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EXECUTIVE SUCCESS AS A FUNCTION OF LEADERSHIP STYLE-ORGANIZATIONAL CLIMATE FIT*

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Traditional research on factors predicting executive success has typically employed correlational method designed to assess how individual characteristics of one kind or another or in combination influence success. This study is based on a social-psychological contingency perspective and was designed to test the hypothesis that interaction or fit between personal work styles and organizational climate makes a significant contribution to the variance in career success among executives. Questionnaires survey data collected from a sample of 150 middle level executives in three different company environments in northern Indian firms were used for the study. Three paired style-climate variables were investigated: authoritarianism, nurturant-task, and participative. Success was measured by a salary progression-age ratio. The findings support the fit hypothesis in the particular case of the nurturant task pair with some additional support in the authoritarianism area. Modifications in the basic hypothesis guiding the study are proposed, which followed the implications of this research to organizational development.

For a long time, industrial and organizational psychologists have been showing their keen interest on the topic of "executive success." Despite the decades of conceptual and empirical inquiries in this problem area, the evidence in regard to understanding and predicting success is far from conclusive.

The concept of "success" has often been confused with the concept of "effectiveness." Many researchers (e.g., Dunnette, 1967; Smith, 1967) have used the two terms interchangeably. Yet, the extent of overlap between personal success and organizational success has hardly been determined and found to be impressive and consistent. It is worthy of mention that an executive may be effective on his job without being successful. For example, he may appear to be highly efficient, although he depletes the human resources of his department or organization (Likert, 1967) and, hence, he may not be able to succeed in his professional career. Or, organizational dynamics of a place may push even an inefficient executive up in the

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hierarchy. Such reasoning may be due, at least in part, to the fact that career success is measured in terms of salary progress or the number of levels promoted to or attained by executives, while actual job performance serves as the criterion of effectiveness. Attention, in this research, is addressed to success and *not* the effectiveness. Specifically, the study has been proposed to enhance our understanding of factors associated with executive success--a study stimulated by a social-psychological contingency perspective concerning the *interaction* between personal and organizational factors.

A good number of studies are available both at descriptive and predictive levels. Attempts have been made to relate executive success with biographical data (Ansari, 1981), need structure (Ghiselli, 1968a, 1968b; Ghiselli & Johnson, 1970), values (England & Lee, 1974; Watson & Williams, 1977), life style (Ansari, 1981), and intelligence and personality (Ansari, 1982; Ghiselli, 1966; Henry, 1949 ; Kinslinger, 1966; Kurtz, 1949). However, any of these studies hardly explains or predicts more than a small amount of variance in career success. Progress in the solution to this problem may better be sought in contingency or interaction models than in such univariate designs.

History is witness to the fact that organizational researchers have tended generally, for long, to focus either on personality or situations ignoring the importance of the transaction or interaction between the two. The interactional approach focuses on both sets of combined characteristics to predict human behavior. This notion is quite consistent with the Lewininan (1951) view of behavior--that is, behavior (*B*) is a function of the interaction between the person (*P*) and his or her environment (*E*), commonly stated by a formula, B = *f* (P, E). Taking this contingency perspective, then, the *fit* model was discovered. Pervin (1968), for the first time, systematically emphasized the salience of person-environment *fit* model in predicting performance and satisfaction. Subsequently, the model was refined and used in predicting various kinds of strain (French & Kahn, 1972; French, Rogers & Cobb, 1974; Harrison, 1978), organizational commitment (Dunn, 1977), and managerial success (Ansari, Baumgartel, & Sullivan, 1982).

