



# **The development of employee commitment to the supervisor: a case study in the Australian Public Service**

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## Abstract

This research examines the relationship between the traditional components of affective, normative and continuance commitment, including the concept of side-bets on the foci of employee commitment to the supervisor. The research builds a deeper understanding of how commitment works in practice from the perspective of the employee and extends our understanding of how employee commitment is fostered and works in large public sector organisations. This research highlights that employees believe they invest considerable effort into the development of the relationship with their supervisor. It is demonstrated that the relationship between the employee and the supervisor is more important than previously recognised in large public sector organisations.

According to side-bet theory, organisational commitment will increase with the accumulation of side-bets (Cohen and Gattiker, 1992). Becker (1960) suggests that employees who devote time and effort in mastering tasks or skills are betting that the time and effort invested will pay off, but winning requires continued employment in the organisation. This research explores the concept that “side-bets” are transferable to the employee-supervisor relationship. What is found is that employees report a desire and willingness to invest in, and build, a strong relationship with their supervisor due to the fact that this investment is perceived to lead to positive outcomes for the employee.

The research provides considerable new insight and knowledge on how commitment works by providing empirical evidence on how the concept of side-bets operate from the perspective of the employee. This research extends side-bet theory by introducing a two stage side-bet decision making process. The current paradigm of employee commitment is built on the concept that it is the relationship between the employee and the organisation that forms the basis of employee commitment. This research has demonstrated that the structure of the organisational and the people management policies used by the organisation can create the situation where the idea of a relationship or link between the employee and the organisation has been brought into question. As a result there has been a change in the way that employee commitment is developed and works.

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# Introduction

## 1.0 Statement of the problem

Organisational commitment has become a much researched subject over the past three decades (Steijn and Leisink, 2006). Previous research has associated high commitment with increased productivity and decreased withdrawal behaviours such as turnover and absenteeism (Mowday, Porter and Steers 1982; Baba and Knoop, 1987). Commitment to an organisation has also been found to relate to a variety of desirable work outcomes including employee job satisfaction (Hackett, Bycio, and Hausdorf, 1994). Organisational commitment has been linked to absenteeism (Gellatly, 1995) and turnover intentions (Mathieu and Zajac, 1990, Bateman and Stasser, 1984; Mowday, et al., 1982; Mowday, Steers, and Porter, 1979; Weiner and Vardi, 1980). Ostroff (1992) reported that committed employees are associated with better organisational performance. Recent research suggests there is a positive relationship between affective commitment and in-role performance (Allen and Meyer, 1996; McElroy, 2001).

The current paradigm of employee commitment is built on the concept that it is the relationship between the employee and the organisation that forms the basis of employee commitment. Several researchers have described employee commitment as the psychological attachment of worker to their workplace (Allen and Meyer, 1990; O’Rielly and Chatman, 1986). Mowday, Porter and Steers (1982) suggested commitment is the relative strength of an individual’s identification with, and involvement in, the organisation in terms of values and goals.

Most of the previous research undertaken on commitment explores the construct of commitment from the perspective of the impact of employee commitment on the organisation, and organisational outcomes. There have been few studies which attempt



to explore employee commitment from the perspective of the employee and which seek to identify how employee commitment works from the employee perspective.

Employee commitment to the organisation has often been conceptualised as part of the exchange agreement between the individual and the organisation (e.g. Angle and Perry, Rousseau, 1995). Social exchange theory (Blau, 1964) suggests that employees are motivated to seek a fair and balanced exchange with their organisation (Homans, 1961). The ability of the organisation to provide this exchange has, in recent times, been brought into question. Zhao, Wayne, Glibkowski, and Bravo (2007) state that in the last two decades there have been major changes to the structure of organisations including downsizing and outsourcing. Such changes have the potential to alter employee perceptions of, and reactions to, the employment relationship. If employees do not identify with the organisation in a manner that is conducive to building organisational commitment what would the implications be for employee commitment? This research will seek to determine whether changes to the organisational structure have impacted the way that employee commitment works from the perspective of the employee and detail the broad consequences of this finding. If this research demonstrates that organisational size and management practices can lead to a change in the way the commitment works it may suggest that much of the literature on building employee commitment is incomplete. Such a finding may also indicate that the employee-supervisor relationship will take on greater importance in this context which could also be to the detriment of the organisation. As a result, an employee's ability to develop and maintain a relationship with their supervisor could become critical to the fulfilment of the exchange agreement and broader issues of retention and employee engagement. It may also suggest that employees will actively seek to link and remain working for a particular supervisor. Such a finding would have a series of consequences for employees and the organisation.

The research will test the assumption that the exchange agreement is considered by employees to exist between themselves and the organisation. It will highlight the implications for the organisation and employees if this assumption is wrong. The research will examine the concept that employees do not believe it is the organisation that fulfils the exchange agreement and highlight a range of consequences and seek to discover what is happening and why? It will also explore the implications of employees changing the target of the exchange agreement from the organisation to the supervisor.



In particular the research will explore the implications of employees developing a sense of attachment to the supervisor or attributing workplace achievement to their relationship with the supervisor. If the evidence supports this finding it would suggest that the current approaches to developing and managing employee commitment may be ineffective and our understanding of how commitment is developed is incomplete.

This research is important for two reasons, firstly it may highlight that we do not understand the commitment relationship in a way which would allow organisations to use it effectively to drive positive outcomes for the organisation. Secondly, if the organisation does not understand how employee commitment works it may create the situation where decisions taken by the organisation may negatively impact on employee commitment. Employees who believe that their psychological contract with the organisation has been violated are likely to hold the view that the organisation cannot be trusted to fulfil its obligations and that the organisation does not care about the well being of its employees (Robinson, 1996). Prior research also indicates that a psychological contract breach is negatively related to employees self reported in-role performance (Robinson, 1996). This could lead to a loss of key talent, a reduction of extra role effort and performance, and a disempowered workforce. This could also eventuate if employees believe that the exchange agreement is fulfilled by the supervisor, any failure of this relationship may be perceived to have significant implications for the employee. As a result, the lack of understanding of how employee commitment works in practice has the potential to damage the overall performance of the organisation.

Relationships are an intrinsic component of social psychology (Simons, 1999). A relationship is considered to exist if there is an element of interdependence between entities (Lee, 1999). Previous research has found that relationships are the product of interactions and are an important component of social psychology enhancing organisational outcomes Robbins, Millett, and Waters-Marsh, (2004). The research will explore the impact and importance of the relationship between the supervisor and employee to identify whether the behaviours and actions of the supervisor are likely to influence the development of employee commitment to the supervisor.

Little empirical research to date has attempted to explore commitment from the standpoint of the employee to the supervisor or examined the existence and impact of side-bets between employee and the supervisor. As a consequence, the implications of any such relationship remain unknown. This research will seek to determine whether

employees believe there are side-bets that are valid and exist between the supervisor and the employee. The implications of such a finding would be important in terms of increasing the knowledge of how employee commitment is fostered in public sector organisations and will provide a deeper understanding of how commitment works in practice.

This research is important as not only does it focus on the relatively understudied Australian Public Service (APS) it will provide new insight and understanding of employee commitment in the public sector. Steijn and Leisink (2006) state that organisational commitment in the public sector is relatively less studied. The organisational commitment of public service employees is not often addressed, as explicitly stated by Liou and Nyhan (1994) and Balfour and Wechsler (1996). Dobel (1990) and Nachmias (1985) both argue that building affective organisation commitment in public service organisations is the key to meeting the challenge of complex problems with limited funding and high citizen expectations. Understanding how to foster employee commitment should be a focus for all APS organisations given the intractable nature of the issues that the APS is required to deal with on behalf of Australian community.

## **1.2 Justification of research**

The commitment of employees to the organisation has been given a great deal of attention in research (Mowday, Porter, and Steers, 1982). This is largely due to the fact that committed employees have been found to be less likely to leave an organisation than those who are uncommitted (Mathieu and Zajac, 1990; Angle and Perry, 1981; Porter, Steers, Mowday, and Boulian, 1974). Because turnover can be costly to organisations, commitment is generally assumed to be a desirable quality that should be fostered in employees Meyer, Paunonen, Gellatly, Goffin and Jackson (1989).

The Australian Government's Intergenerational Report 2007 and projections made by the Australian Productivity Commission indicate that Australia is on the verge of a sustained tightening of the supply of labour in Australia, particularly the supply of younger, skilled workers. It is predicted that there will be 3.8 million retirements in the period to 2025, and 3.5 million jobs that will need a much greater depth of skill than is the case today (AHRI 2010, white paper). In this environment the competition for and critically the retention of talented employees who are committed to the organisation

will be of great importance for organisations. The Labour Force, Australia, 2010 August figures released by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) reported that the national unemployment rate is currently at 5.2%, this is a historical low level. The most recent Hudson report on recruitment indicates that 34.9% of employers have indicated an intention to increase their permanent staff levels in 2010 which is the highest level of confidence reported since June 2008. If APS organisations are to continue to operate as successfully as they have in the past achieving and maintaining high levels of employee commitment, and achieving high levels of employee retention will be important.

The next decade will see the baby boomer generation, which has dominated the APS employment environment for more than two decades, move into retirement with 46% of employees eligible to retire over the next ten years (Australian Public Service Commission, State of the Service, 2008-09, pg 14). If the exodus of baby boomers is compounded by a tightening of the labour market, labour shortages will require APS organisations to intensify their efforts to retain current employees. The tightening of the labour market already placing pressure on the ability of the APS to recruit talented individuals (Ahead of the Game: Blueprint for the Reform of Australian Government, 2010, pg 11).

Most studies on organisational commitment identify commitment as an attachment or linking to an organisation. Porter et al. (1974, pg 604) suggest that commitment is “the strength of an individual’s identification with and involvement in a particular organisation”. Organisational commitment is conceptualised as having three distinguishable components: normative, affective and continuance commitment (Allen and Meyer, 1990; Reichers, 1985).

Normative commitment relates to the obligation that an employee feels to remain with the organisation Chen and Francesco (2001). Affective commitment is suggested to refer to an individual’s emotional attachment to, identification with, and involvement in the organisation, whereas, continuance commitment is said to refer to commitment based on the costs the employee associates with leaving the organisation (Meyer et al., 1989). Becker (1960, pg 33) described continuance commitment as the tendency to engage in “consistent lines of activity” because of the perceived cost of doing otherwise.

This research explores the impact that the employee-supervisor relationship has on the components of affective, normative and continuance commitment. The research examines the possibility that side-bets will, in the mind of the employee, increasingly

become linked to a relationship with their supervisor. The term side-bet was termed by Becker (1960) to refer to the accumulation of investments that are valued by the employee which would be lost or deemed worthless if the employee was to leave the organisation.

According to side-bet theory, organisational commitment will increase with the accumulation of side-bets (Cohen and Gattiker, 1992). Becker (1960) suggests that employees who devote time and effort in mastering tasks or skills are betting that the time and effort invested will pay off, but winning requires continued employment in the organisation. Side-bet theory is an exchange-based approach to commitment (Griffin and Bateman, 1986) it has traditionally been conceptualised as anything of value the individual perceived they would lose if they left the organisation. This research explores the concept that side-bets are transferable to the employee-supervisor relationship. If side-bets are found to be transferable to the employee-supervisor relationship this will have a significant impact on the people management strategies that organisations use to build and maintain employee commitment. Currently, most of the methods employed by organisations to build employee commitment are designed to build commitment between the organisation and the employee. Should the concept of side-bets be transferable to the employee-supervisor relationship organisations will need to develop policies and practices which support and capture this form of employee commitment. If the organisation decides not to acknowledge or support this form of commitment it could create the situation where the use of traditional approaches, policies and practices could be seen as irrelevant and negatively impact the employees' view of the organisation.

This research takes on significant importance because a large percentage of APS employees perform supervisory functions and activities. Twenty seven per cent of APS employees, totalling approximately 39,691 people (State of the Service Report 2007–2008) are responsible for supervising the activities of approximately 108,000 other employees. For many employees in the APS it is the supervisor who articulates the goals, mission, and vision of the organisation and, most importantly, the role that the employee performs. The importance of the role of the supervisor is clear, acting as an agent for the organisation, the supervisor often interacts with employees on a daily basis, enacting formal and informal procedures and are the provider of rewards to subordinates (Farth, Podsakoff, and Organ, 1990).

The supervisor controls the flow of information in most organisations and access to information is a key manifestation of the level of trust in an organisation (Creed and Miles, 1996). The research will explore and highlight whether the actions and behaviours of the supervisor can foster the development of employee commitment to the supervisor. Despite the apparent importance of the supervisor in the APS employment setting, little research has been undertaken on the importance of the relationship between employee and their supervisor and the impact of this relationship on construct of employee commitment.

### **1.3 Research aim**

The current paradigm of employee commitment is built on the concept that it is the relationship between the employee and the organisation that forms the basis of employee commitment. This research will demonstrate that the structure of the organisation and the people management policies used by the organisation has created the situation where the idea of a relationship or link between the employee and the organisation has been brought into question. As a result this has led to a change in the way that employee commitment is developed and works, and suggests that the current understanding of employee commitment may be incomplete.

The research will highlight that employees do not believe that the organisation is best placed to fulfil the exchange component that is crucial to the development of employee commitment. As a result, new forms of commitment are emerging to fill this void. It will be demonstrated that the relationship between the employee and the supervisor is more important than previously recognised in large public sector organisations. As a result, this has supported the development of a foci of commitment that is targeted at the supervisor.

The research questions guiding this research are:

1. What is the impact of the employee-supervisor relationship on employee commitment?
2. What are the factors that support the development of the foci of commitment to supervisor?
3. How do the traditional components of affective, normative and continuance commitment, including the concept of side-bets and exchange impact the foci of commitment to supervisor?
4. How does commitment work in practice from the perspective of the employee?

This research will expand the current understanding and literature on the foci of employee commitment. This will be achieved by undertaking research which expands the focus (foci) of the construct of employee commitment to include new meanings and definitions. The knowledge and understanding that emerges from this research will provide new insight into how employee commitment to the supervisor is fostered and will provide a deeper understanding of how commitment works in practice.

## **1.4 Why is this research important?**

The implications of this research will highlight that the construct of employee commitment in its present form is incomplete and it should be expanded, therefore the way commitment is fostered within organisations needs to be re-examined. The research will add significant insight into the impact of organisational structure, management practices, and supervisor behaviour on the development of employee commitment to the supervisor, which prior to this research had received little attention in the literature.

Although a great deal has been written about organisational commitment, there is still no clear agreement on how the factors purported to be associated with it contribute to its development or how these organisational factors can be managed to promote the development of organisation commitment (Beck and Wilson, 2001). Jenkins and Thomlinson (1992) state that what is needed is a more expansive examination of the differing conceptions and dimensions of organisational commitment.

The only way to develop a deeper understanding of how employee commitment works is to seek further insight from employees themselves on how they construct commitment. This research will provide empirical evidence of some of the factors which support development of employee commitment from the perspective of the employee. The findings of this research will provide greater insight into how commitment works and how it is developed in large public sector organisations. The research will seek to identify some of the factors that support the development of employee commitment to the supervisor and identify issues regarding the management of employee commitment which need to be given consideration by the organisation.

