

UNETHICAL PRO-ORGANISATIONAL BEHAVIOUR AIMED AT UNDERMINING QUALITY

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Purpose: The primary purpose of this article is to identify the manifestations and causes of unethical pro-organisational behaviour related to the lowering of quality, as well as to propose measures that could prevent such behaviour.

Design/methodology/approach: The main research method used was a literature review. The applied procedure was in line with the general methodology for conducting research in management sciences (Easterby-Smith et al., 2015). Exemplification was used as an ancillary research tool.

Findings: Manifestations of unethical pro-organisational behaviour aimed at the lowering of quality include falsifying system documentation, hiding quality errors that occur in individual processes, deliberately impairing product quality by reducing the quantity of particular components or replacing them with lower-quality substitutes, providing customers with a completely different product under the organisation's own name and reducing quality objectives. Paradoxically, the occurrence of such behaviour is fostered by excessive identification, affective commitment, organisational support resulting in a sense of indebtedness to the organisation, pressure for results and even satisfaction with one's job. The possible measures that could prevent unethical pro-organisational behaviour include the following: applying the principle of positive discipline, entering into transparent psychological contracts, abandoning annual employee appraisals, employee rankings and bonus systems whose results depend on employee cooperation, as well as the variable part of managers' remuneration.

Research limitations/implications: A literature review is not a perfect way to obtain information. The article does not discuss all causes and manifestations of unethical pro-organisational behaviour that may occur in organisations oriented towards quality.

Practical implications: Based on the conclusions formulated on the basis of the conducted research, managers can significantly reduce the development of unethical behaviour (mainly by following the recommendations of E. Deming).

Originality/value: While there is a large body of literature on the causes of unethical pro-organisational behaviour, very little is known about their causes and manifestations in organisations focused on quality.

Keywords: pro-organisational behaviour, ethics, quality management, organisational sociology.

Category of the paper: conceptual paper.

1. Introduction

In 2011, E.E. Umphress and J.B. Bingham, in the journal *Organization Science*, found that employees sometimes engaged in unethical actions with the intention of benefiting their organisation, and named such actions as unethical pro-organisational behaviour (UPB) (Umphress, Bingham, 2011). It seems that in the initial period unethical pro-organisational behaviour is a positive phenomenon, as it protects the company's image, safeguards its interests and increases profits. However, in the long run and when detected, such behaviour causes many negative consequences and has a potentially destructive impact on stakeholders, other organisations and even society as a whole (Yang, Wei, Wu, 2021), creates stress and leads to conflicts of interest between work and family, undermines employee morale and reputation (Liu et al., 2021; Chen, Kwan, Xin, 2022), is the cause of declining trust and credibility (Vem et al., 2023).

Such behaviour has various manifestations (e.g. deleting harmful information, drawing up documentation containing false information, lying to employees, customers or suppliers, but also exaggerating the scope of a given company's services or product features (Umphress et al., 2016; Dou et al., 2019).

A relatively large body of research has been conducted to determine what factors influence unethical pro-organisational behaviour. Particular studies have focused, among other things, on the impact of different types of leadership on the development of such behaviour (e.g. Miao et al., 2013; Graham, Ziegert, Capitano, 2015; Effelsberg, Solga, 2015; Tang, Li, 2022; Uymaz, Arslan, 2022), relational factors regarding the exchange processes between the leader and team members (Bryant, Merritt, 2021; Inam et al., 2021; Xiong et al., 2021), the problem of the mentality of people in managerial positions (Zhang et al., 2020; Zhan, Liu, 2022; Farasat, Azam, 2022), selected managerial factors (Xu, Lv, 2018; Ding, Liu, 2022), the role of selfishness, narcissism and greed (Graham et al., 2020; Shah et al., 2020; Tacke et al., 2023), as well as the importance of personal beliefs and personality traits (Clugston, Howell, Dorfman, 2000; Kong, 2016). Attention has been given to the moderating function of moral identity (Matherne, Litchfield, 2012; Johnson, Umphress, 2019; McCorvey, Woehr, 2022; Zonghua et al., 2022; Chen, M., Chen, C., 2023). Quite a few studies have been devoted to the role and importance of organisational identification (e.g. Umphress, Bingham, 2011; Effelsberg, Solga, 2015; Kong, 2016; Johnson, Umphress, 2019; Naseer et al., 2020; Graham et al., 2020; Schuh et al., 2021; Yang, Wei, Wu, 2021; Kelebek, Alniacik, 2022; Sharma, Mishra, Uppal, 2023; Holmes, Howard, 2023; Li, 2023). An interesting research trend has been the issues of moral decoupling (Fehr et al., 2019), moral disengagement (Schuh et al., 2021; Nguyen, Zhang, Morand, 2021; Yao et al., 2022), moral justification (Chen, M., Chen, C., 2023), psychological entitlement (Lee et al., 2019; Chen, M., Chen, C., Schminke, 2023; Jiang, Liang, Wang, 2023) and psychological embedding (Ghosh, 2017; Lee, Oh, Park, 2022).