Since this research is concerned with the person-environment *fit,* it assumes that for each individual there are environments (subjective and objective) which more or less match the characteristics of his or her personal style and orientation. According to Jahoda (1961), a "match" or "best fit" is viewed as resulting in increased

performance, satisfaction, and little stress in the system, while a "misfit" is considered as causing itself in decreased performance, dissatisfaction, and stress in the system. However, the *fit* model speaks of at least two major issues of concern in predicting executive success. The first issue directs our attention toward the environment: should one consider the "perceived" (psychological) or "actual" (organizational) climate? The final answer to this question rests with the understanding of circumstances under which one or other kind of data would be most useful. This study would focus on the objective environment, i.e., organizational climate and *not* the perceived world of individual members, which is a psychological climate. Another issue of concern is associated with the units of analysis. Both Murray (1938) and Rotter (1955) recommended that the same units should be used to describe and measure the individual and the environment. French (1963) quoted Lewin, "we can best maximize this sort of relevance of personality to environment by conceptualizing and measuring these two terms in commensurate dimensions . . . only those entities which have the same conceptual dimension can be compared as to their magnitude" (p. 42). Unless there are commensurate dimensions, there is no point of employing *fit* model in predicting any outcome variables. For example, French and Kahn (1972) pointed out that the dimension of "love" better describes an individual's needs and values than the demands and supplies of the job or environment. With this end in view, the study at hand proposes to investigate the salience of three relevant and appropriate matched pairs--authoritarianism, nurturant task, and participative dimensions of individual and environment in predicting career success. In the relative paucity of theory applying a contingency model to this problem area, it is difficult to generate any specific conjectures beyond the general proposition itself. However, on the basis of the aforesaid discussion, it may be expected that *how successful an executive is in his or her professional career is a function of the extent to which the climate or work environment is congenial with his or her motivational predispositions.*

Method

Research Site and Sample

The study concerns three business organizations in northern India. Since the organizations are many and of divergent nature, no attempt was made to draw the sample randomly. Rather, keeping in view a few dimensions of this heterogeneous universe, three contrasting organizations were selected. The points of difference between the organizations lie mainly in (a) the styles of

management, (b) the production process, (c) the source of capital investment, (d) the efficiency, (e) the size or numerical strength, and (f) the geographical location. Altogether 150 (middle level) executives participated in this study. The executives were interviewed individually and in private during working hours. They were assured of the complete confidentiality of their individual responses; however, the importance of frank and sincere responses was emphasized. The average age of the respondents was around 42 years. On average, they had 4 years of experience on the present positions, and the mean company tenure was about 14 years.

Criterion Measure

The availability of a good criterion has been one of the key problems in industrial and organizational psychology. It is also true with regard to the measurement of executive success. Yet, there is a clear-cut indication that salary progression (Ansari, 1981, 1982 ; Ansari, Baumgartel, & Sullivan, 1982; Bray & Grant, 1906; Grant & Bray, 1969; Jaques, 1968) and the hierarchical levels promoted to or attained by executives (Ansari, 1981, 1982; Doktor & Bass, 1974) have frequently been used to measure executive success on the assumption that compensation is related to general performance (Gilmer, 1971). The success index in this study was calculated by the following equation: Success Index = (Salary/Age) x 100.

Predictor Measures

In order to test the *fit* hypothesis, three leadership style scales were constructed to match with the three climate measures deemed important in determining a productive match. Every possible attempt was made to include items of similar contents in each pair.

Climate Measures. It is evident from the literature (Litwin & Stringer, 1968; Schneider, 1975; Taguiri & Litwin, 1965) that industrial-organizational psychologists have shown more concern with measurement techniques than with understanding and explicating the concept of climate. The main confusion lies in the unit of analysis--that is, whether one is measuring *psychological* climate (the perceived world of the individual members) or studying the *organizational* climate (attributes of the organization as a whole). If we regard climate as an organizational attribute, the term "organizational climate" seems appropriate; when regarded as an individual attribute or perception, a new designation such as "psychological climate" may be employed (James & Jones, 1974). The present research deals with organizational climate and *not* with the psychological climate. With this end in view

the organizational climate was conceptualized as "the sum total of particular attributes of the organization as a whole as well as those values and norms which symbolize the on-going pattern of the organization and its sub-units" (Ansari, 1980, p. 94).