The construct of employee commitment to supervisor has received little attention in the literature or within APS organisations. As a result, the implications of this form of employee commitment on the organisation, and potential implications for

APS organisations and APS employees remain largely unknown. The research is important because there is significant lack of empirical research and understanding on the construct of employee commitment from the perspective of an attachment or linking to a supervisor. There is also a lack of empirical research on the impact of employee commitment to the supervisor on the organisation and the achievement of the organisation's objectives. An outcome of the research may be the identification of factors that act as trigger points for the development of employee-supervisor commitment. As a result, this will enable the organisation to introduce new approaches to the management of employee commitment taking into consideration this new form of commitment.

Despite many years of research little is known about the impact of the employee-supervisor relationship on employee commitment. As a result of this research the organisation will have new insight into the positive and negative implications that could emerge due to the existence of employee commitment to supervisor. The organisation may choose to develop new measures which provide greater support to employees and which may even be designed to foster employee commitment to the supervisor but which allow greater oversight by the organisation.

Furthermore, there remains a lack of empirical understanding of the investments (side-bets) that the employee considers they make to develop and maintain their relationship with the supervisor. Critically, the research will seek to identify if the traditional components of affective, normative and continuance commitment, including the concept of side-bets operate in a similar way to the current understanding of these components of commitment. This will provide clear insight into how the organisation can manage this form of commitment and alert the organisation to many of the risks associated with this form of employee commitment.

For example, if the employee-supervisor side-bets operate in a similar manner to the current understanding of side-bets this would provide the organisation with evidence that any fracture of the employee-supervisor relationship could have negative implications for employee commitment, and lead to increased turnover and reduced performance. In addition, the organisation may choose to give greater consideration to the management of change programs so as to limit the risks associated with the loss of employee-supervisor side-bets.



This research will provide greater insight into the role of the supervisor in creating distinct sub-cultures and climates within the organisation. The research will provide the organisation with evidence of the type of supervisor behaviours which are highly valued by employees and which support higher level of performance and the development of employee commitment. As a result the organisation may choose to devote energy towards supporting the development of these supervisor behaviours as it may improve the overall performance of the organisation. This research will provide the organisation with evidence of how these constructs impact employee retention and inter-agency mobility. The insight provided by this research will assist the organisation in reviewing the effectiveness, design and management of programs to improve the culture and climate of the organisation.

The existence of employee commitment to the supervisor will require the organisation to review all of the people management practices and frameworks that are currently used within the organisation to ensure their continued relevance, and their ability to drive desired behaviours and outcomes. The research may identify that current people management approaches and systems may be negatively affecting employee performance and limiting in role and extra performance. As a result all APS organisations will need to develop a deep knowledge of the factors that foster this form of commitment and develop an understanding of the implications that this form of commitment could have on the achievement of organisation objectives, supervisors and employees more broadly.

## **1.5 Location of the research and the participants**

The Australian Government impacts the lives of all Australians. The Australian Public Service (APS) plays a critical role in assisting the Government to implement its objectives and meet the responsibilities that are placed upon the government. The APS has over 160,000 employees (Australian Public Service Commission, State of the Service, 2008–09, pg 1) who, in the main, work in policy, regularity, service delivery and implementation roles.

The APS was established as a bureaucracy (Parkin, Summers and Woodward, 1994) with a set of instructions that directed and controlled activities with typical autocratic rule by management. The APS is a professional, non partisan service dedicated to assisting the government of the day to provide service to the citizen and meet forthcoming policy

challenges (Ahead of the Game: Blueprint for the Reform of Australian Government, 2010, pg 3). Since the establishment of the APS, employee roles have expanded from a purely administrative one, into today's requirement of strategic advice and policy implementation, enabling the Government to make timely interventions for the benefit of all Australians (State of the Service Report, 2005–2006).

The research participants will be drawn from one large Australian Public Service organisation. The organisation was established to provide Australian Government services to the Australian public. The participant target group for the research will be employees who work within the policy and/or service delivery implementation sections of the national support office in Canberra. The participant target group was chosen because of their level and the generalist nature of the work undertaken by the group (project, implementation and maintenance activities etc). The specific choice of the target group should assist the transferability of findings to other settings. The researcher will use the human resource team within the national support office to identify 300 potential participants from the target group.

## **1.6 The outcomes of the research**

The outcomes of this research will lead to a deeper understanding of some of the factors that support the development of employee commitment to supervisor. The research will also provide for a greater understanding of how employee commitment works in large public sector organisations from the perspective of the employee. It will also provide evidence of the impact of the organisational size, structure and management practices on the development of employee commitment to supervisor. This research will seek to demonstrate the importance of the relationship that the employee has with the supervisor, and the impact of this relationship on employee commitment.

The research aims to build greater understanding of the foci of commitment between employee and supervisor, confirmation of which will challenge the merit and effectiveness of the strategies that organisations currently use to develop and maintain employee commitment in the public sector. This research may lead to the introduction of new and dynamic approaches to building and maintaining employee commitment. Organisations, as a result, may need to introduce approaches to building and maintaining employee commitment that take into account the concept of employee

commitment to supervisor. Failure to do so could lead to reduced organisational and individual performance and higher levels of employee turnover, absence and lower employee engagement.

This research is presented in eight chapters.

1. **Chapter one** details the statement of the problem and provides a background to the problem and the purpose and justification for the research.
2. **Chapter two** identifies the literature and the need for further research on the employee commitment to supervisor. It suggests that what is required is a deeper understanding of the factors, relationships and drivers which support the development of employee commitment to supervisor, and to identify the consequences of this action for employees and the organisation.
3. **Chapter three** details the methodology used to underpin the research. It highlights that the nature of this research is explorative and that the research aims to demonstrate how and why employee commitment to supervisor is developed. The research design supports this explorative approach and includes a constructivist research paradigm, case study approach, qualitative methodology and method (semi-structured in-depth interviews).
4. **Chapter four** explores the impact of organisational size on employee commitment, the chapter highlights that as a result of organisation size employees have identified that the relationship they have with the supervisor is critical to their experience of the workplace. In this chapter it is reported that employees do not consider that the organisation is able to meet the exchange component of the commitment agreement and as a result employees are seeking to invest their efforts where they feel the exchange can be completed.
5. **Chapter five** explores the concept that organisational management practices foster the development of commitment to supervisor. The chapter highlights that for the majority of participants the supervisor was most likely to influence their experience of work, care about their well being, foster a sense of future opportunities, and ensure there was equity in the workplace. This chapter identifies that the devolvement of responsibility to enact organisations policies to the supervisor had created the situation where employees attribute their experience of organisational policies to the supervisor. Instead of building organisational commitment this served to build commitment to the supervisor.

6. **Chapter six** demonstrates that the concept of side-bets is transferable to the employee-supervisor relationship and that the accumulation of side-bets between employee and supervisor serves to strengthen employee commitment to the supervisor. The chapter highlights that time, effort and emotional energy were considered by employees as their investment (side-bets). The findings indicate that employees believe the strength of the relationship the employee had with the supervisor largely determines the opportunities and rewards that they received. The chapter also introduces a two stage framework for employee side-bet.
7. **Chapter seven** discusses the implications of this research, it suggests that the way commitment is fostered within organisations needs to be re-examined. This research adds significant insight into the impact of organisational size and management practices on the development of employee commitment. The findings provide new insight into how employee commitment works and how it is developed.
8. **Chapter eight** highlights the contribution to the literature and knowledge of commitment theory including the provision of empirical evidence of the development, and impact, of employee commitment to supervisor. The research also provides a modern understanding of how employee commitment is developed and operates in large public sector organisations.

The analysis of participant responses has supported the development of new understanding of the construct of employee commitment to supervisor across the components of affective, normative and continuance commitment. The component of normative commitment did not always emerge explicitly from the analysis of the data. However, throughout this research where employee commitment is mentioned as a single overarching construct, normative commitment is considered to be one part of this construct along with the components of affective and continuance commitment. Where a participant comment clearly reflected a component of commitment, for example affective commitment, the particular component is identified in the analysis.



# Literature review



## 2.0 Review of the literature

Although the literature on commitment theory covers a wide range of topics this literature review will focus on the themes which have repeatedly emerged throughout the review of the literature and which provide the theoretical base for this research. The purpose of this literature review is to explore the expanding foci of employee commitment and to highlight a gap in literature which suggests that certain structural, cultural and management practices are likely to support the development of employee commitment to the supervisor. The literature review will identify the potential impact of the employee-supervisor relationship on employee commitment. It will also examine the role of the supervisor in a large organisation and as a result the potential for the components of affective, normative and continuance commitment to become associated with the supervisor. This chapter will build the argument that a deeper understanding of the factors, relationships and drivers which support the development of employee commitment to the supervisor is needed. In achieving this goal the literature review will provide the theoretical underpinning for the research.

## 2.1 Three decades of commitment research

In the last thirty years the construct of organisational commitment has received a great deal of empirical study. During this period organisational commitment has emerged as a key concept in the study of attitudes and behaviour (Cohen, 2007). As a result there is a large body of work on organisational commitment, which has been defined and measured in various ways (Hall, Schneider, and Nygren, 1970; Mowday, Steers, and Porter, 1979; Wiener, 1982, Becker, Billings, Eveleth and Gilbert, 1996; Chen et al., 2002; Shore, Barksdale and Shore, 1995; Tsui, Pearce, Porter and Tripoli, 1997;

Porter, Steers, Mowday and Boulian 1974; Becker, 1960, Weiner and Vardi, 1980). A common theme between each of the definitions is that organisational commitment is an attachment or linking of the employee to the organisation. Several researchers have described employee commitment as the psychological attachment of a worker to their workplace (Allen and Meyer, 1990; O’Rielly and Chatman, 1986). The definitions, however, differ in their explanation of how the attachment or link to the organisation develops (Cohen and Kirchmeyer 1995; Hackett et al., 1994). What is needed is a further exploration of the factors and drivers which impact the employee attachment and a review of what and to whom this attachment occurs. This research will aim to explain how the attachment occurs, to what or who the attachment is made, from the perspective of the employee and detail the implications and consequences of these actions for the organisation and its employees.

## **2.2 Why is commitment important to the organisation?**

High levels of employee commitment generally have positive implications for organisational outcomes (Mathieu and Zajac, 1990, Randall, 1990). Research has associated high commitment with increased productivity and decreased withdrawal behaviours such as turnover and absenteeism (Mowday, Porter and Steers 1982; Baba and Knoop, 1987). Commitment to an organisation has been found to relate to a variety of desirable work outcomes including employee job satisfaction (Bateman and Stasser, 1984; Mowday, Porter and Steers, 1982; Hackett, Bycio, and Hausdorf, 1994) and motivation (Mowday, Steers and Porter, 1979). Organisational commitment has also been linked to reduced absenteeism (Gellatly, 1995) and turnover intentions (Mathieu and Zajac, 1990, Bateman and Stasser, 1984; Mowday et al., 1982; Mowday et al., 1979; Weiner and Vardi, 1980; Clegg, 1983; Cotton and Tuttle, 1986). Mowday, Porter and Steers (1982, pg 27) note that those who are committed to the organisation “are willing to give something of themselves in order to contribute to the organisation’s wellbeing”. Theoretically employees’ willingness to exert effort on behalf of the organisation is differentially influenced by the nature of their commitment (Meyer and Allen, 1991).

Although little research has examined links between normative commitment and performance, evidence suggests that it is positively related to work effort and overall performance (Ashforth and Saks, 1996). Ostroff (1992) reported that committed employees are associated with better organisational performance. Recent research



suggests there is a positive relationship between affective commitment and in-role performance (Allen and Meyer, 1996; McElroy 2001). Chen et al. (2001) reported that affective commitment is also an important antecedent for predicting extra-role performance.

There remains some debate on the link between commitment and performance; Mathieu and Zajac concluded that “commitment has relative little direct influence on performance in most instances” (1990, pg 184). The conclusion that commitment is largely unrelated to job performance is based upon the conventional view of employee commitment defined as “the relative strength of an individual’s identification with and involvement in a particular organisation” (Mowday et al., 1982, pg 27). The significance of employee commitment to the supervisor for organisations was highlighted by the work of Becker et al. (1996, pg 476) which found that commitment to the organisation was uncorrelated to performance and that commitment to the supervisor was positively and significantly associated with performance. Becker et al. (1996, pg 477) also reported that the propensity to become committed to the supervisor would be a valid predictor of performance. This research will highlight some of the factors that support the development of employee commitment to the supervisor from the perspective of the employee and in doing so will seek to understand how this may influence employee performance. This will go some way toward meeting the request by Becker et al. (1996, pg 477) that those concerned with employee performance should focus their attention on commitment to the supervisor rather than on that to organisations.

### **2.3 Affective and normative commitment**

Organisational commitment is conceptualised as having three distinguishable components, which are identified as affective, continuance and normative commitment (Allen and Meyer 1990; Reichers, 1985). Affective commitment (Mowday et al., 1982; Allen and Meyer, 1990) is said to refer to an individual’s attitude toward an organisation, consisting of emotional attachment, identification with, and involvement in, the organisation. McElroy (2001) states that affective commitment also refers to employee identification with the goals of the organisation and may be based on a sense of shared values. Affective commitment is a higher order commitment as it has affective components; it increases motivation to produce as well as to stay (March and Simon, 1958).

Normative commitment relates to the obligation that an employee feels to remain with the organisation (Chen et al., 2001). In contrast to affective and continuance commitment, employees displaying normative commitment focus on the ‘right or moral thing to do’ (Weiner, 1982, pg 42). Employees with a strong normative commitment remain with an organisation because they feel ought to (Meyer et al., 1993). Chen et al. (2001) suggest that it is the psychological state associated with each component of commitment that differs, employees demonstrating affective commitment remain because they want to, employees who remain because they need to demonstrate continuance commitment and normative commitment is displayed by employees who remain because they feel obliged to.

## **2.4 Continuance commitment and side-bets**

Continuance commitment (Allen and Meyer, 1990) refers to commitment based on the costs the employee associates with leaving the organisation, perceived lack of alternatives and the perception that much will be lost if the employee-target relationship is lost. Kanter (1968) defined continuance commitment as “profit” associated with continued participation and “cost” associated with leaving. Continuance commitment or calculated commitment, is a disposition to engage in “consistent lines of activity” as a result of the accumulation of “side-bets” that would be lost if the activity were discontinued Becker (1960, pg 33). Iverson and Buttigieg (1999) found that individuals displaying high continuance commitment were only more likely to leave if they perceived that there were attractive alternatives available. This finding is consistent with the understanding of how side-bets work, the term side-bet was first termed by Becker (1960), and refers to anything of value the individual has invested that would be lost if he or she was to leave the organisation (Meyer and Allen, 1984). The ‘investment’ is anything deemed valuable by the employee and can include tenure, money, training and effort (Becker, 1960).