Thus, as can be seen from the review, so far researchers have not devoted too much attention to managerial factors. Apart from HR systems and high-performance teams, the other identified factors – although very important to some extent – relate directly to management principles or a specific management philosophy followed by individual organisations. There is also rather little knowledge of the conditions in which product or service quality is lowered deliberately. The literature on the subject draws attention to the problem of monopolistic market positions (Mussa, Rosen, 1978), the importance of prices in trade (Leffler, 1982), the lack of knowledge of customer expectations and how quality can be achieved (Shetty, 1988), the inability of customers themselves to assess the quality of products and services (Liu et al., 2007), costing and marketing strategies (e.g. Balachander, Stock, 2009), the nature of distribution (Xu, 2009), the types of business activities (e.g. Pennerstorfer, Weiss, 2013) and the importance of compensatory attributes of services in relation to product quality (Guajardo et al., 2016).

In view of the above, the authors decide to make an attempt:

1. to identify the manifestations of unethical pro-organisational behaviour associated with the lowering of quality and the causes of such behaviour,
2. to establish how particular quality management principles may paradoxically enhance the drivers of unethical behaviour,
3. to determine what actions or measures can prevent unethical pro-organisational behaviour.

2. Method

The primary purpose of this article is to identify the manifestations and causes of unethical pro-organisational behaviour related to the lowering of quality, as well as to propose measures that could prevent such behaviour.

The main research method used by the authors was a literature review. The review comprised the following stages: (1) selecting keywords (pro-organisational behaviour, unethical behaviour); (2) searching for papers containing the selected keywords in the following databases: Academic Search Ultimate, including Business Search Ultimate, Agricola, ERIC, Green File and Open Dissertation; (3) becoming familiar with the chosen publications; (4) reviewing the publications; (5) mind-mapping; (6) summarising the chosen publications, taking into account the objective of this paper; and (7) organising the collected research material. The applied procedure was in line with the general methodology for conducting research in management sciences (Easterby-Smith et al., 2015).

A total of 157 papers containing the key phrase “pro-organisational behaviour” underwent a review. This was followed by the selection and analysis of the literature that dealt with the lowering of quality (nine papers in total). The systematic literature review was extended to include grey literature review.

In the section on the causes, manifestations and ways of reducing the behaviour that constitutes the subject matter of this paper, the exemplification method was additionally used to illustrate and justify the formulated research premises (Kazmierska, 2018). This approach serves to enrich the explanation of the reality under study. The use of the exemplification method was based on the authors’ participation in quality management system audits conducted in business organisations of various types.

3. Results

3.1. Identification of manifestations of unethical pro-organisational behaviour aimed at the lowering of quality and their potential causes

Unethical pro-organisational behaviour usually manifests itself in the destruction or deletion of uncomfortable information, preparation of documentation containing false information, falsification of vouchers or expense accounts, lies told to employees, customers or suppliers (Umphress, Bingham, 2011), destruction of incriminating files and records to protect an organisation’s reputation, manipulation of information to protect an organisation's image (Miao et al., 2013), theft, corruption, bribery (Shu, 2015), cheating of customers, prioritisation of profits over public safety, falsification of financial statements (Tian, Peterson, 2016), exaggeration of the scope of a company's services or the functionality of its products (Dou et al., 2019), distortion of the truth, as well as hiding of bad news or financial results from customers or the public (Zhang, Du, 2022).

