendency to be direct (mean = 2.51), and assertive behavior (mean = 2.58) . As can be seen, the most common, but also the most desired, traits are those related to professionalism/skills that allow the superior to achieve performance at work (intelligence, competence). Over time, characteristics aimed at sociability are less desirable, with the exception of respectfulness (see Table 2).

Table 2: Frequency and weight on the traits of an ideal hierarchical superior

The most often chosen and the least chosen ideal traits of a hierarchical superior		**Most-Preferred and Last Preferred traits in a hierarchical superior**	
Feature	N	character	Mean
Intelligent	152	Competent	3.85
Respectful	146	Intelligent	3.55
Competent	142	Respectful	3.16

Cooperative	125	Calm	3.06
Calm	125	Ripe	3.03
Honest	111	Imposing	3.03
Open to change	109	Cooperative	3.02
Friendly	107	Inspiration	2.98
Ambitious	90	Open to change	2.92
Decided	81	Friendly	2.85
Inspiration	64	Impartial	2.78
Ripe	62	Honest	2.75
Optimistic	56	Optimistic	2.62
Impartial	55	Decided	2.58
Direct	49	Direct	2.51

Since, in the study, we wanted to explore the traits that employees consider important in an ideal hierarchical superior, we wanted to give respondents the freedom to specify other characteristics that they consider important, apart from those that we proposed. In this regard, we have included the option 'other', to allow respondents to add any other characteristics they consider relevant.

One aspect we would like to mention is that we did not take into account the variable "others" in the analyzes carried out, since it was chosen by very few respondents (N = 6). This can be interpreted in two ways: either the majority of respondents thought that the options we proposed sufficiently cover the features they consider important, or some respondents did not want or did not have time to complete this section.

However, we noticed that among other traits that employees would like in an ideal supervisor, which are not among the options proposed by me, the respondents mentioned characteristics related to sociability ("open", "empathetic"), of competence at the workplace ("punctuality", "to know the field very well"), but also of religiosity ("faith in Jesus").

These answers give us a more nuanced picture of employees' expectations of their superiors and underline the importance of humane management that takes into account the individual needs and expectations of employees. They also highlight that, in certain contexts, employees may also value other aspects, such as professional competence or even religious belief.

Further analyzes revealed subordinates' perceptions of their superiors' behavior. In general, subordinates perceive that hierarchical superiors most frequently adopt behavior specific to the motivator (sound), with a mean of 3.78 on the evaluation scale. This suggests that most superiors are perceived as inspirational and able to motivate employees. The next behavior that hierarchical superiors adopt, according to the perceptions of subordinates, is accommodating, with a mean of 3.58, followed by that specific to the administrator (status quo), which was evaluated with a mean of 3.41 . Indifferent behavior received a mean of 2.90, indicating that superiors are sometimes perceived as detached or uncaring of their employees. Finally, authoritarian (dictatorial) behavior received the lowest mean, 2.56, suggesting that superiors are rarely perceived as authoritarian.

Next, we conducted correlation between all these managerial typologies and employees' perception towards the hierarchical superior. Following the analysis, it emerged that there is a correlation between the subordinate's perception of the hierarchical superior's conduct and his typology ($p < 0.01$). The strength of the correlations is small regarding the following typologies: accommodating ($r = 0.285$), indifferent (-0.303), authoritarian (-0.314) and administrator (0.267). Regarding the motivator, although we expected it to show a lower level of correlation than the accommodator and the administrator, it shows the highest degree of correlation ($r = 0.551$). Also, all correlations are directly proportional except those for indifferent and dictator, which are inversely proportional. In other words, the less the superior

behaves in an indifferent or authoritarian way, the more positive the perception of them is (see table 3). These results confirm my hypotheses I2.1 and I2.2, respectively.

Table 3: Correlation between the employee's perception of the hierarchical superior and the managerial typology adopted by him

Variables	Pearson Correlation	Sig. (2-tailed)
Motivator (sound)	0.551	< 0.005
Accommodating	0.285	< 0.005
Administrator (status quo)	0.267	< 0.005
the indifferent (indifferent)	-0.303	< 0.005
The Dictator (dicatorial)	-0.314	< 0.005

We also wanted to find out if the socio-demographic aspects of the hierarchical superior can influence the employees' perception regarding their adoption of certain managerial typologies. Therefore, we performed a t-test, which provided us with the fact that significant differences between male and female superiors in adopting an authoritarian style (p = 0.021; Lower Bounds = 0.209; Upper Bounds = 2,669). Continuing the interpretation, based on the differences between the means, we observe that male hierarchical superiors (mean = 15.95) are perceived as more authoritative than their female counterparts (mean = 14.51). A possible explanation would be that men may be seen as tougher, while women are seen as softer, more pleasant. In addition, we found significant differences from a statistical point of view between the hierarchical superiors from the urban environment, respectively those from the rural environment, regarding the adoption of an authoritarian style, because the significance threshold does not exceed the value of 0.05 (p = 0 .44), and the value 0 is not found in the Lower Bounds (0.40) – Upper Bounds (3.178) range. Also, according to the mean, the hierarchical superiors from the rural environment (mean = 16.37) are perceived as more authoritarian than those from the urban environment (mean = 14.76). A possible reason would be that the importance of a leadership position might differ between those in rural and urban areas. Which would mean that rural superiors might be more task-focused than employee-relationship-focused when they get into such positions.

8. **Conclusions and discussion**

At the beginning of the research, we thought that we would get similarities between the results of the study conducted by Furnham A., from 2002. However, we found out that there are some differences between the current study and that of the British researcher, which disproves my first hypothesis. For example, although they were rated as some of the most desirable characteristics in the psychologist study, honesty and openness to change ranked low. Another example is that impartiality was among the most desirable traits in a superior in Furnham's study, but in the current one, it ranks third among the most undesirable traits. It is possible that these differences are explained by a difference in methodological approaches. However, we believe that these differences are more likely to be explained by the 20-year difference between the current study and Mr. Furnham's study. In addition, it is not excluded that these differences also have a cultural, value explanation, since the current study was conducted in Romania, while the one from 2002 was conducted in Great Britain. On the other hand, we also registered certain similarities. For example, competence is among the most desirable characteristics of an ideal superior in both my study and that of the British researcher.

The analysis carried out revealed that respect is a universally desired trait in a hierarchical superior, regardless of the importance each respondent gives. Instead of being at the extremes, respondents' answers were evenly distributed across the 5 response options,

with a slight upward trend. This suggests that regardless of the level of importance they place on it, all employees want their superiors to be respectful.

Regarding the profile of the ideal hierarchical superior, according to the data obtained, this would be a motivating, intelligent, competent and respectful leader. This would be a reliable person who helps employees develop professionally without becoming arrogant. In contrast, an authoritarian, imposing, impartial, and direct superior—a person who constantly and indiscriminately criticizes all of his subordinates—is not considered an ideal superior.

However, it is important to note that the study has some limitations. The study population was predominantly young, which may result in a limited representation of the labor force population. Because of this, further research could include a more varied sample to provide a more accurate representation of the workforce population. This would allow a deeper understanding of employees' expectations from their superiors and could contribute to the development of more effective management strategies. Furthermore, future research could include other research methods, such as qualitative ones. Thus, more detailed information could be obtained.

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