It is not unexpected that the “side-bets” associated with leaving an organisation increase with age and tenure due to the time and effort that an employee has invested within the organisation. Hackett, Bycio and Hausdorf (1994) found significant relationships between continuance commitment and both age and tenure. However, little empirical research has been undertaken to determine if the “side-bets” identified within this and other studies on commitment are influenced or impacted by the relationship between the employee and the supervisor. As Meyer and Allen (1984) suggested, perhaps we need to directly obtain employee’s perceptions of the size

and importance of investments they have made. Examining side-bet theory in this way may identify the importance of the relationship that exists between supervisor and employee based on investments made by the employee. This is an area which had received little attention in the literature. Further examination of the employee-supervisor relationship would provide new knowledge and insight into the impact of side-bets on the foci of employee commitment to supervisor. This is important as it will provide insight into the potential implications of this finding for employees and the organisation.

## **2.5 Exchange theories of commitment**

Building on the work of Becker (1960) and the concept of side-bets, employee commitment to the organisation has often been conceptualised as part of the exchange agreement between the individual and the organisation (Angle and Perry, 1981; Rousseau, 1995). Exchange parties follow the principles of reciprocity (Emerson, 1976; Gouldner 1960). Barker (1997) found that relationships in our society tend to be contractual things, with performance standards and evaluations. Social exchange theory (Blau, 1964) suggests that employees are motivated to seek a fair and balanced exchange with their organisation (Homans, 1961). Social exchange theory assumes that the reciprocation of valued resources fosters the initiation, strengthening and maintenance of interpersonal relationships (Lynch, Eisenberger and Armeli, 1999). The valued resources could include money, services, and information.

The theory of social exchange developed by (Emerson, 1981) proposes that people invest in relationships that are relatively rewarding and disinvest in those that they perceive as relatively costly. The idea that people will invest in relationships which they consider to be rewarding is consistent with the concept of employee commitment to the supervisor which is explored within this research. This suggests that it is likely that critical analysis employees will invest effort into developing the relationship with their supervisor if the employee considers that this investment will provide a reward. There is a gap in the literature on the implications of any employee investment or side-bet of this nature and the consequences for employees and the organisation. The research will also seek to determine if the constructs of affective, normative and continuance commitment work in the same manner for the foci of employee commitment to the supervisor as traditionally understood in the literature on organisational commitment. Such insight would provide new knowledge on how employee commitment to the supervisor works and is developed from the perspective of the employee.

## 2.6 Expanding the foci of employee commitment

This research seeks to expand the current understanding and literature on the foci of employee commitment. This will be achieved by undertaking research which expands the focus (foci) of the construct of employee commitment to include new meanings and definitions. As previously mentioned, although a great deal has been written about organisational commitment, there is still no clear agreement on how the factors purported to be associated with it contribute to its development or how these organisational factors can be managed to promote the development of organisation commitment (Beck and Wilson, 2001).

A number of researchers support this action, Meyer and Allen, (1997, pg 110) state that “we know even less about the mechanisms involved in the development of normative and continuance commitment than we do about those implicated with the development of affective commitment”. Conway and Monks (2009, pg 141) state that there is some diversity and controversy regarding how the construct of commitment is defined and measured. Iverson and Buttigieg (1999, pg 326) indicate that there has been little empirical evidence on ‘how to’ obtain commitment. Jenkins and Thomlinson (1992) state that what is needed is a more expansive examination of the differing conceptions and dimensions of organisational commitment. Conway and Monks (2009) report that the emphasis on organisational performance that has captured researchers over the last number of years has led to less attention being paid to the management of the commitment process that is at the heart of the employment relationship.

Becker (1992) reported that a reconceptualisation of employee commitment has emerged within the literature on work related attachments, arguing that the conventional view of work related commitment is concerned exclusively with organisational commitment and is vague with respect to the role and bases of commitment. Becker, Billing, Eveleth and Gilbert, (1996) state that a number of researchers have begun to view employee commitment as having multiple foci and bases. O’Reilly and Chatman (1986) also argued that commitment has multiple bases. The work of Caldwell, Chatman, and O’Reilly (1990) suggests that compliance, identification and internalisation are relevant bases of commitment. Becker et al. (1996) found that employees in many organisations distinguished between commitment to supervisor and commitment to the organisation and between identification and internalisation as bases for the commitment to these two foci.

It has previously been reported that employees can be committed to foci as professions (Gouldner, 1958) and unions (Gordon, Beavais and Ladd 1984) as well as to organisations (Mowday et al., 1982). Reichers (1985) stated that foci of commitment are the individuals and groups to whom an employee is attached. In recent times the conceptualisation of commitment has expanded to include new forms such as commitment to occupations, supervisors and customers (McElroy, 2001). Reichers (1985, pg 472) stated a number of foci may be relevant to employees including “co-workers, superiors, subordinates, customers and other groups and individuals that collectively comprise the organisation”. Previous research has highlighted differential commitment to occupation, top management, supervisor, co-workers and customers (Becker, 1992, Meyer, Allen, and Smith 1993). The definition of commitment has also been expanded to include commitment as a process through which subjective attachments guide moment to moment behavior. From this perspective, commitments are more than just behaviorally revealed preferences that underlie individual choices; they are ties that link individuals to social structure through the roles, organizations, individuals, and values with which they affiliate (Bielby, 1992).

The importance of the supervisor has been established in the literature; Reichers (1986) argued that top managers, supervisors and co-workers are generally important foci for employees. Becker et al. (1996) suggest that the reason for this is that norms regarding in role behaviours are often established by local foci such as the supervisor and workgroups, and that commitment to local foci should lead to an acceptance of performance norms. Acting as an agent for the organisation, the supervisor often interacts with employees on a daily basis, enacting formal and informal procedures and are the provider of rewards to subordinates (Farth, Podsakoff and Organ, 1990). Indeed such is the importance of the role of the supervisor that Reichers (1986) suggested that employee commitment to the organisation largely represents commitment to managerial goals and values.

Previous research has identified that supervisors are the most salient agents of the organisation who principally determine the job products of the subordinate employees (Fiske, 1992; Frone, 2000; Reichers, 1986). The literature has identified the supervisor as playing such an important role in the organisation and the existence of the foci of commitment to supervisor, it is not inconceivable that the components of commitments reported as affective, normative and continuance could also become associated with the supervisor. The implication of such a finding on employees and the organisation has not been explored in the literature. This is important as it would

suggest that any fracture of the employee-supervisor relationship could have negative consequences for the organisation and its employees.

Becker (1992, pg 233) reported that the concern for distinguishing the contribution of foci and bases of commitment contrasts markedly with the conventional view of commitment. The requirement for further work in the field is evidenced by Finegan (2000) who stated that although values play an important role in the definition of organisational commitment, and it stands to reason that a person whose personal values matched the organisation would be more committed than a persons who's values did not, there is little empirical evidence for this idea (O'Reilly, Chatman and Caldwell, 1991). A further exploration of the foci of employee commitment to supervisor is important as it may lead to a greater understanding of the factors that influence and build employee commitment. Within this construct a detailed examination of the employee supervisor relationship may provide new knowledge and insight on how employee commitment works, and highlight factors that support the development of employee commitment to supervisor.

## **2.7 The importance of the employee-supervisor relationship**

The issue of developing the employee-supervisor relationship in the workplace has traditionally been discussed from the perspective that the supervisor manages the relationship. Graen and Cashman (1975), assert that supervisors do not interact with subordinates uniformly because supervisors have limited time and resources. Conway and Monks' (2009) study of HR directors found that the directors did not view their employees in a uniform way, but were tampering with existing policies to cater for what they perceived as different employee needs. Wayne (1987) found that the extent to which supervisors liked their subordinates was positively related to the subordinate's performance appraisal. Supervisors rated those employees they liked higher than those they did not. Becker et al. (1996 pg 478) found that supervisors can be expected to give a lower rating to employees who hold values which conflict with their own. If the research establishes that the employee-supervisor relationship has greater importance than previously reported, it would suggest that an employee's ability to develop and maintain a relationship with their supervisor will be critical. It may also suggest that employees will actively seek to link and remain working for a particular supervisor. Such a finding would have a series of consequences for employees and the organisation.

Several studies have found significant relationships between commitment and supportive or caring treatment by the employees supervisors, including supervisor feedback (Dunham, Grube and Castaneda, 1994) and supervisor support (Aryee, Chay, and Chew, 1994). Eby, Freeman, Rush and Lance (1999) suggest that supervisors play a key role in encouraging and assisting individuals as they strive to attain meaningful goals. Previous research indicates that beneficial treatment from supervisors is indeed related to commitment (Bycio, Hackett, and Allen 1995; Settoon, Bennett and Liden, 1996). Researchers contend that employees reciprocate favourable treatment with greater commitment and performance (Eisenberger, Huntington, Hutchison, and Sowa 1986; Meyer and Allen, 1997; Shore and Shore, 1995; Wayne, Shore, and Liden, 1997). Relevant to this concept is the norm of reciprocity, according to which the recipient of benefits is morally obligated to recompense the donor (Gouldner, 1960). Meyer and Allen (1997) offer the explanation that beneficial treatment by supervisors should increase affective commitment by strengthening employee sense of belonging and identification with the organisation. The literature to date has not explored the possibility that beneficial or favourable treatment from the supervisor could also lead to the development of continuance commitment which is targeted at the supervisor. Furthermore, if this was true it may suggest that the supervisor could become the target of the exchange agreement. This outcome would have consequences and implications for all employees and the organisation which have not been documented in the literature.

The concept of the psychological contract is an important consideration for this research. The psychological contract defined broadly as the individual's expectations of the exchange relationship with an organisation (Rousseau, 1990, Puchala, 2007). The factors of that exchange are identified as economic, socio-emotional and ideological (Thompson and Bunderson, 2003). Psychological contracts are said to have more impact on behaviour and attitudes than formalised contracts (Rousseau and Tijoriwala 1998). Employees who believe that their psychological contract with the organisation has been violated are likely to hold the view that the organisation cannot be trusted to fulfil its obligations and that the organisation does not care about the well being of its employees (Robinson, 1996).

Prior research also indicates that psychological contract breach is negatively related to employees self reported in-role performance (Robinson, 1996). It is not inconceivable that the technical elements of the psychological contract could also apply at the



level of the supervisor given the evidence provided above about the importance of the supervisor in providing beneficial treatment, goal attainment and support. The importance of the psychological contract between the supervisor and the employee has received little attention in the literature on employee commitment to supervisor. As a result little is known about the potential implications of any such contract. This is an important consideration due to the fact that should the exchange component of the contract become associated with the supervisor, any action which could potentially damage the employee-supervisor relationship could have negative consequences for the organisation and its employees.

## **2.8 Expectancy theories of motivation**

The construct of the psychological contract (Rousseau, 1990, Puchala, 2007) has synergy with the concept of expectancy theory (Vroom, 1964) which established that when the value of the reward to the individual is increased, individual motivation and performance increases. Pritchard and Sander (1973) and Nakanishi (1989) both conclude that the greater the value attributed by the manager to the reward received, the higher the level of work motivation and performance. Broedling (1975) reported that expectancy theory explains motivation as a function of how much an employee values the various potential outcomes of the job. Valence, a component of expectancy theory, is defined as the extent to which the contingent outcomes are desired or valued by the recipient (Vroom, 1964). The work of Holland, Meertens and Van Vugt (2002) in cognitive dissonance suggests that if an employee is working hard to achieve the reward, then he or she will attempt to convince himself or herself that the reward is worth a great deal, bringing his or her beliefs inline with his or her actions.

Consistent with the work of Kelman (1958), who found that compliance occurs when people adopt attitudes and behaviours in order to obtain specific rewards or to avoid specific punishments. Deci (1975) stated that because expectancy theory explains behaviours in terms of perceptions regarding job outcomes, it is primarily a theory of extrinsic motivation. Stajkovic and Luthans (2003) state that one of the central tenants behind reinforcement theories of motivation is that rewarding specific behaviour will lead to additional instances of that behaviour. The concept of expectancy and reinforcement theories are both heavily dependant on the fact that the employee will consider the value of the reward to be sufficiently enticing and that there is the opportunity to reward the specific behaviour in a meaningful manner to the employee. This suggests that the supervisor could play a key role fulfilling this requirement due

to their ability to form a unique relationship and understanding of the employee and type of reward which motivates them. What needs to be determined is whether employees recognise this as a role performed by the supervisor and if so what is the impact on the development of employee commitment. Further research should be undertaken to explore whether employees will modify their own behaviour to meet the expectations of the supervisor, and if rewarded for this behaviour what impact this action has on employee commitment?

## **2.9 The impact of supervisor leadership style and character on employee commitment**

Schien (1992, pg 5) states that neither culture nor leadership, when one examines each closely, can really be understood by itself. DuBrin (1990, pg 255) defined leadership as “the process of influencing the activities of an individual or group to achieve certain objectives in a given situation”. Transactional leadership is often defined as an exchange process between leaders and followers (Bass, 1990; Bass and Avolio, 1994). The transactional leader recognises specific follower desires and provides goods that meet those desires in exchange for followers meeting a specific objective or performing certain duties. The concept of the exchange which underpins transactional leadership suggests that it is not inconceivable that these employees will develop a sense of continuance commitment, particularly if they consider this exchange to be desirable and fair. In this regard why would the technical elements of employee commitment at the level of the supervisor not also operate this way? In a similar manner the operation of transformational leadership, which is said to be based on the personal values, beliefs and qualities of the leader rather than on an exchange process between leaders and followers (Burns, 1978) could also foster employee commitment toward the supervisor due to the alignment that is achieved between employee and supervisor.

Organisational culture is defined as the organisational norms and expectations regarding how people behave and how things are done in an organisation (Glisson and James, 2002, Verbeke, Volgering, and Hessels, 1998). Organisational culture is important because shared beliefs and norms affect employee perceptions, behaviours and emotional responses in the workplace (Aarons and Sawitzky, 2006). The impact of supervisor character may therefore be an important factor for developing the culture of the organisation. Character can be defined as doing the right thing despite outside pressure to the contrary (Lickona, 1991). Kirkpatrick and Locke (1991) argued for the importance of character as a

leadership trait. Baysinger (2004) highlighted that individuals react to their environment, and that a leader is a major part of that environment.

Previous research has found that the leaders style will impact on employee satisfaction and performance (Avolio, Bass and Jung 1999, Cook and Masi, 2000). Savery (1991) claims that the better the fit between subordinates perceived and preferred style during implementation, the greater their job satisfaction and organisational commitment. Pechlivanidis and Katsimpra (2003) found that subordinates who claimed a fit between their perceived and preferred supervisory styles were more intrinsically motivated. Inversely, those who claimed no fit were less intrinsically motivated. This finding suggests that employees can develop a bond or sense of fit with the supervisor, so why would the development of employee commitment not also operate in the same way? The research aims to review this question and to provide new insights on how commitment works, and importantly it will explore whether employees recognise the need to link with a supervisor whose leadership style and character aligns with their preferred style.

Organisational climate represents a global impression of one's organisation and personal impact of the work environment, which influences the individual's work behaviours and job related attitudes (Pritchard and Karasick, 1973). There is a growing body of evidence which indicates there is a need to take into account employees' perceptions of what matters within the workplace (Marchington and Grugulis, 2000; Kinnie et al. 2005; Conway and Monks, 2009). There is significant research showing that one style of management, known as participative management, positively affects employee job satisfaction (Drucker, 1974; Daley 1986; Bernstien, 1993).