In view of the above, the following question could be posed: Which of these or other manifestations are related to the lowering of quality and what causes them?

Firstly, one of these manifestations is the falsification of quality system documentation. The organisations that fail to update their quality management systems on an ongoing basis tend to complete their system documentation (e.g. internal quality audit reports) in a haphazard manner before an anticipated external audit (Bugdol, 2007). This noticeable problem is compounded by the current situation in the certification services market. With too many certification providers and a limited number of organisations seeking their services, the former are beginning to compete for the latter by reducing the quality of their services.

Secondly, there may be various types of misrepresentation of the functional characteristics of products or the scope of services offered (Dou et al., 2019). This can happen when an organisation prefers short-term profits over quality or in the conditions of strong competition.

Thirdly, unethical pro-organisational behaviour may also manifest itself in the concealment of quality errors that occur in individual processes. One reason for this is the fear of a reaction from superiors and an inappropriately designed bonus system that fails to take quality criteria into account (Bugdol, Jedynak, 2020). Organisations may hide their quality errors out of concern for their financial benefits. Such behavioural manifestations are more likely if quality assurance processes are not monitored or are inadequately monitored.

Fourthly, such unethical behaviour can manifest itself in the deliberate lowering of product quality by reducing the number of some components or adding ingredients of an inferior quality. In times of inflation, some companies that supply the market with both luxury products and products aimed at the average customer reduce the number of components needed to produce a particular product or its model. Moreover, they may claim that such measures are environmentally friendly. In fact, they exert more pressure on suppliers because they buy fewer parts but in larger batches (cf. Schumpeter, 2023).

Fifthly, another manifestation of said behaviour is providing customers with a completely different product (sometimes even one offered by competitors) under an organisation's own name. Such manipulations often require the cooperation of sales agents. In one such case, bound by a contract with a customer, a sales agent purchased products of a lower quality from a competitor and, after minor alterations, sold them to the customer under the trade mark of the company it represented. In this way, the agent succeeded in performing the contract, but its behaviour was unethical and even illegal, as the delivered products did not have the claimed quality characteristics. However, such behaviour would not have been possible without the knowledge and tacit consent of the company's employees responsible for sales operations.

Sixthly, unethical pro-organisational behaviour can also be manifested in establishing quality objectives that are very easy to achieve (cf. Bugdol, Jedynak, 2022). There are many reasons for this behaviour, but one of them is a faulty design of a remuneration system for managers which provides for a variable part of remuneration for the achievement of annually established objectives. Consequently, top management is not interested in pursuing ambitious objectives, but prefers ones that are secure and known in advance to be achievable, thus guaranteeing high remuneration.

3.2. Paradoxically, quality management principles reinforce the drivers of unethical behaviour

In quality management, emphasis is put on the commitment of top management and employees, the use of statistical techniques of quality control, the improvement in the quality of work environment through education and training, as well as employee empowerment (cf. Tamimi, Gershon, 1995). It is assumed that an important element of these activities is the satisfaction of employees, support for their efforts and the setting of quality objectives for individual processes. Such activities are perfectly legitimate, but when they are not performed in line with the applicable principles or based on strong ethical values, various forms of unethical behaviour may occur. The table below shows selected examples of such situations.

Table 1.
Quality management and the risk of UPB occurrence

Factor favouring UPB	Justification	Comments
Excessive identification	Involving employees in quality improvement processes, participating in decision-making and solving quality problems can lead to one's excessive identification with the organisation	Individuals who strongly identify themselves with their organisation are more likely to engage in UPB when they have strong positive beliefs about reciprocity and look forward to future reward from their organisation (Umphress, Bingham, Mitchell, 2010).
Organisational support of employees	In quality management, a lot of attention is given to supporting employees who care about quality improvement. The issue of providing such support is addressed in both the ISO 9001 standard and TQM policies.	A high level of organisational support may encourage UPB because employees have a sense of indebtedness to their organisation and look for ways to repay such debt (Yang, Wei, Wu, 2021; Griep et al., 2023).
Commitment	Treating employees well, rewarding them for quality improvements and appreciating their participation in solving quality problems can result in the development of an employee's emotional attachment to the organisation.	Individuals with lower levels of moral identity are more likely to engage in UPB, especially if they represent high levels of affective commitment (Matherne, Litchfield, 2012).
Job satisfaction	In quality management, employee satisfaction is a guarantor of external customer satisfaction.	Paradoxically, a strong sense of community and the resulting sense of satisfaction can contribute to the emergency of unethical pro-organisational behaviour (Zhang, 2020).
Pressure for results	In quality management, there can be strong pressure for results in the area of quality improvement.	It is assumed that such pressure tends to trigger UPB. This is contributed by moral justification, that is reconstructing harmful behaviour by associating it with worthwhile goals (Chen, M., Chen, C., 2023).