The climate measures referred to the three leadership style dimensions--authoritarianism (*F*), nurturant task (*NT*), and participative (*P*). The *NT* style was proposed by Sinha (1980). This style can be contrasted with the authoritarianism one which is characterized by self-oriented, power-minded, rigid, defensive, and personalized relationship. While *NT* is predominantly task-and-efficiency-oriented with a blend of nurturance orientation, it does not completely disregard the human relationship. Rather, it does manage congenial and benign work climate but in a fashion which is conducive to task accomplishment. The unique character of this model is the *priority* attached to productivity over job satisfaction, with the assumption that meaningful and lasting job satisfaction has a pre-condition--the productivity of an organization. On the other hand, the *NT* style is different from the participative one which is people-oriented having lower preference for power, status, or structure.

The 15 items in the climate measures were taken from Sinha (1980). Each factor (scale) consisted of five items rated on a 5-point scale ranging from *Quite False* (1) through *Doubtful* (3) to *Quite True* (5). The internal-consistency reliabilities, in the present study, for *F-, NT-* and *P*-scales stepped by S-B formula yielded .80, .65, and .41, respectively, with an average *r* value of .62. The interrelationships among these factors readily show that the *F* climate is negatively correlated ($N = 150$, $r = -.50$, $p < .01$) with the *p* climate. While there is essentially no relationship (near zero) between the *F* and *NT* climates, there is a strong positive relationship ($N = 150$, $r = .34$, $p < .01$) between the *NT* and *p* climates. While the three climate measures are not entirely independent of each other, they may be construed as assessing three different dimensions of climate.

In the light of the above perspective, the particular climate scores on the three dimensions for each of the three organizations in the study were determined by the *mean* of the *mean* item scores of the respondents representing the particular company--a summated index. In other words, the measures of organizational climate were based on reasonably reliable and valid *collective* judgments of the objective environment in the companies. Individual executives were, hence, assigned their company scores on the three climate dimensions.

Leadership Style Measures. Three leadership style scales were used which were relevant to career success and which would suitably match with the three important climate measures. The measures comprised eight triplets--out of Sinha's (1980) 13 triplets. The respondents were asked to rank the three alternatives of a triplet for their being *Most True* (1), *True* (2), and *Least True* (3). Each triplet had authoritarianism (*F*), nurturant-task (*NT*), and participative (*P*) leadership alternatives. The rank scores were averaged across the triplets and the respondents to yield rank scores for *F*-, *NT-,* and *P*-styles for each organization. The low scores on the scale indicated predominance of a style. Sinha (1980) reported an average item-total correlation of .54 with a range of .44 to .67.

Data Analysis

As stated earlier, the main objective of the present study was to investigate how the *fit* of leadership style with organizational climate influences or predicts executive success. The *fit* was measured by the statistical *interaction* between style and climate in predicting success. Thus, for example, in the case of participative-participative pair, whatever the main effects of each variable, highly participative executives should succeed most in a highly participative climate, while the degree of participative climate should have little influence for low participative executives. Conversely speaking, highly participative executives should not succeed well in a non-participative environment. The hypotheses were, hence, statistically tested in two-way *ANOVA*'s (of unequal *ns*) by categorizing the executives into three levels of both climate (high, moderate, and low) and style (high, moderate, and low) yielding 3 x 3 data arrays. In addition to testing the three main propositions, six supplementary *ANOVA*'s were calculated to study the other possible climate-style pairs as an exploratory investigation. Significant statistical interactions other than main effects in the predicted direction would, then, provide evidence supporting the hypotheses.

Results

As explained earlier, the main focus of the present study was to test the hypothesis that the climate-style fit predicts career succees. The findings for the matched pairs will be presented first, then the data for the non-matched pairs will be shown.

The summary of the results for the matched pairs are portrayed in Figure 1 . The findings clearly support the hypothesis in the case

of the nurturant task-nurturant task data pair; there is a strong positive relationship between climate and success for the high and low nurturant-task-oriented and essentially no relationship for the moderate nurturant-task-oriented executives. This statistical interaction ($F = 1.94$, $df = 4/132$, $p < .10$, See Table 1) supports to this degree the hypothesis of *fit* that an executive who is highly nurturant and task-oriented is most likely to succeed in an environment which is also nurturant and task-oriented (Figure 1b). The pattern of configuration provides an additional support to the *fit* model that there is least success in the low climate-style data pair on this dimension.