Many empirical studies have been conducted which conclude that employees prefer participative management styles (Yousef, 2000; Kim 2002; Cook, 1994). Participation is a process in which influence is shared among individuals who are otherwise hierarchical unequals (Locke and Schweiger, 1979; Wagner 1994). Participative management practices balance the involvement of managers and their subordinates in the information process, decision making or problem solving (Wagner, 1994). Baysinger (2004) found that there is a significant relationship between participative management practiced by their supervisor and the satisfaction that employees have with their supervisor. Spreitzer et al. (1997) argue that the notion of empowerment is derived from theories of participative management and employee involvement. The literature relating to participative management and empowerment has found that

the supervisor is the key figure for employees; this suggests that the development of employee commitment may also be influenced by the supervisor's management style. This research will explore the impact that supervisor behaviour, leadership style, and character has on the construct of employee commitment to the supervisor.

## **2.10 The impact of changing organisational structure and people management processes on employee commitment**

Changes to the structure of an organisation may have the potential to impact employee commitment. Thomas (2009) reports that automation and off-shoring have eliminated most of the highly repetitive jobs in the US, while global competition has provide flatter, more responsive organisations that require employees to use judgement and initiative to a much greater extent. Zhoa et al. (2007) state that in the last two decades there has been major changes to the structure of organisations including downsizing and outsourcing. Thomas (2009) reports that younger workers now come to organisations with different expectations than their parents, and that they respond best to work that is more meaningful, allows them to learn cutting edge skills, and lets them find their own ways of accomplishing tasks.

Merchant (1989) argues that the considerable distance between the organisations top and lower level management and the consequent information asymmetry make the direct monitoring of the actions of middle level manager expensive and occasionally unfeasible. Kim (2002) found that effective communications between supervisor and employee is a significant factor in informing employees of the objectives and job expectations under existing or particularly, new organisational structures. The impact of changes in organisational structure and the effectiveness of communication between the organisation and employees have received little attention in the literature on employee commitment to supervisor. This research will review the impact of structural change and the provision of information on employee commitment and how this change may have enhanced the perceived importance of the role of the supervisor.

The importance of human resources policies and practices has been established in the literature. Bellou (2007) found that human resource policies and practices are among the most prominent elements in establishing what has been called in the literature the "psychological contract" (Freese and Schalk, 1996). Guest and Conway (2000) concluded that human resource practices have a significant positive

impact on employee attitudes and performance when the organisation fulfils its obligations. Rousseau (1995, pg 162) states that “HR practices send a strong message to individuals regarding what the organisation expects of them and what they can expect in return”. However, Conway and Monks (2009) state there is surprisingly little research exploring the links between attitudes to human resource practices and commitment despite the fact that relationships between both are depicted in many models displaying the human resource management performance linkage.

Research by Morrison (1996) identified that the system of human resource practices shapes the nature of the firm’s exchanges with its employees. Miles and Snow, (1984) reported that organisational agents make decisions about human resource policies and practices with regard to the organisations overall goals and the strategy adopted for achieving those goals. Iverson and Buttigieg (1999) suggest that the management of commitment requires ‘some knowledge of the effect of different human resource policies on its various dimensions’. Meyer and Allen (1997) argue that the management of commitment is possible because there is evidence that commitment is related to employee perceptions of human resource practices. Given the link established between human resource policies and the psychological contract, this research will seek to determine whether the employee experience of human resource policies and practices enforced by the supervisor, when acting as the agent for the organisation, could also influence the development of employee commitment to the supervisor.

Kinnie et al. (2005) supported this position when they found that employee evaluations of practices related to reward and recognition, communication and work-life balance were linked to organisational commitment. Conway and Monks (2009) also found that attitudes toward human resource practices had a greater impact on affective commitment than either continuance or normative commitment. Kinnie et al. (2005, pg 11) point out that the “fulcrum of human resource management performance chain is the employees reactions to the human resource practices as experienced by them”. Few studies have sought to explore the possibility that human resource management policies and practices experienced by employees might impact on multiple dimensions of commitment, including supporting the development of new foci of commitment such as to the supervisor. This research will aim to fill this gap in the literature by exploring the impact of organisation policies on reinforcing the significance of local foci and the interaction between this reinforcement and the development of employee commitment to supervisor.

Based on the review of the literature a number of gaps in the current literature have been identified, the gaps in the literature have informed the development of the research questions. The research questions were developed to build greater understanding of the foci of employee commitment to supervisor and contribute to the expansion of the literature on this topic. This will be achieved by undertaking research which expands the focus of the construct of employee commitment to include new meanings and definitions. The research questions which guided this work are:

1. What is the impact of the employee-supervisor relationship on employee commitment?
2. What are the factors that support the development of the foci of commitment to supervisor?
3. How do the traditional components of affective, normative and continuance commitment, including the concept of side-bets and exchange impact the foci of commitment to supervisor?
4. How does commitment work in practice from the perspective of the employee?

## **2.11 Summary**

The literature review has identified that further research on the employee commitment to the supervisor is needed. It has found that what is required is a deeper understanding of the factors, relationships and drivers which support the development of employee commitment to the supervisor, and to identify the consequences of this action for employees and the organisation. The literature review has developed the theoretical argument to support the research questions. It has highlighted the need to explore the impact of the employee-supervisor relationship on employee commitment. It has identified that further work is required to develop understanding of the factors that support the development of the foci of commitment to the supervisor. It has built an argument that the traditional components of affective, normative and continuance commitment, including the concept of side-bets could become associated with the supervisor. The review has also found that a deeper understanding of how commitment works in practice from the perspective of the employee is required.

This literature review has identified a number of gaps in the literature relating to how employee commitment to the supervisor is developed and works. This research will inform the literature by developing a deeper understanding of the foci of employee

commitment to the supervisor. The research will provide new insight into how affective, normative and continuance commitment is developed and works with regard to the foci of employee commitment to supervisor. This research will aim to provide new knowledge and insight on the impact of side-bets on the foci of employee commitment to supervisor. The research will also provide empirical evidence of the implications of the employee-supervisor relationship on employee commitment and the organisation. The outcomes of this research will support the organisation to build a deeper understanding of the implications and opportunities that are presented by the construct of employee commitment to the supervisor.



# Methodology

# 3

## 3.0 Research paradigm and methods

In chapter two the theoretical argument for this research was developed. It highlighted the expanding foci of employee commitment and the potential for the concept of the exchange agreement to become associated with the supervisor. The literature review also highlighted the importance of the supervisor and the role they perform in organisations and as a result the potential for the components of affective, normative and continuance commitment to become associated with the supervisor. The review of the literature identified that further research on the employee commitment to supervisor is needed. In this chapter I will explain how I intend to undertake this research. This research will explore and seek to develop a deeper understanding of the factors, relationships and drivers which support the development of employee commitment to supervisor. The nature of the research will be inductive as it aims to demonstrate how and why employee commitment to supervisor is developed. The research is not about confirmation of the factors impacting the phenomena. The research will focus on learning and inducting from the data so as to build understanding of the phenomena. The research design supported this explorative approach and allowed the researcher to build understanding in this manner.

The following section details the theoretical and methodological underpinnings of the research. It describes the constructivist research paradigm, case study approach, qualitative methodology and method (semi-structured in-depth interviews) that comprise the research framework.

### 3.1 A constructivist research paradigm

Kuhn (1970) described a 'paradigm' as a theoretical construct that consolidates concrete and conceptual components. Essential to every paradigm is the process of normal science. Kuhn (1970, pg 10) described normal science as "research firmly based upon one or more past scientific achievements, achievements that some particular scientific community acknowledges for a time as supplying the foundation for further practice". A paradigm is a set of basic beliefs that guide action (Denzin and Lincoln, 1998, pg 185). Inquiry paradigms define for the investigator what it is they are about and what falls within and outside the limits of legitimate inquiry (Denzin and Lincoln, 1998, pg 200).

The choice and articulation of the research paradigm is, therefore, important for all research projects as it identifies the world views and values of the researcher and also the assumptions that underpin the chosen paradigm. These assumptions will guide the research, for example: what constitutes data, how will it be collected and how will it be analysed.

The research paradigm that will guide this research is that of constructivism (Denzin and Lincoln, 1998, pg 185). Researching within a constructivist paradigm assumes there is a knowable world but that our understanding of this world is inadequate as the researcher's knowledge is influenced by the researcher's current level of understanding and experience.

Constructivism is ideal for this research as it focuses on understanding and reconstructing the mental constructions that both the investigator and investigated initially hold, by being open to new interpretations as information improves (Denzin and Lincoln 1998, pg 211). It is assumed that "people construct the social world, both through their interpretation of it and through actions based on those interpretations" (Huberman and Miles, 2002, pg 67).

Being able to explore local and specific constructs of employee commitment to allow the identification and documentation of the situational and social constructs that have influenced participants aligns with the intent and the aim of the research. Constructivism's epistemological position suggests the investigator and the investigated are linked and that findings are created as the project develops (Denzin and Lincoln, 1998, pg 207). This assumption has clear implications for this research

as the methodology and method chosen to facilitate data capture must support this epistemological position.

Constructivism's ontological position assumes that reality is "apprehendable in the form of multiple intangible mental constructions, socially and experimentally based, local and specific in nature" (Denzin and Lincoln, 1998, pg 206). We construct meaning and understanding from the world we live in and this may change over time as new information allows us to formulate more sophisticated interpretations of the world. As the researcher's knowledge on the subject improves the researcher will become more informed and the constructs held by the researcher may become more sophisticated.

Constructivism's methodological approach suggests the identification of personal and social constructs can only be achieved through interaction between the investigator and the investigated. This approach guides the researcher's direction in terms of the choice of methods that are used to collect and analyse data (Wolcott, 1992; Erickson 1986).

### **3.2 A case study approach**

Benbasat, Goldstein and Mead (1987) highlight that each research strategy has advantages and disadvantages; no strategy is more appropriate than all others for all research purposes. Morgan and Smircich (1980) argue that the actual suitability of a research method derives from the nature of the social phenomena to be explored. Benbasat (1984) showed that the goals of the researcher and the nature of the research topic influence the selection of a strategy.

One method is that of the case study. Benbasat, Goldstien and Mead (1987) state that a case study examines a phenomenon in its natural setting, employing multiple methods of data collection to gather information from one or a few entities (people, groups, or organisations). In explaining what a case study is Yin (1989) suggests that the term refers to an event, an entity, an individual or even a unit of analysis. It is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real life context using multiple sources of evidence. Anderson (1993) sees case studies as being concerned with how and why things happen, allowing the investigation of contextual realities and the differences between what was planned and what actually occurred. Noor (2008) suggests that case studies become particularly useful where one needs to

understand some particular problem or situation in great-depth, and where one can identify cases rich in information.

Tsoukas (1989) found that the epistemological status of case studies has caused contention among social science researchers. Tsoukas (1989) reported that case study research design has low external validity (i.e., nongeneralizability of findings beyond the case(s) researched) and that the case study method is only suitable for the investigation of local causality, and, therefore is not legitimate for general theoretical claims (Miles and Huberman, 1984; Mintzberg, 1979). The work undertaken by Tsoukas also identified that the analogy can be made that comparative case study research is like experimental research design, where the replication logic can be applied (Yin, 1984).

Case study research is particularly appropriate for certain types of problems: those in which research and theory are at their early, formative stages (Roethlisberger, 1977) and according to Bonoma (1983) for sticky, practice based problems where the experiences of the actors are important and the context of action is critical. Yin (1984) states that the reader of the case study should be able to follow the derivation of any evidence from initial research questions to the conclusions of the study. Benbasat, Goldstein and Mead (1987) state that the case study research should move from objectives and questions, to assumptions and design choices, to specific data uncovered, and finally, to results and conclusions. Importantly, the reader should be able to follow this path readily. Yin suggests single-case studies are appropriate if it represents a critical case for testing a well-formulated theory or if it is an extreme or unique case. Benbasat et al. (1987) identified that site selection should be carefully thought out rather than opportunistic, researchers should consider the nature of their topic and the characteristics of the organisation including the, size, organisational structure, public or private ownership and so on. The site chosen for this research was ideal as it provided the perfect environment for the research. This was due to the size of the organisation and therefore the ability to explore this form of commitment and to highlight the drivers and factors which support the development of commitment to the supervisor.

There are a number of reasons why the case study approach is suitable for this research. It allows the researcher to answer “how”, “what” and “why” questions, that is, to build understanding of the nature and complexity of the problem being explored. The case study approach is an appropriate way to research an area in which few previous studies have been carried out. Furthermore, Yin (1981) suggests that case studies can be done

by using either qualitative or quantitative evidence. Yin (1984, pg 78) identifies several sources of evidence that work well in case study research including documentation, archival records, interviews, direct observation and physical artefacts. The work of Yin suggests that the use of qualitative methodology and a data collection method such as semi structured interviews is appropriate for this research.

Benbasat et al.(1987) highlight that data analysis is critical to the written results of case study research. As much as possible, the contextual and data richness of the study should be presented, and a clear chain of evidence should be established. Noor (2008) reported that case studies also allow generalizations as the result of findings using multiple cases can lead to some form of replication.

### **3.3 Qualitative research methodology**

One of the challenges that confronted this research was how to best construct meaning and increase understanding of the topic. The researcher was presented with the option of two methodological approaches: the choice between quantitative and qualitative research methodologies. A quantitative approach uses statistical or mathematical methods for analysing data, stemming from questions which aim to “identify how many, how often and how much” of a certain phenomena (Wadsworth, 1997, pg 104). A qualitative approach aims to identify the “who, which, what, when, why and how of a certain phenomena” to provide the researcher with the depth and breadth of data (Wadsworth, 1997, pg 103). The researcher’s response to the question; what do I need to know and why? (Bell, 1993, pg 64) will direct him/her to a particular methodology. The decision to utilise a qualitative methodology in this research helped to facilitate the emergence of themes, issues and relationships that may influence or impact the construct of commitment to supervisor, it is also consistent with the case study approach.

### **3.4 Construct validity**

Centrelink was chosen as the target organisation for this research due to the size of the organisation and likelihood that within the organisation the environment and management practices could create a set of conditions which support the development of commitment to supervisor. The intent of this research is to demonstrate that employee commitment to supervisor can be developed in large public sector organisations and to highlight the implications for the employee and organisation when this occurs. Construct validity is the extent to which the items in a scale measure the

theoretical or abstract construct (Churchill, 1979). Construct validity is defined broadly as the degree to which a case study measures the concept it is supposed to measure. Construct validity seeks agreement between a theory and specific devices or procedures used for measuring (Mesick, 1995). Following the case study methodology proposed by Yin (1994) the researcher tried to assure construct validity by using multiple sources of evidence and establishing a chain of evidence. This included reviewing previous research and documents produced by the agency, participant interviews and APS wide reports such as the State of the Service Report issued by the Australian Public Service Commission. Increasing the construct validity of the study was also improved by having the 'draft report reviewed' (Yin, 2003). In the case of this research the various drafts of the thesis were reviewed, by the researchers supervisory team, to support the validity of the findings.