Source: the authors' own work based on the cited publications.

The Table 1 shows that improperly applied quality management principles can contribute to the development of UPB, especially in the conditions of excessive identification and the absence of adequate supervision, when moral values are compromised or when employees put personal gain before the well-being and interests of their organisation.

Pressure for quality performance can be particularly dangerous due to a lack of understanding of what a quality improvement process is. Such a process may not involve radical changes, but rather a continuous pursuit of gradually better results.

3.3. Actions that can prevent unethical pro-organisational behaviour

The conducted review of the literature on the subject shows that the scope of unethical pro-organisational behaviour can be reduced by means of the following measures: providing appropriate guidelines for pro-organisational behaviour (Xu, Lv, 2018), avoiding the negative effects of excessive concern about the welfare of employees, strengthening employees' moral identity, providing a positive ethical climate, suppressing selfishness and greed, as well as

promoting a culture of morality and ethical behaviour (Cheng, Wei, Lin, 2019; Qureshi, Ahmed, 2021; Inam et al., 2021; Kelebek, Alniacik, 2022; Kim, Lee, C., Lee, G., 2023).

Given the specificity of organisations oriented towards quality and the quality principles followed by them, particular attention should be paid to the following issues:

a. Avoidance of excessive identification

Identification alone does not necessarily lead to the development of UPB. Such behaviour emerges for other reasons. Members of an organisation will only approve of it if they regard it as morally acceptable (Schuh et al., 2021). In practice, therefore, it is recommended to follow the principles of positive discipline, which is lenient towards unethical acts as long as they result from incompetence rather than a lack of goodwill.

b. Poorly understood organisational support

A high level of organisational support must be linked to the support that leaders give to their team members. Attention should be paid to prevent the emergence of any debt of gratitude or violation of a concluded psychological contract (Griep et al., 2023). In practice, it is important that employees and management enter into a transparent contract governing their mutual expectations and needs. Hence, quality management systems emphasise the need to examine such needs and expectations, which later become requirements for employees.

c. Combating excessive commitment

There are many types of detrimental commitment. A case in point is anticipatory commitment, when certain activities are undertaken without the awareness of their need and potential benefits. But in practice, commitment can also be harmful in the case of a lower level of moral identity (Matherne, Litchfield, 2012). Employees with high levels of moral identity can act morally and are less likely to engage in unethical pro-organisational behaviour (Zonghua et al., 2022; Xu, Lv, 2018).

Shaping such an identity in management practice is difficult and sometimes unfeasible. The affective foundations of moral identity (e.g., empathy, guilt and shame) emerge early in life (Hardy, Carlo, 2011). However, efforts can be made to ensure that all manifestations of unethical and immoral behaviour are strongly denounced. Such action is taken in organisations that shape pro-environmental behaviour. A sense of shame and guilt is then aroused among those employees who do not comply with the rules currently in force.

d. Conditions for using employee satisfaction

Employee satisfaction does not equate to employee loyalty. Nor is there a direct connection between employee satisfaction and customer satisfaction. Nevertheless, it is generally accepted that employee satisfaction is a good thing and that is why so much importance is attached to this value in quality management. In practice, to ensure that satisfaction does not cause UPB, the process of maintaining satisfaction should be

linked to compliance with the principles contained in quality management systems. It is therefore important that employees receive information about the degree to which successive objectives are achieved. Such communication can have a motivating and satisfying effect.