The results (Figures 1a and 1c) further suggest that the *fit* hypothesis does not apply to the other pairs. In fact, an entirely different and contradictory pattern appears in some cases. The interaction effect ($F = 3.13$, $df = 4/132$, $p < .02$, see Table 1) is significant for only the authoritarianism-authoritarianism pair; however, this contradictory pattern is true with regard to the participative-participative pair. A style main effect ($F = 2.92$, $df = 2/132$, $p < .10$, See Table 1) is also significant for the authoritarianism pair. The climate main effect does not reach its statistical significance at even the .10 level in any case. The data do suggest that, in the authoritarianism area, the higher the *fit* between leadership style and organizational climate, the lower the success score (Figure 1a). The best match for success appears to be high authoritarian climate and low authoritarian style. A similar dynamic is seen to operate in the case of participative-participative pair, i.e., the higher the climate-style *fit,* the lower the success score (Figure 1c). High success is achieved in the high climate and moderate style in this area. The lowest score is in the predicted direction, i.e., low style-low climate combination and least success; however, the interaction effect fails to reach its significance level.

A supplementary statistical analysis was carried out to examine the effects on career success of the alternative six climate-style, non-matched, data pairs (e.g., authoritarianism *vs*. participative). A summary of the statistical findings for the non-matched pairs (along with three matched pairs) is reported in Table 1. The findings clearly support the contingency or interactional approach, particularly for the authoritarianism dimension. It should be noted that, out of six, four statistical interactions are significant. Interestingly, the *F* style interacts with *NT* and *P* climates; also *F* climate is seen to interact with the *NT* and P styles in determining career success. The obtained data show a sharper focus on the fact that the higher *F* style and the higher *NT* or *P* climates suggest only moderate success. The maximum success score is achieved in the low *F* style and low *NT* or *P*

climates. By the same token, the low *F* climate and low *NT* style or low *F* climate and low *P* style account for greater and significant variance in career success. It should be noted that no interaction effect (see Table 1) approaches its significance level in the case of *NT-P* data pairs--style *vs*. climate or vice-versa.

Discussion

A summary of the findings, then, provides a limited support for the *fit* model of career success. Probably the most significant findings of the study is the strong support for the contingency proposition regarding the importance of the significant contribution of person-environment interactions to career success. In other words, style and climate variables jointly tend to explain greater variance in success than either set of variables alone.

It is evident from the data that there is statistically significant interaction in only one of the three primary tests of the main hypothesis *(NT-NT* pair), thus supporting it. The significant interactions of *F* style with *NT* and *P* climates or *F* climate with *NT* and *P* styles provide some supplementary support for the contingency notion. The empirical support holds true, as noted, only for the *NT-NT* data pair. Entirely different patterns of interaction between style and climate as they influence success appear in the data for other pairs. One general conclusion is obvious that the *fit* hypothesis appears to function in the case of nurturant-task dimension for the executives in middle positions. Data from the statistical analysis and common sense suggest that this dimension is the most relevant and salient for career success within this group of Indian executives. Hence, the *fit* hypothesis should itself be modified to refer only to those personal orientations or styles and climate dimensions which are most relevant to career success in business organizations. Such a modification further suggests that future research should focus on the role of power orientation as well as on that of nurturance and task orientations. A note of caution may be suggested at this point: the dynamics of the *fit* hypothesis may be quite different for the top executives (Ansari, Baumgartel, & Sullivan, 1982), presumably in the case of chief executive officers and heads of major divisions and departments.