### **3.5 Semi-structured in-depth interviews and interview questions**

The use of a qualitative research methodology supports a variety of methods for data collection for example, observation, interviews, document analysis and records analysis (Nelson et al., 1992). A semi-structured interview format was chosen as the primary data gathering tool for the research. This was due to the fact that semi-structured interviews allowed the researcher to gain a deeper understanding of the construct in question (Kvale, 1996; Minichiello et. al., 1990). The use of interviews also has other benefits, for example, it allowed the researcher to examine non-verbal behaviour, such as tone and facial expression, of the interviewee during the interview (Bell, 1993). The researcher was also able to identify new issues as they arise during the interview and pursue these leads with the participant.

The use of the semi-structured approach allowed the researcher to verify anticipated trends or issues through the use of prompts. Although the interviews were conducted in an opened ended format, the semi-structured approach allowed the researcher to maintain the focus of the conversation on the research topic. The questions used during the semi-structured interviews were designed to provide adequate coverage for the purpose of the research and to allow respondents to explore issues of importance to them. The semi-structured interviews used a combination of genuinely "open-ended" (DeSimone and Harris, 1998, pg 147) or "probing questions" (Sofu, 1995, pg 44), and "direct questions" (DeSimone and Harris, 1998, pg 147). The use of open-ended questions allowed the participant to reflect on the topic and provided the participant

with the opportunity to organise their thoughts on the concept being discussed. The researcher used open-ended questions that stimulate ‘higher order’ or ‘divergent thinking’ to help elicit responses from participants (Sofa, 1995, pg 47, 53). The use of direct questions served to narrow the participant responses and probing questions were used to help the participant to provide deep insight into the concept being discussed. The research aims and supporting questions are attached at Appendix 1. By focusing on the participant the researcher was able to gain an understanding of the topic and related issues from the participant’s perspective.

Interviews, as a form of inquiry, allow the researcher to ask the participant “for their knowledge, beliefs, attitudes and behaviors” (Minichiello et. al., 1995). For the purpose of this research one set of interview questions were used. As the questions ‘probed’ an individual’s perception and experience not all of the questions were asked to each individual. This was due to the fact that each interview was a unique conversation, therefore, a participant may have answered a question before it is asked. The questions were designed to elicit responses that explore each person’s experience and understanding. By design, each interview question was derived from at least one of the primary research questions.

### **3.6 Pilot study and saturation**

The research questions were piloted prior to the commencement of the research. The five participants of the pilot were informed that it was a pilot exercise and that any information given would not be included in the research. The pilot participants were selected due to the fact they were at the same level as the target group and performed similar roles in another section of the organisation. Once it was clear that the questions could be understood and produced informative responses the research proceeded.

The rationale for the pilot process was to ensure that the interview questions were well constructed and that the questions facilitated insightful responses from the pilot participants. As a result of the pilot a number of new questions were introduced, changes were also made to the wording of some of the remaining interview questions and to the order that the questions were presented. This action was undertaken to ensure that each question elicited information and insight that was relevant to the aim of the research. Each of the research questions was drawn from the review of the literature. A question was only included if it clearly supported a research aim and was



considered by the researcher to be relevant and likely to provide new insight into the construct in question. The interview questions chosen supported an exploration of the construct as informed by the literature and a deeper understanding of some of the factors that contributed to the development of employee commitment to supervisor. The ability to ask probing or direct questions supported new insight into how the construct of employee commitment to supervisor works in practice.

Qualitative researchers continue to collect data until they reach a point of data saturation. The concept of saturation (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) is understood to have been achieved when the collection of new data does not shed any further light on the issue under investigation. For the purpose of this research, *saturation* was considered to have been achieved at the point at which no new data was forthcoming from the interviews. To provide the depth and breadth of data required to build knowledge the researcher conducted 35 interviews. At this point the researcher was no longer hearing or seeing new information. The researcher was of the view that a point of saturation had been reached and that as no new information or insight was being presented the interview process was concluded. Each of the participants was interviewed once, with the interviews ranging from 45 to 60 minutes.

### **3.7 Ethical considerations**

In line with the procedures approved by the University of Canberra Ethics Committee, each of the participants was sent an information sheet detailing the objectives of the research project. Each participant completed a consent form which was signed and returned to the researcher before the interview. Ethical considerations were integral to this research project. The disclosure of participant information to others and identification of participants was a particular concern. To ensure confidentiality and anonymity a number of steps were taken by the researcher to remove all identifying information from the interview transcripts and at no stage will the identity of participants be disclosed.

One ethical issue that was considered related to the use of direct quotations. The researcher was acutely aware that quotes can be interpreted in many ways, easily taken out of context, and that direct quotation may identify certain individuals, even after the removal of certain 'identifiers'. Yet it is also an important consideration to ensure the voice of the participant is not lost.

The use of direct quotation provides the opportunity to capture a participant's level of emotion, the way they think and organise their world, their thoughts about what has occurred. Their experiences and perceptions are critical to the research as it provides a personal insight into participant understanding of the construct. The removal of information or identifiers from the data, participant validation of the interview transcript and aggregation of the data reduce the possibility of data being linked to a particular participant. As there is a limited number of participants and the level of the participants is the same in each case, where multiple quotes are used in the findings section of this research each are from different participants.

### **3.8 Location of the research and the participants**

The research participants will be drawn from a single organisation, Centrelink. Centrelink is an Australian Public Service organisation which is a statutory agency operating within the Department of Human Services portfolio of the Australian Government.

Centrelink was established to provide Australian Government services, such as income support, to the Australian public. Centrelink's purpose is to serve Australia by assisting people to become self-sufficient and supporting those in need. Through Centrelink, 7.02 million Australian's access Australian government products and/or services designed to assist them in building and sustaining their independence. In 2009/2010 Centrelink sent 113.8 million letters, received 32.7 million phone calls, had 85 million website visits and made out-lays of \$84.2 billion.

Centrelink has 27,305 employees and delivers products and services through a network of 16 areas, which combined, have 313 customer service centres and 25 call centres. Centrelink employees in these centres are supported by 16 support offices and a national support office in Canberra. The majority of Centrelink employees work in the customer service and call centres, with approximately 3000 Centrelink employees working in the national support office in Canberra, Australia.

The participant target group for the research is Centrelink employees who work within the policy and/or service delivery implementation sections of the national support office in Canberra. The participant target group was chosen due to their employment level, each participant was at the executive level, and for the generalist nature of the work undertaken by the group such as key projects, policy implementation and program maintenance activities.

The target group met a number of factors considered important by the researcher, including time served in the organisation, a minimum of 5 years was set, and that at executive level it was likely that the participants would have had exposure to a wider variety of management practices and experiences. These factors were considered to be important as they indicate that the individuals were likely to have had substantial experience of work life in the organisation, the management and operating structures, and the culture of the organisation. Each of these factors were considered by the researcher to have the potential to influence the development of employee commitment to supervisor. The specific choice of the target group should assist the “credibility and generalisability” (Huberman and Miles, 2002) of this research. Credibility is understood as the extent to which the findings and recommendations of the research report are viewed as credible. Generalisability is understood as the “fit between a studied situation and others to which one might be interested in applying the concepts and conclusions of that study” (Huberman and Miles, 2002, pg 198). The use of a single case study for this research is a limitation however, the case study approach supported the identification of gaps in the literature. The choice of this target group should build the credibility of the research due to the fact that a large number of APS employees work at the same employment level as the target group, have served similar amounts of time, undertake similar work, and work in large organisations that are structured and have organisation practices that are similar to that which impact the target group.

### **3.9 Data analysis**

Data analysis is the act of transforming data with the intent of extracting useful information and facilitating conclusions, the aim of this process is to assemble or reconstruct the data in a meaningful or comprehensible fashion (Jorgensen, 1989, pg 107). The research used an inductive approach which allowed the results to emerge overtime through the analysis of the data. Each interview conducted during the research was analysed using “coding procedures” (Strauss and Corbin, 1990, pg 57) to extract significant statements/phrases/word groups/key words from the interview.

The researcher used open coding (Strauss and Corbin, 1990) to identify, examine, compare, and categorise data. The researcher looked for commonality and difference among significant statements, organised significant statements into themes and finally formulated meaning under each theme by returning to the interview transcript. Each

theme was traced across all interviews to allow larger patterns to emerge. The use of this approach allowed the identification of themes across all participants, as well as documentation of those issues that affect only individual participants. To develop a deeper understanding of how the identified themes are related, the researcher used axial coding (Strauss, 1987). Axial coding is the next stage after open coding. In axial coding, data is put together in new ways to identify causal relationships between categories.

To support the development of an in-depth understanding, and to achieve credibility and generalisability (Huberman and Miles, 2002), the researcher analysed information from a number of alternative sources. The information sources included prior unpublished research undertaken on employee commitment within the organisation, and across the APS. As well as published reports such as the State of the Service Report published by the APSC. This information served to identify areas of research interest which required further detailed exploration in order to build understanding of some of the factors influencing the construct in question, and importantly how it operates in practice. Consistent with the multi-method focus (Brewer and Hunter, 1989) of qualitative research the researcher examined literature from the field to further inform the discussion of themes. As credibility and generalisability are the main factors of trustworthiness for this research, the issue of subjectivity is, therefore, a concern for the research as “subjectivity undermines credibility” (Wadsworth, 1997, pg 103). As constructivist research is based on an exploration of lived experience, the data that is attained will be inherently subjective. The limitation of this research is that the generalisability of the findings are limited due to the fact that the research was conducted in one organisation. However, if this research demonstrates that employee commitment to supervisor can be developed in large public sector organisations and show a clear relationship between organisational size and management practices and the development of employee commitment to supervisor it will indicate that further research is required in this area.

### **3.10 Summary**

The intent of this research is to demonstrate that employee commitment to supervisor can be developed in large public sector organisations and to highlight the implications for the employee and the organisation when this occurs. The paradigm, methodology and methods detailed in this chapter provide a comprehensive methodological framework to undertake an analysis of the construct in question. The use of a case

study approach, qualitative research methodology, incorporating semi-structured interviews provides a framework that encouraged participants to talk about their experiences and perception of the construct of employee commitment to supervisor.

This research used an inductive approach which allowed themes to emerge through the analysis of the data obtained through the participant interview process. Through the use of open coding (Strauss and Corbin, 1990) the data was organised into key themes and each theme was traced across all interviews to allow larger patterns to emerge. As a result of this approach and the use of open ended interview questions which allowed the participants to organise their thoughts and articulate their experiences and perceptions, new insight and understanding of the construct has been obtained. This approach also resulted in the emergence of themes and concepts which had not intentionally been flagged for exploration. However, analysis of this information established clear links between the themes divulged by participants and the construct being reviewed. For the reasons outlined above the findings chapters that follow are presented by theme rather than in order or any grouping of the research or interview questions. The key themes that are discussed are presented in a manner that clearly establishes and builds evidence of some of the factors that support the construct of employee commitment to supervisor.

This framework provided the opportunity for participants to detail the employee perspective on how organisational size, environment and management practices create a set of the conditions which support the development of commitment to supervisor. As a result of the methodological framework established for this research a number of key themes will be developed in chapters 4, 5 and 6. Chapter 4 will explore the impact of organisational structure, culture and climate on employee commitment to the supervisor. Chapter 5 highlights the impact of organisational management practices on employee commitment to supervisor, and Chapter 6 identifies the employee perception of the investments that they make in building their relationship with the supervisor. It will highlight the concept that the accumulation of side-bets can occur between employee and supervisor and that where this does occur it will strengthen employee commitment to the supervisor.

The presentation of the finding chapters in the manner outlined above serves to provide empirical evidence which builds the readers understanding of the construct and some of the factors that support the development of employee commitment to supervisor.

# Findings

## the impact of organisational structure, culture and climate on employee commitment to the supervisor

# 4

### **4.0 The impact of organisational size, culture and climate on employee commitment to supervisor.**

This chapter outlines the impact of organisational size, organisational culture and climate, and employee perception of their value to the organisation on employee commitment to the supervisor. What will be demonstrated is that the combination of organisation size and the management practice to devolve key responsibility to the role of supervisor have led to a change in the way that employee commitment works. The chapter will provide evidence to demonstrate that the way commitment is managed is now incomplete, and that employee commitment needs to be managed differently. This chapter will identify some of the factors that influence and support the development of employee commitment to supervisor. It will demonstrate that the focus of employee commitment has moved from the organisation to the supervisor.

### **4.1 The impact of organisational size on employee commitment**

The impact of organisational size on employee commitment has received little attention in the literature. This section explores the concept that the size of an organisation could influence the development of employee commitment to the supervisor. One of the objectives of this section is to develop an understanding of the type of commitment that is fostered in the situation where, due to the size of the organisation, the employee does not identify or develop a sense of attachment with the organisation.

The literature review highlighted that organisational commitment is often identified as an attachment or linking to an organisation. Porter et al. (1974, pg 604) suggest that commitment is “the strength of an individual’s identification with and involvement in a particular organisation”. To explore the concept that the size of an organisation could impact employee commitment, participants were asked whether they considered themselves to be individually important to the organisation.

The current understanding of employee commitment is built on the concept that it is the relationship between the employee and the organisation that forms the basis of employee commitment. Should the research identify that employees do not perceive that they are individually important to the organisation this may suggest that individuals in large organisations may not identify with the organisation in a manner that is conducive to building organisational commitment. Such a finding would draw into question the current understanding of employee commitment, and indicate that the current understanding of commitment is incomplete. If employees do not consider that they are important to the organisation this may impact the strength of the individual’s identification with the organisation and could present the basis for the development of employee commitment to other commitment constructs, including the supervisor.

The findings revealed that “due to the size of the organisation” the majority of participants did not feel they were individually important to the organisation. For these participants the organisation was too large to care about them as an individual. This finding was reported by participants as one of the major weaknesses of working in a large public sector organisation. Further exploration of the data identified a critical theme for this research, and the concept of employee commitment to supervisor. Every participant involved with the research recognised that, due to the size of the organisation, the relationship with their immediate supervisor had ‘increased importance’, and that employees needed to invest time and effort into developing and maintaining the relationship they had with the supervisor.

The implication of this finding is very important for this research, as it suggests that in addition to holding the view that they are investing time and effort into the organisation, one of the traditional components of developing organisational commitment, employees have also identified that they need to direct effort toward managing the relationship with their supervisor and to developing a relationship with them. This research has found that, in large public sector organisations, an employee’s



relationship with their immediate supervisor is considered by employees to take on great importance. This finding suggests that organisational structure, and in particular size, could be an important factor in the development of employee commitment to the supervisor.

## 4.2 Organisational size affects employee perception of their value

To explore the impact that the size of an organisation has on employee perception of their value to the organisation, participants were asked to consider the extent to which the organisation valued their individual contribution. The intent of this question was to explore how participants reconciled the value of the work they completed as an individual with the recognition they received from the organisation for doing it. Employee commitment to the organisation has often been conceptualised as part of the exchange agreement between the individual and the organisation (e.g. Angle, Perry and Rousseau, 1995). Recognition is considered to be a vital part of this exchange agreement. If the organisation is unable to provide employees with adequate recognition and a sense of their value to the organisation, this could damage or reduce employee commitment to the organisation. If a substitute such as the supervisor were to fill this void, and provide the employee with recognition both formally and informally, this could foster the development of a sense of affective commitment toward that supervisor.