Satisfaction, together with other values, forms a value system and this means that its perceived lack is caused by a lack of trust and fairness. The latter value constitutes the foundation of trust. In practice, the enemies of satisfaction include the same activities that harm the sense of fairness:

- annual employee appraisal systems (especially rankings),
- bonus systems based on employees' collective responsibility for achieving set objectives,
- different salaries for the same jobs,
- unequal treatment, favouritism.

e. Excessive pressure for results

Excessive pressure for results stems from greed, but it is conditioned by investment processes and other managerial factors. Huge bonuses earned by top management for meeting annual targets are the reason for building reward and appraisal systems oriented towards quickly reaching short-term goals. Acting under pressure from investors or owners, top management sets unrealistic and difficult objectives. This results in creative accounting methods and falsification of data (cf. Stanisławska, 2019).

In some organisations, employee assessment systems include individual goals. If these are unrealistic, both employees and their superiors tend to cheat (cf. Cohen, 2005). If performance undergoes rigorous assessment and an assessment process may result in either a dismissal or a financial reward, the propensity for UPB may increase. Thus, in order to prevent excessive pressure on performance, it would be necessary to dispense with numerical targets, which was recommended by E. Deming, and employee rankings, especially those linked to incentive systems. It is important that remuneration systems for top management should not provide for the payment of huge bonuses for the achievement of annual targets, especially if their achievement is attributed entirely to subordinate employees.

4. Discussion

The lowering of quality is caused by a number of factors, such a lack of knowledge (Shetty, 1988), a monopolist position (Mussa, Rosen, 1978), the dominant role of quantity (Leffer, 1982), the profitability of post-warranty services (Guajardo, Cohen, Netessine, 2016), different forms of sales (cf. Liu et al., 2007) and different forms of business activities (Balachander,

Stock, 2009). In some situations, what occurs is not so much unethical behaviour as behaviour that may raise ethical questions. In offering a product of a certain quality, it is important who determines the level of quality and the price, as well as who benefits from these decisions. If the seller, rather than the producer, sets the quality level, the latter's willingness to offer high quality products may be diminished under certain conditions. If the producer has influence over the price and the higher price increases their profits, they may tend to offer products of higher quality, provided that customers appreciate such quality (Xu, 2009).

Thus, it is worth noting that it is not only managerial factors, but also market conditions, or more broadly understood contextual conditions, that foster the occurrence of UPB.

Research also confirms that the individual principles and elements of TQM constitute a certain whole or system. The lack of a single element or action may cause a failure to achieve the intended effects in the form of quality improvement. Taking into account the factors of unethical behaviour, it can be clearly stated that the primary reason for the development of such behaviour is the lack of strong ethical organisational values such as trust and fairness.

Unfortunately, some badly designed employee assessment and remuneration systems contribute to the emergence of UPB. It is therefore difficult not to refer to the research of E. Deming, a vocal opponent of rankings, competition and numerical target setting (Deming, 1994).

5. Limitations

Research limitations may arise from the adopted research method. The use of both a literature review and one's own experience significantly limit the range of obtained results.

The article does not address all quality principles. Those that are discussed are strongly linked to the identified causes of unethical behaviour.

It should also be borne in mind that the science of quality indicates many paradoxes. What is a cause of success in one setting may lead to the development of unethical behaviour in others.

6. Conclusion

Manifestations of unethical pro-organisational behaviour aimed at the lowering of quality include falsifying system documentation, hiding quality errors that occur in individual processes, deliberately impairing product quality by reducing the quantity of particular components or replacing them with lower-quality substitutes, providing customers with

a completely different product, often one manufactured by a competitor, under the organisation's own name, as well as reducing quality objectives.

Paradoxically, the occurrence of UPB is fostered by excessive identification, affective commitment, organisational support resulting in a sense of indebtedness to the organisation, pressure for results and even satisfaction with one's job, when such satisfaction is not maintained by other organisational values.

The possible measures that could prevent unethical pro-organisational behaviour include the following: applying positive discipline, entering into transparent psychological contracts, abandoning annual employee appraisals, employee rankings and bonus systems whose results depend on employee cooperation, as well as the variable part of managers' remuneration.

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