On the positive side, however, we can conclude that the study provides significant evidence that the Indian executives in middle positions thrive best, in the sense of salary progress, in organizational environments congenial to their own motivational orientations toward nurturance and task dimensions. Such a circumstance has obvious implications for both executives in their own career planning and for

firms in their organizational development programs. Executives need to be aware of their own motives or styles and sensitive to the characteristics they choose for their careers. Alternatively speaking, organizations need to be aware of the characteristics of the environments which they provide for their executives. For example, if the executives of nurturant-task style are needed for organizational effectiveness, then a nurturant-task-oriented environment must be provided. Organizations lacking in these characteristics can self-consciously choose a course of development along this dimension. Evidence exists furthermore (Baumgartel, Dunn, & Sullivan, 1976, 1977; Litwin & Stringer, 1968) that organizational climates set by the top leadership can and do influence the motivational orientations and styles of middle managers in specific and organizationally important ways. Obviously, the methodological questions raised by this study can only be properly answered by longitudinal studies designed to explore the circumstances under which the person-environment fit effect has its major implications.

The study is not without potential limitations, however. Considering the small sample size, especially in the sub-groups, the study needs to be replicated with a larger sample size before firm conclusions about the theoretical and practical significance of the findings can be reached. It is hoped that ever-changing combination of variables and their contribution to interaction effects on career success will keep the professional experts busy far quite some time.

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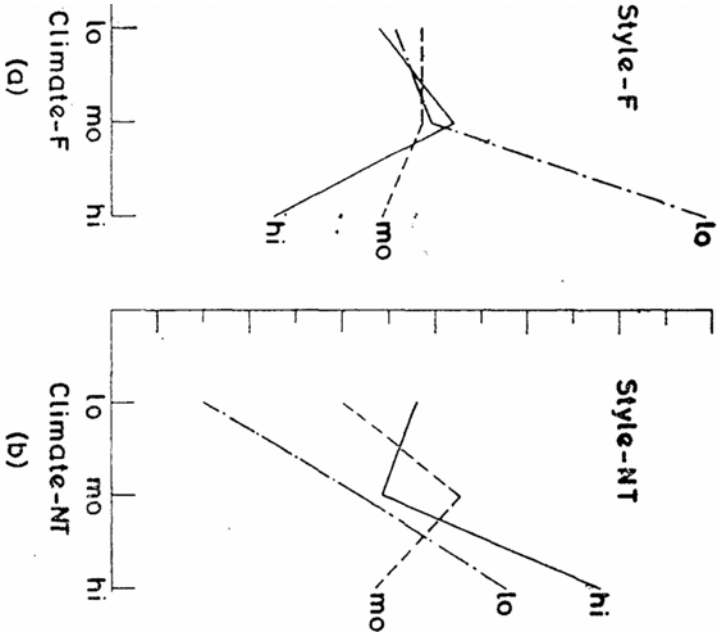
Table 1

Summary Results of Style x Climate ANOVA Analysis: Main Effects and Interactions

Leadership Style	Effect	Climate **F** df	**F** MS	**F** F	Climate **NT** df	**NT** MS	**NT** F	Climate **P** df	**P** MS	**P** F
	S	2	731.63	2.92[a]	2	145.37	0.66	2	399.91	1.64
	C	2	135.35	0,54	2	58.02	0.26	2	57.51	0.24
F	S x C	4	783.51	3.13[c]	4	622.05	2.82[c]	4	1166.69	4.77[d]
	Residual	132	250.49		132	220.40		132	244.41	
	S	2	97.53	0.64	2	439.46	205	2	36.09	0.21
	C	2	468.82	3.06[b]	2	1059.09	4.93[c]	2	64.98	0.39
NT	S x C	4	362.35	2,36[a]	4	41658	1.94[a]	4	218.24	1.30
	Residual	132	153.24		132	214.83		132	167.32	
	S	2	67.90	0.44	2	102.40	0.42	2	156.35	1.04
	C	2	246.80	1.60	2	238.24	0.97	2	233.76	1.55
P	S x C	4	482.19	313[c]	4	170,93	0.70	4	139.13	0.93
	Residual	132	154.11		132	245.18		132	150.33	

Note. S = Style; C = Climate; **F** = Authoritarianism; **NT** = Nurturant task; **P** = Participative;
[a]$p < .10$; [b]$p < .05$; [c]$p < .02$; [d]$p < .01$.



Note. F = Authoritarianism; NT = Nurturant Task; P = Participative; lo = Low; mo = Moderate; hi = High

Figure 1. Summary of fit hypotheses on mean salary progression scores.