The findings reveal that employees did not believe the organisation did, or could, value their individual contribution. This response was based on the perception that, due to the size of the organisation the relative contribution of an individual was hard to measure.

*“I don’t think the organisation can care, we are 26000 people, we are too large and complex to rely on individuals”.*

*“My contribution is not known, the organisation is simply too big to do so”.*

*“I think in the big scheme of things my contribution is not really recognised, as an individual you do not really leave a mark”.*

*“I think the organisation values the work that gets done but it is hard to recognise the individual contribution”.*

*“I am not important to the organisation, the job is, but anyone could do that”.*

*“The organisation cares about the role, but if I left tomorrow I could be replaced”.*

The perceived inability of the organisation to recognise or value the contribution of the individual suggests that there could be a problem with the concept of the employee organisational exchange in large public sector organisations. It would seem unlikely that in this situation the employee would develop a deep sense of commitment to the organisation. The inability of the organisation to provide employees with adequate recognition suggests that if recognition was provided by a substitute, such as the supervisor, it could foster the development of employee commitment toward the supervisor. The next section of this chapter explores the impact that the provision of recognition by the supervisor has on employee commitment.

### **4.3 Employee perception of the local work environment**

Following the emergence of a theme that suggested employees in a large public sector organisation did not believe that their individual contribution was valued by the organisation, participants were asked to consider if they felt that they were a valuable part of their immediate work team. This question was included to highlight the implications of the scenario in which employees considered themselves, and their work effort, to be valued within their immediate team by their supervisor, whilst holding the perception that the organisation did not value their individual work effort.

Analysis of the data identified that all of the participants believed their individual work effort was valued within their immediate team. A large number of the participants restated that, whilst they felt they were a valuable part of their immediate work team, they did not feel they were valued by the organisation.

*“I feel I am valued by the supervisor and that I make a difference in the team, I feel that what I am doing makes a difference”.*

*“I don’t feel valued by the organisation but by the team and my supervisor yes”.*

*“At the moment I do and a lot of this is due to opportunity, my supervisor has given me the opportunity to put my foot print on something so I feel a sense of empowerment and commitment”.*

*“Through my supervisor I feel valued, through the organisation, no, it is too large, it is too large to look at any individual contribution”.*

*“I would say I do, it is more to do with the way you are treated by the supervisor and the group of people that you work with”.*

The research has found that employees in a large public sector organisation do not believe their work efforts are valued or recognised by the organisation. This finding indicates that the concept of the traditional exchange agreement that is considered to support the development of employee commitment to the organisation may no longer be relevant in large public sector organisations.

The finding indicates that in a large organisation the development of employee commitment to the organisation may be impacted by the organisation’s perceived inability to value individual employee contributions. The analysis indicated that employee perception of being valued was strongly linked to the immediate work environment and the actions and behaviours of their supervisor. The identification of the supervisor suggests that the supervisor, because of their actions, could become the central figure in the development of employee commitment because the employee considers that it is the supervisor who values the employees’ effort in the workplace. This finding indicates that the actions of the supervisor could facilitate the development of affective, normative and continuance commitment which is targeted toward the supervisor rather than the organisation. This transfer, is influenced by the size of the organisation and its perceived failure to recognise or value the individual, could be strengthened if the organisation’s management practices transferred greater authority and management responsibility to the role of the supervisor. The implications of this action are explored later in this chapter.

#### **4.4 The impact of organisational culture on employee commitment to supervisor**

The importance of culture is well documented in the literature. Organisational culture is defined as the organisational norms and expectations regarding how people behave and how things are done in an organisation (Glisson and James, 2002, Verbeke, Volgering, and Hessels, 1998). Organisational culture is important because shared beliefs and norms affect employee perceptions, behaviours and emotional responses in the workplace (Aarons and Sawitzky, 2006). The literature on organisational culture

indicates that culture is as a key factor that can influence performance outcomes and the behaviours of employees in the workplace. To develop an understanding of employee perception of culture in a large organisation and any subsequent impact on employee commitment, participants were asked to describe the organisational culture.

Analysis of the data identified that the culture of the organisation was considered to be outcome driven, performance orientated, and bureaucratic.

*“It is performance driven and outcomes focused”.*

*“I think it (the culture) is largely bureaucratic”.*

*“Bureaucratic, this causes grief and confusion”.*

*“I think it is performance driven to the extent that it is not so much the intent of the outcome that is important but how well you do getting the outcome”.*

The analysis highlighted that for many employees the current organisational culture created negative feelings and led to negative experiences.

*“Uncertain the majority of the time, I think this is more common at the lower levels and I think a lot of people struggle to understand what is actually going on”.*

*“At the moment it is one of blame, we have to make sure we protect ourselves, therefore people don't take risks as there is the concern that if something goes wrong you will be blamed”.*

*“I think it is a culture of uncertainty at the moment”.*

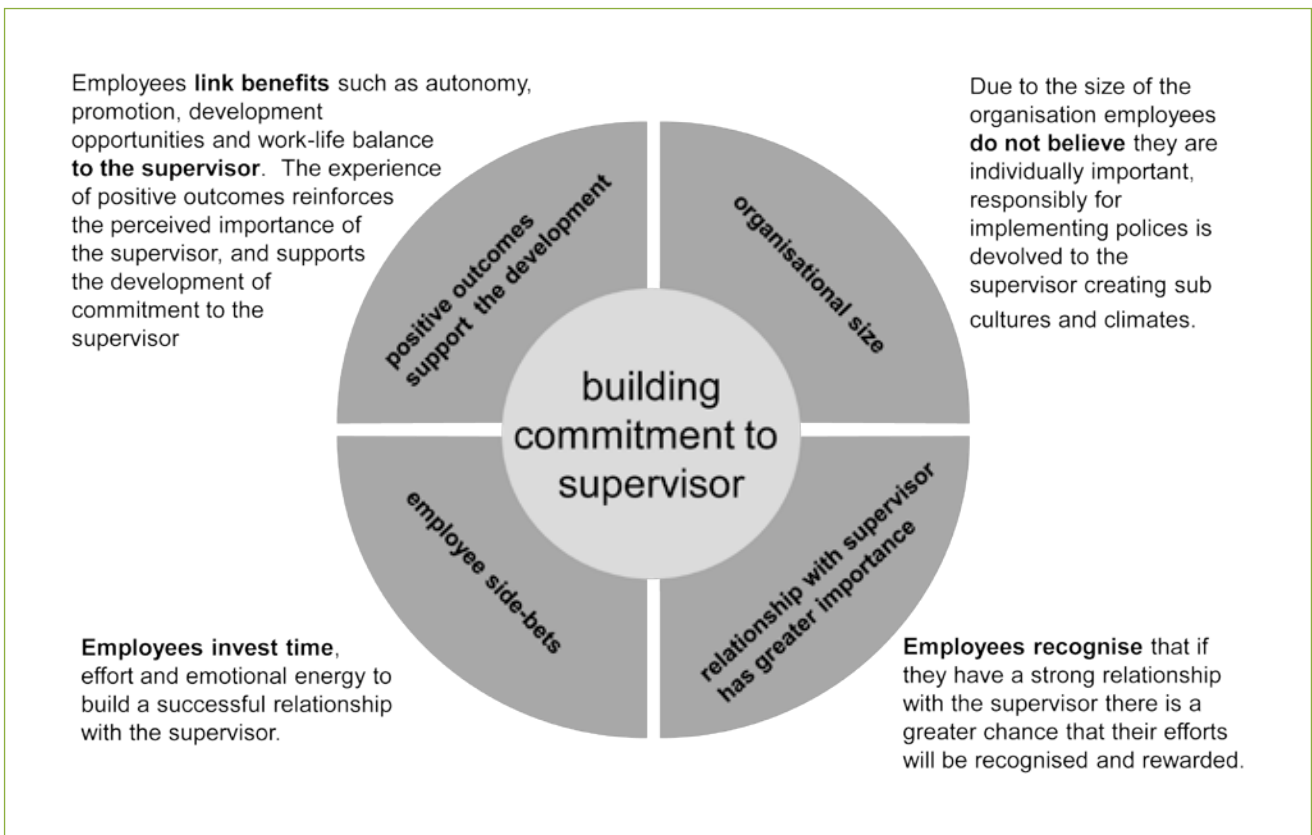
*“It is a chaotic culture in the sense that everything is run in a way that is reactive”*

*“I find it very bureaucratic, the word empowered does not exist in this organisation, everything is checked to an inch of its life and I think that demoralises people as there is no faith or trust shown”.*

The data revealed that in order to protect themselves from a negative experience or outcome employees had identified the need to develop a strong relationship with their supervisor, as the supervisor was best positioned to provide clarity, information and if required, protection.

Building on the findings of the previous section which found that the size of the organisation impacted the development of employee commitment and the identification of the supervisor as potential target of employee commitment, Figure 1 provides a framework which illustrates some of the factors, including organisational size, which support the development of employee commitment to the supervisor. A key aspect of this framework is the importance that employees attribute to the role of, and their relationship with, their supervisor. The framework also identifies two other factors, employee investment and outcomes. These factors complete the model and are explored in detail in later chapters.

**Figure 1** How employee commitment to the supervisor is developed



The findings of this section support the framework introduced above as it provides evidence of the perceived increased importance of the role of the supervisor. This research has identified that a large number of participants believed the supervisor could prevent or circumvent negative organisational cultural factors. It brings into question the concept that there is a defining culture in large public sector organisations or rather, are there numerous sub-cultures? It also suggests that if a supervisor can influence the workplace culture experienced by the employee this experience, if considered positive by the employee, could also encourage the development of employee commitment to the supervisor.

To explore this issue further, participants were asked whether they considered there was a defining organisational culture, or were there smaller sub-cultures across the organisation. This question was included to explore the concept that in a large organisation there are numerous cultures operating, each with the potential to directly influence employee perception and experience of the workplace. If the analysis of the data identified the existence of strong distinguishable sub-cultures, some considered positive and some negative, this could support the development of the employee commitment to the supervisor. This form of employee commitment would be further strengthened if the employee attributed the positive aspects of the sub-culture to the supervisor. Furthermore, if an employee considered that working in a particular sub-culture was highly desirable, this would foster the development of affective commitment toward the supervisor who introduced this workplace sub-culture.

The findings revealed that the majority of employees believed there were significant sub-cultures across the organisation.

*“Having worked within many teams there are lot of different cultures within the organisation”.*

The analysis also identified that the existence of sub-cultures was one of the primary reasons the organisation lacked a dominant culture, and that the existence of sub-cultures contributed to the perception that the culture of the organisation was confused. Following the identification of the existence of sub-cultures further analysis was undertaken to determine what role, if any, the supervisor had in developing the sub-culture. The findings suggest that the supervisor directly impacted the development of a sub-culture. Participant’s responses indicate that the supervisor played a significant role in forming and influencing the sub-culture they experienced.

*“There are different individual cultures across the workplace, these are directly set or influenced by the supervisor”.*

*“The people that you have the daily interaction with, such as your direct supervisor, have the most clout and impact on the culture you experience”.*

*“There are sub-cultures, mostly these are people driven, the supervisor has strongest influence”.*

*“From what I have noticed there are cultures that are largely created by the supervisor”.*

*“I have worked in the same job for five years and the culture that I work in changes with each new supervisor, even though I am in the same role”.*

Further analysis identified that the supervisor was considered to provide a buffer from the wider organisation and that a supervisor could protect and look after employee interests.

*“The supervisor can create a sub-culture and a work environment removed from the larger organisation, this can often protect you from wider issues and problems”.*

The analysis also identified that the development of sub-cultures did not always result in positive experiences in the workplace. A number of participants indicated that sub-cultures can vary from those that are almost a dictatorship, to a culture that values input, debate and openness.

*“The culture of the team is driven by the supervisor. This can create the situation where, if the person is negative or sees everyone else as the enemy, the team can become negative and see everyone as an enemy”.*

*“In the past I have had other experiences of culture that have not been as good; this largely reflected the supervisor at the time”.*

*“There are such different cultures set by supervisor as a result I have worked in cultures that are terrible”.*

The analysis of the findings from this section identified the existence of numerous sub-cultures within the organisation. The key factor in the development of sub-cultures



was reported to be the employee's direct supervisor. The ability of the supervisor to influence the workplace culture experienced by employees indicates that the actions of the supervisor could play an important role in the development of employee commitment toward the supervisor. This finding demonstrates the importance of the supervisor in a large organisation and suggest that when employees experience a positive workplace culture that they will attribute this culture to the supervisor. Building on the work of Chen et al. (2001) who argue that employees demonstrating affective commitment remain because they want to, it is argued by this research that a positive experience of workplace culture will foster the development of affective commitment targeted toward the supervisor.

The development of affective commitment to the supervisor is likely to be reinforced by the knowledge of workplace sub-cultures which are considered to promote less desirable workplace experiences. This finding supports the work of Chen et al. (2001) in relation to employees choosing to remain in a workplace because they want to. In this example the employee decision is influenced by the culture created by the supervisor. This finding has implications for organisations as it suggests that culture across an organisation is strongly impacted by the supervisor. The next section of this chapter explores the impact that the supervisor has on employee perception of organisational climate.

## **4.5 The impact of organisational climate on employee commitment**

Organisational climate is reported to influence employees experience within the workplace. Organisational climate represents a global impression of one's organisation and personal impact of the work environment, which influences the individual's work behaviours and job related attitudes (Pritchard and Karasick, 1973). Lawler, Hall and Oldman (1974) state that depersonalisation is the extent to which an employee feels hardened, distant or removed from those they serve. Employees working in a positive organisational climate report low levels of depersonalisation.

Building on the previous section which found that the supervisor played a significant role in the development of sub-cultures in the workplace, participants were asked to consider what, if any, influence the supervisor had on the organisational climate they experienced in the workplace. If the supervisor is reported to have a significant influence on the organisational climate experienced by employees this finding would

provide further evidence of the importance of the supervisor, and highlight the potential for the development of affective commitment targeted at the supervisor. Furthermore, should employees report that they feel distant or removed from the organisation, whilst identifying a connection with the supervisor this would provide indicate the potential to develop an attachment to the supervisor. The concept of attachment was identified in the literature review as one of the key factors in developing employee commitment.

The analysis of the data identified that the organisational climate was, in general, considered to be positive and the majority of participants stated “that for them it was easy to go to work each day”. A participant’s response which captured the sentiments of many of the responses indicated that:

*“I have never had the feeling of not wanting to come to work, there are times when the pressure is high but I don’t wake up thinking I don’t want to go to work”.*

However, further exploration of the data identified the emergence of a theme which indicated that many of the participants considered the wider organisational climate to be distinguishable from their immediate team climate. The analysis of responses suggested that the majority of participants had a positive perception of the climate associated with their immediate team whilst holding a negative or poor view of the wider organisation climate.

*“Within the team we have a positive climate - the team has created this removed from the larger organisation which is poor”.*

*“My opinion right now is that the organisation is fairly negative, however my own attitude is fairly positive due to the team I work in and relationships I have. I am able to come to work and make a difference”.*

*“I think it is quite positive in my space, but there is angst about at the moment and the organisational climate as a whole is poor”.*

*“I say ours here is a good climate, this is not the same elsewhere”.*

*“My direct team is ok, however, looking at the organisational perspective it is not an overly positive climate, and in some areas people struggle to come to work”.*

Further analysis of the data from this section identified a theme which indicated that employees who reported the organisational or the team climate as positive also reported a strong relationship with their supervisor.

*“I find it a good climate and I have no problem coming to work but I think this can vary depending on what team you are in and the position you hold. Your supervisor and the relationship you have with them influences the climate you experience”.*

*“Personally I would say that at this point in time it is negative. This is based on the current supervisor relationship. I have had periods where I was skipping to work, this was when I had a good relationship with my supervisor”.*

*“It can be strongly influenced by the relationship you have with your supervisor. I have a strong relationship so this helps me”.*

*“The answer can be point in time, it depends a lot about how things are with your direct supervisor—for me at the moment the relationship is good and this helps”.*

Subsequent analysis of the data highlighted that the supervisor was identified by the employee as being influential in developing the climate that they experienced in the workplace. It indicated that the supervisor can play a key role in the creation of a positive or desirable workplace climate for the employee. A large number of the participants cited the provision of information from the supervisor, particularly during periods of uncertainty or change, as a critical factor that influenced their view of the organisational climate.

This research builds on the work of Aaron et al. (2003) who reported that leadership has been demonstrated to have a strong effect on organisational climate. The findings from this section suggest that it is the leadership shown by the supervisor that can play a significant role in influencing the organisational climate experienced by the employee.

The analysis of the data has indicated that the actions of the supervisor can develop a local climate that is distinguishable in the mind of the employee from the wider organisational climate. This research expands the work of Lawler et al. (1974) by

indicating that an employee could feel removed or distant from the organisation but identify positively with the local climate developed by the supervisor. This section has provided evidence of the significance of the supervisor and the employee-supervisor relationship in large public sector organisations. The research has found that the supervisor can influence and create a climate distinct from that of the wider organisation.

This finding provides insight into some of the factors that support the development of employee commitment to supervisor, in particular it highlights the potential for the development of affective commitment targeted toward the supervisor. The development of affective commitment to the supervisor is likely to be reinforced in the situation where the climate experienced by the employee is considered to be positive or desirable to the individual.

## 4.6 Conclusion

This chapter set out to explore the impact of organisational size on employee commitment, and to determine if the organisational size could influence the development of employee commitment to the supervisor. The findings of this chapter have indicated that employees working in a large public sector organisation do not consider that they are individually important to the organisation. Furthermore, this chapter has highlighted that as a result of organisation size, employees have identified that the relationship they have with the supervisor is critical to their experience of the workplace. There are clear implications of this finding on organisational commitment, due to the fact that employees did not consider that the organisation was able to meet the exchange component of the commitment agreement. As a result employees may be choosing to invest their effort into relationships where they feel the exchange can be completed. This issue will be explored in the following chapters.

This chapter has identified that whilst employees considered that they were not valued or effectively recognised by the organisation their work effort was valued and recognised by their supervisor. It was also reported that the supervisor had the capacity to develop sub-cultures and organisational climates that were distinct from the wider organisation and that often these subcultures and climates appealed to employees. The findings of this chapter indicate that due to the size of the organisation the behaviours and actions of the supervisor can serve to foster the development of employee commitment to the supervisor.

The evidence presented in this chapter suggests that the way commitment is understood is incomplete and that a new interpretation is required. Commitment has often been considered as part of the exchange agreement between the individual and the organisation, the exchange including aspects such as recognition of work and valuing the work of the individual. This research has found employees in a large public sector organisation did not believe the organisation is capable of fulfilling this function. This research has shown that the void is being filled by the supervisor and that as a result employees are likely to develop a sense of commitment to the supervisor. The next two chapters explore the implications of this form of commitment and will develop an understanding of some of the factors that serve to develop and strengthen this form of commitment.

# Findings

## the impact of organisational management practices on employee commitment

# 5

### 5.0 The impact of organisational management practices on employee commitment

This chapter will explore some of the factors that support the development of employee commitment to the supervisor. What will be shown is that the decision to devolve responsibility for key management processes to the supervisor has supported the development of the foci of employee commitment to the supervisor. As a result employees have begun to attribute the achievement of workplace goals and the provision of intrinsic and extrinsic rewards to the supervisor. This has resulted in a shift in the way that commitment works in large public sector organisations. Importantly, it will be identified that employees believe their future opportunities are shaped, not by the organisation, but by their supervisor.

The implications of this change suggests that the relationship between the supervisor and the employee is more critical than previously reported, and that employees are aware of the significance of the supervisor and, therefore, will seek to link with, and remain working for, a supervisor. In this regard commitment to the supervisor has replaced organisational commitment as the main focus of employee commitment.

The previous chapter explored the impact of organisational size on employee commitment, and identified that the supervisor played a critical role in influencing the culture and workplace climate that employees' experience. It also provided evidence of the significance of the supervisor and the employee-supervisor relationship in a large public sector organisation. This chapter provides insight into a fundamental consideration for this research: do the current approaches to organisational management help to foster and reinforce the development of employee commitment to the supervisor.

## 5.1 The impact of management practices on employee commitment.

To explore the impact of management policies on employee commitment, participants were asked to identify if they considered that it was their supervisor or the organisation that provided for and cared about their personal well-being. The findings indicated that for the majority of participants the supervisor was most likely to influence their experience of work and care about their well being in the workplace. The analysis identified that this was largely attributed to the size of the organisation and the fact that, although the organisation set rules and management policies, the organisation had also devolved the authority and responsibility to enact the rules to the supervisor. As a result employees considered the supervisor as the key to their experience of the organisations rules and policies.

*“It is the supervisor – the organisation claims to be family friendly but the onus on being family friendly always rests with the supervisor, they are the ones that have to accommodate time off or flexible work hours, they have to agree, it is all up to them”.*

*“The supervisor, it all comes down to a supervisor and how they put that into practice on a daily basis”.*

*“The supervisor directly, I don’t get a strong feeling for the organisation level. The organisation sets the parameters but the supervisor actions it”.*

*“The supervisor, they are in constant contact and who you report too, they answer to the organisation or people higher up the in the organisation but it is they who you feel like you have the relationship with each day”.*

*“The supervisor, the organisation puts a lot of things in place and makes the statements but all of the actioning is delegated down to the supervisor”.*

*“I think it is the supervisor, the organisation says it does but it is the supervisor, the walking of the talk is left to the individual supervisor and it is this which makes it inconsistent”.*

Further analysis of participant responses relating to the practice of devolving authority to the supervisor led to the emergence of a sub-theme which indicated that the employee experience of the organisational policies varied from supervisor to supervisor.



*“The supervisor does, but only the good ones who are prepared to be flexible when you need it”.*

*“The supervisor can, but some supervisors don’t”.*

*“The organisation is too big to care for single me, so it becomes the responsibility of the supervisor to do so, as the representative of the organisation, but this means that it does not always happen. It is not happening for me at the moment so the organisation may have all the right policies in the world but they count for nothing”.*

*“I think it is the supervisor, as I think that if the supervisor does not care about your well being then the organisation can not do anything about it, often they would not be aware of it”.*

The findings of this section demonstrate that the employee-supervisor relationship, and subsequently employee commitment, is fostered and then strengthened by two key factors, firstly, the devolvement of responsibility to enact organisations policies to the supervisor creates the situation where by employees attribute their experience of these policies to the supervisor. The outcome of which is to strengthen the perceived importance of the role of the supervisor in the workplace. Secondly, as the experience of the policies enacted by supervisors may vary between supervisors, a positive experience is likely to support the development of affective commitment toward a particular supervisor. In this situation employees want to remain working for the supervisor, this finding is consistent with the work of Chen et al. (2001).

This research confirms the work of Farth, Podsakoff and Organ (1990) who reported that the supervisor often interacts with employees on a daily basis, enacting formal and informal procedures. The findings of this section also reveal that the daily interaction and the relationship that employees have with their supervisor was considered more important to employees than the policies and practices put in place by the organisation.

*“The supervisor as they deal directly with you one to one every day”.*

*“The supervisor, I think most people associate their experience by the relationships they are working with each and everyday, rather than organisation policies”.*

*“The supervisor, it is the one to one daily relationship that counts”.*

*“The supervisor, it is the supervisor with who you have a direct relationship”.*

The findings of this section have identified the basis for a fundamental change in the way that we understand employee commitment. Although the organisation sets in place the policies that support the employee, it is the execution of these policies by the supervisor which is recognised and acknowledged by the employees. The management practice to devolve the responsibility for the management of employees and the lack of perceived consistency have created the perception that the organisation has little control or influence on the employee experience in the workplace. This research has found that, as a result, the relationship the employee has with the supervisor has become a critically important aspect of work life.

As highlighted in literature chapter (section 2.3) affective commitment reflects an emotional attachment to the organisation. Chen et al. (2001) have suggested employees demonstrating affective commitment remain in the organisation because they want to. This section confirms the fundamental premise of this statement, that is, employees who display affective commitment develop an emotional attachment and choose to remain because they want to. This research, however, argues that the focus of employee commitment has changed, no longer is employee commitment targeted at the organisation, it has transferred to the supervisor. As a result of the management practices employed by the organisation employees are likely to develop a sense of affective commitment toward a supervisor with whom they have a positive relationship and experiences. The next section of this chapter will explore employee experience of equity in the workplace.

## **5.2 The supervisor has the greatest impact on employee experience of equity in the workplace**

The literature chapter (section 2.8) identified that employee perception of outcomes is an important determinant of behaviour. Within this context equity theory suggests that employees evaluate outcomes by comparing them to others. Park and Rainey (2007), state that employees compare their efforts (inputs) to rewards (outcomes) and then compare their input-outcome ratio with that of colleagues. If employees perceive that their situation is fair they will be satisfied and believe that there is equity, if they sense a disparity in the ratios they will try to correct it. This classical view of equity theory, consistent with the work of Adams (1963), is an important concept

for this research as it supports the constructs of the psychological contract (Puchala, 2007), expectancy theories of motivation (Vroom, 1964), and exchange theories of commitment as discussed in the literature chapter of this research.

If the analysis of the data identifies that employees believe the supervisor has the greatest influence on their experience of equity in the workplace this could provide a further basis for the development of employee commitment to the supervisor. Such a finding would also suggest that employees may recognise that working with a supervisor who is considered to support equity in the workplace would become an important aspect of organisational life. The implications of which suggest that employees may begin to actively target and seek to work for supervisors who are considered to support equity in the workplace. This finding would also indicate that supervisor reputation could become increasingly important and that those supervisors who earn a negative reputation may struggle to attract staff to work with them.

Analysis of the data indicates that participants believe that the supervisor has the greatest influence on equity in the workplace. This finding identified that participants believed that, regardless of the frameworks that the organisation has put into place, it is the supervisor to whom the responsibility falls to manage equity in the workplace.

*“The supervisor, everything comes down to them, the organisation puts a lot of frameworks in place but it is the supervisor who determines the outcomes”.*

*“On balance the supervisor is charged with maintaining equity”.*

*“The supervisor, the organisation could set a tone but the supervisor at the end of the day influences your experience of it”.*

*“The organisation has plenty of frameworks in place, but it is the supervisor who decides what recognition or outcomes you receive and whether or not these are appropriate”.*

*“The supervisor is the key, it all falls to them, in my experience the outcome of which has varied, so when you find a supervisor who provides this you tend to want to stay working from them”.*

The findings of this section provide evidence that the management decision to devolve responsibility to the supervisor places a greater emphasis on the actions and

interpretations of the supervisor and creates the situation where employees are likely to develop a sense of commitment to a supervisor who they perceive treats them fairly. This study draws on the work of Locke and Latham (1990) who reports that outcome expectancies are a measure of the extent to which one sees a causal relationship between one's behaviour and the positive or negative outcome that one expects. In the context of this research the key determinant in this relationship has been identified as the supervisor. The finding that employees perceive that equity in the workplace is directly impacted by the supervisor suggests that employees will develop a sense of commitment to a supervisor who maintains equity in the workplace.

This finding provides further evidence of a fundamental change in our understanding of commitment. Although the organisation puts in place formal processes to achieve equity in the workplace, employees perceive it is their direct supervisor who is responsible and who has the greatest influence on equity in the work place. Furthermore, this finding suggests that employees who perceive that their position is equitable are highly likely to attribute this to their direct supervisor rather than the organisation. Finally, this research has identified that once an employee locates a supervisor who they believe provides an equitable working environment they often will choose to remain working with this supervisor. Each of these findings provides further evidence of the importance of the employee-supervisor relationship and suggests that employees will develop affective commitment to the supervisor, that is, they will want to remain working for a supervisor who provides equity in the workplace.

The findings of this section demonstrate that the focal point of employee commitment has transferred, no longer is employee commitment targeted at the organisation, rather in large public sector organisations the defining paradigm of employee commitment is now to the supervisor. The next section explores the impact of goal attainment on building employee commitment in the workplace. This section is important due to the fact that if employees believe that it is the supervisor who is the key figure in helping them to attain their workplace goals, it is likely that this exchange will support and strengthen the development of commitment to the supervisor.

### **5.3 The attainment of workplace goals build commitment**

To identify the impact of goal attainment on employee commitment, participants were asked whether they thought it was the organisation, through formalised procedures or policies, or alternatively the supervisor, that took into account their work place goals.

This question was included to explore whether employees attributed goal attainment to the existence of organisational processes or policies, or to the actions of the supervisor in supporting and enacting the organisations policies. Should the analysis of the data identify that employees attribute goal attainment to the supervisor this would provide strong basis and evidence for the development of affective and normative commitment to the supervisor.

This research has found that the majority of participants believe it was their supervisor who directly helped them to achieve their goals.

*“It is always going to be the supervisor first and foremost as this is where you have the working relationship”.*

*“The supervisor, this is from where you tend to receive the majority of your support and development, so when I have had a training need or development it is they who will generally work with you to help you achieve those goals”.*

*“It is the supervisor as they have the one on one with you – the organisation tries but it is the supervisor as they have the direct contact and know what you want to do and want you can do”.*

*“I think it is the supervisor who is best positioned to understand my goals and values and requirements”.*

The analysis of data indicates that this perception was based on the view that the development of a relationship between the employee and the supervisor creates the situation where the supervisor is aware of the participants’ goals and is, therefore, able to provide opportunities which support the achievement of these goals. This finding builds on the work of Eby et al. (1999) who suggest that supervisors play a key role in encouraging and assisting individuals as they strive to attain meaningful goals.

This research has also found that the majority of participants believed that due to the size of the organisation the responsibility for employee development had rightfully been devolved to the supervisor. Participant responses indicated that the devolvement of responsibility to the supervisor leads to positive outcomes for employees as it meant the supervisor, the person who was directly and most often in contact with the employee, could assist the employee to achieve their goals or take into their personal requirements when considering work demands or opportunities.

*“A good supervisor can influence your experience and the attainment of your goals more broadly than if it was left to formal structures and processes of a large organisation”.*

*“The good supervisors are more likely to go out on a limb for you rather than apply the strict policy of the organisation to help you achieve your goals”.*

*“The organisation is too big so it is rightly left to the supervisor”.*

The finding highlights an interesting anomaly which is that, due to the size of the organisation the management practices provide a framework which, by default, supports the development of employee commitment to the supervisor. This form of commitment could be strengthened if employees perceive that the exchange relationship, fundamental to the development of employee commitment, now exist between themselves and their supervisor.

Further analysis of the above findings highlighted that employees in large organisations do not trust that the systems and processes put in place by the organisation will support them in their development and goal attainment. Nyhan (1999) suggested that trust can be differentiated as interpersonal trust (between the employee and the manager) and systems trust (between the employee and the organisational as a whole). Diffie-Couch (1984) concluded that mistrust leads to decreased commitment. This research has identified that employees trust their supervisor to support the achievement of their goals.

This research extends the work of Nyhan (1999) who reported that supervisor trust is a better indicator of affective commitment than that of systems trust. It suggests that supervisor trust, rather than being an indicator of affective commitment to the organisation is actually an indicator and an antecedent of affective commitment to the supervisor. This finding indicates the importance of the relationship and suggests that in the case where there is a strong relationship between the employee and the supervisor that this is likely to build employee commitment to the supervisor.

The importance of a strong employee-supervisor relationship in supporting the achievement of employee goals was highlighted by the finding that the supervisor can also inhibit goal attainment.

*“The barrier is often the supervisor, much of your access or experiences depend on the supervisor, if they don't support you or if it is only lip service then you are in trouble”.*

*“The risk is that often the supervisor is so driven they can’t factor in the personal side of things and your goals get lost in the pressure of work”.*

*“I had study leave last year, the rules of which are set out by the organisation but it has to be supported by the supervisor before you get access to it”.*

*“In my view the organisation sets the processes but it is up to the supervisor to allow you to access these”.*

This research has found that devolved management environments can create the perception that the attainment of employee goals is largely dependant on the quality of the relationship the employee has with the supervisor. Furthermore, this research has found that employees are likely to seek out and want to work for supervisors who are known to be supportive of employee development. This action by the employee creates a foundation for the development of affective commitment toward that supervisor, which is likely to be strengthened if the employee links with a supervisor who supports their development. This finding has implications for organisations as it indicates that employees will develop strong preferences for working with a particular supervisor and any action or event which is considered to impact this relationship is likely to be viewed negatively by the employee. The next section explores the factors that strengthen the development of employee commitment to the supervisor, building an understanding of these factors will provide a greater understanding of this new form of commitment.

## **5.4 Supervisor behaviours support the development of employee commitment**

The previous sections of this research have identified the importance of the employee-supervisor relationship in a large public sector organisation, and have also identified that the supervisor has become a target of employee commitment. To explore the type of actions and behaviours that support the development of commitment to supervisor, participants were asked whether they felt their supervisor was considerate of their views and opinions. Previous studies have found significant relationships between commitment and supportive or caring treatment by a supervisor, including supervisor feedback (Dunham, Grube, and Castaneda, 1994) and supervisor support (Aryee, Chay, and Chew, 1994). This research explores whether these actions support the development of employee commitment to the supervisor.



The findings of this section indicate that the majority of participants believed their supervisor was considerate of their views and opinions, and that this behaviour had a positive impact on them.

*“Yes they are. It makes you want to come to work and go out of your way to do things to please the supervisor and get better results, and provide views and opinions”.*

*“Yes he does and this makes me feel wanted and valued”.*

*“They do and this made it much more positive and you feel that you can do more, and you think there are places for me to go and opportunities for you”.*

*“Yes I think so, it is nice to know that someone listens to what you have to say and values your opinion, this makes you feel more comfortable and confident with your work in general and your dealings with that person”.*

*“This is to some extent why I have stayed. For me relationships are most important and encourage me to come to work”.*

The findings of this research build on the work of Meyer and Allen (1997) who reported that relationships between employees and their supervisors influence the development of affective commitment, with regard to the fact that employees who are allowed to participate in decision-making, and who are treated fairly and with consideration are more committed. The findings of this research suggest that the actions of the supervisor can support the development of affective commitment targeted toward the supervisor. This research has shown that this form of commitment is based on the concept of exchange, whereby the supervisor who is considerate of employee views, receives in return a greater level of work effort from employees, which resulted in higher levels of performance.

Further analysis of the data identified the emergence of the themes of empowerment and voice which were linked to participation in the workplace.

*“I work well with people when I have felt empowered to go to them with issues and answers and that they would listen to me”.*

*“It is a positive thing, I am asked to give advice and when I provide it I am given credit and listened to. Just being asked to give an opinion is a positive empowering thing”.*

*“This empowers me and it gives me confidence and allows me to get on with my job and go to my supervisor with ideas and that I will be supported with those ideas, but I also know that if it is not a strong idea she will give me that advice”.*

*“It makes me feel personally valued. It encourages me to share my views and be more interested in what I am doing and what I am asked to do”.*

Analysis of the responses identified that for employees of a large public sector organisation the perception that they had a voice and could influence and inform decision making was extremely important. The size of the organisation is an important factor impacting this finding, the analysis indicated that employees believed that without supervisor support the individual employee did not have a voice in the organisation. The findings of this section indicate that the behaviour and actions of the supervisor created an environment in which employees considered that their views were valued and that they had a voice on key issues and matters.

The outcome of this action by the supervisor was the development of affective commitment: put simply, employees wanted to work and remain working for a supervisor who they considered listened to them. This research confirms the work of Nyhan (1999) who reported that participation in decision making requires willingness by the supervisor to involve employees in decision making and a perception by employees that their involvement is meaningful.

The responses from participants indicated that, for a large number of participants, the opportunity to input or provide comment was more important than the action taken as a result of their input. Analysis of responses indicated that when a supervisor encouraged interaction it served to motivate and supported the achievement of better outcomes.

*“To have the opportunity to input is they key, I agree that not everything I have to say will be acted upon, but maybe together we can come up with a way forward”.*

*“This makes me feel very valued and encourages me to do the work and the hard miles and do my best. The sense that you are being heard is the most important thing even when we have had different views”.*

*“It makes it easy to come to work and contribute and although the supervisor may not agree with what I say I don’t have a problem as I have been given the chance to share my view”.*

*“When this occurs I feel valued, if they listen and take note irrespective of whether they apply it or not, if my views are given serious thought then I am happy as I have put my case forward”.*

The research has confirmed the work of Sashkin (1984) who reported that participative management has a positive impact on performance, productivity and employee satisfaction because it fulfils the three basic human needs of, increased autonomy, increased meaningfulness and decreased isolation. The findings of this research indicate that if a supervisor employees a participative management style it is likely to support the development of employee commitment, however, in a large public sector organisation this commitment is likely to be to the supervisor. The findings also suggest that, as this style of management is attributed to the actions of the supervisor, this may foster the development of affective commitment toward the supervisor.

The previous sections of this research have demonstrated the importance of the supervisor in fostering employee perception of voice in a large organisation. Analysis of participant responses also identified several examples of the negative impact that occurred when employees perceived that their views and opinions were not recognised or considered. This is an important consideration for organisations which devolve management responsibilities to the supervisor as it suggests that poor outcomes or experiences could impact the employee view of the organisation which may result in higher levels of turnover and low levels of employee engagement and performance.

*“When this has occurred it makes it difficult to work”.*

*“There are times when I feel my view and opinions are not valued and this makes me feel that I am left to the side and what I consider is not important, it is very disempowering”.*

*“I have experienced times when my views were not considered important by the supervisor, this creates a level of frustration, at the end of the day the supervisor is the one that is making the decision, but if your views are not considered then how can you support the decision truly”.*

In a devolved management environment a negative experience such as those outlined above may foster a number of consequential outcomes. Firstly, employees are highly likely to seek out supervisors whose work style and behaviours are considered to be participative. Secondly, an employee experience of working for a supervisor who supports a participative work style is likely to strengthen affective commitment toward that supervisor. This finding aligns with the work of Chen et al. (2001) who state that affective commitment is the psychological state of wanting to stay. This section has provided further evidence of the significance of the role of the supervisor within a large public sector organisation and the potential outcomes, both positive and negative, of the supervisor management style. A potential issue for the organisation and other large organisations is the ability to detect poor supervisor management practices before these practices negatively impact on employees. The findings of this section indicate that in a large public sector organisation the employee-supervisor relationship is the main conduit by which employees consider that they have a voice.

In practice, the decision of a supervisor to foster a participative management style which acknowledges and considers employee views and opinions will not only satisfy employee desire to have a voice it is likely that this action will build employee commitment to that supervisor. The literature indicates that participation has been linked to increased affective commitment (DeCotis and Summers, 1987; Castrogiovanni and Macy, 1990). This research suggests that the increase in affective commitment is developed as a result of specific supervisor behaviours and management style, and that in large public sector organisations this commitment is likely to be to the supervisor.

The following section of the research explores the impact of intrinsic or extrinsic rewards on employee commitment. The next section is important for the construct of commitment developed in this paper, as it explores the concept that the exchange of intrinsic and extrinsic rewards provides further support for the development of commitment to the supervisor.

## **5.5 The provision of intrinsic or extrinsic rewards build commitment to the supervisor**

To explore further the significance of the supervisor in large organisations participants were asked a series of questions relating to intrinsic and extrinsic motivational factors.

The Public Sector Motivation (PSM) construct is part of a broad catalogue of ‘needs theories’ of motivation (Perry and Wise, 1990). It brings questions of values and identity into motivation theories (Shamir, 1990). Many public servants are assumed to be motivated by a sense of service not found among private employees (Houston, 2000, Perry and Wise, 1990). Wright and Grant (2010) state that one of the fundamental assumptions for PSM research is that individuals with greater PSM are more likely to work in government because of the opportunities it offers to provide meaningful public service.

Crewson (1997) found that public sector employees rate a feeling of accomplishment and performing work helpful to society and to others as more important job characteristics than do private sector employees. Research suggests that individuals who are strongly motivated to do public service are supposed to work for public organisations, to perform better on the job, and to be more sensitive to intrinsic rewards (Perry and Wise, 1990). In terms of rewards, the research also suggests that public servants are more likely to be motivated by those factors that are intrinsic than extrinsic (Locke and Latham, 1990). What remains unclear in the literature is whether the opportunity to use skills and knowledge (intrinsic factors) is attributed to the organisation or the actions of the supervisor. If employees attribute the provision of such opportunities to the supervisor this could foster the development of affective commitment to the supervisor. Furthermore, if the supervisor is considered to be the determining factor in the provision of these rewards this is likely to foster the development of commitment to the supervisor as it is the supervisor who is considered to provide the exchange.

The analysis of the data confirmed the existing literature on public sector motivation, which suggests that employees within the public service are motivated by intrinsic rather than extrinsic factors. This finding suggests that the provision of intrinsic rewards, in particular the opportunity to use “skills and capabilities”, was a strong motivational factor. Participants identified that being given “challenging work” was a key motivator. For many participants this was often considered to be a reward for doing a previous job well.

*“Intrinsic rewards and being given greater opportunity to use my skills set”.*

*“I think using my skills and being challenged and developed are most important”.*

*“To me intrinsic, recognition and acknowledgement that I have done the best job I can is far more important to me than worldly goods”.*

*“Being given further opportunities to use my skills and undertaking challenging work”.*

*“Intrinsic, this to me means that I do the type of work that I want to do, using my skills”.*

*“The value and enjoyment that I get from my work rather than the money, this is the best reward”.*

This research builds on the work of Romzek (1989) who contends that in the public sector affective commitment can be influenced through a strategic use of intrinsic incentives. Importantly, the research has identified that, although the organisational context frames the work that is completed within it, employees considered that it was the supervisor who provided and made available the intrinsic rewards, as it was the supervisor who was the ‘determining factor’ and ‘who provided the opportunity’ for the employees to ‘use’ their knowledge, skills and capabilities in areas of work that provided high intrinsic motivation. This finding has clear implications for the development of employee commitment. The finding that employees consider the supervisor to be the most important factor suggests that employees will invest in the development of the relationship with the supervisor so they are positioned to access intrinsic and extrinsic rewards.

The findings of this section indicate that in a devolved management environment the role of the supervisor in providing employees with the opportunity to undertake work that is intrinsically motivating could support the development of affective commitment to the supervisor. The following section explores performance management in the public service. This section will identify whether current formal processes also serve to foster employee commitment to the supervisor.

## **5.6 Current approaches to performance management build commitment to the supervisor**

The use of formal performance management processes provide employees with confirmation of the extent the organisation values the job undertaken by the employee. Performance management in the APS has many dimensions it is primarily

concerned with aligning individual and team performance with corporate plans and outcomes. To explore the impact of performance management processes on employee commitment participants were asked how performance in the workplace was recognised. Research by Dunham, Grube, and Castaneda (1994) found a significant relationship between employee commitment and supervisor feedback. This research extends this work by exploring whether the provision of feedback and formal recognition by the supervisor could foster commitment to the supervisor.

The findings identified that current performance management processes were considered by employees to be poor. This finding is considerable in the context of this research, it suggests that the organisation is unable to effectively reward individual performance which thereby draws into question the organisation's ability to fulfil its part of the exchange component of the commitment construct. The analysis of the data identified that performance management processes did not effectively recognise the contribution of the most effective employees, or distinguish high performers from underperforming individuals.

*“There is not a lot of recognition, I think a lot of employees are not recognised as well as they should be, I feel that at times recognition and feedback is the forgotten”.*

*“Although we do performance assessment every year there are many who fall through the cracks, and I believe there are people who do a lot of work that is unrewarded”.*

*“In a large organisation like this I don't think the individual is recognised at all by the organisations' performance management system as it often rewards all”.*

*“I don't necessary think people are recognised well by the organisation, I think sometimes because people are effective and efficient they tend to be overlooked”.*

The findings revealed that participants believed that the responsibility was left to the individual supervisor to acknowledge the specific effort that employees put into their work. The majority of participants stated that they regularly received informal feedback from their supervisor, and that they viewed being given this feedback as more important than the formal recognition provided through performance management systems.



*“In terms of reward and recognition it comes back to the relationship you have with the supervisor, if you have a strong relationship this person will turn around and say well done. I think people give greater weight to this recognition; it is worth more as it is coming from the people you respect”.*

*“Feedback is more important when coming from the supervisor. For the supervisor it takes a lot of their time to sit down with people on a regular basis and talk. A good supervisor will do this informally rather than wait to the quarterly or half year performance cycle”.*

*“Rewards and recognition come mainly from your supervisor and you tend to get this on an ongoing basis”.*

*“It is through the supervisor that you get recognition. A good supervisor will be very big on recognising people that do a good job within the team”.*

*“The effort you put in is recognised by the supervisor in the sense of regular feedback”.*

These responses provide further evidence that employees acknowledge that it is the supervisor who controls and influences their experience of the workplace including the provision of rewards and recognition. The findings also demonstrated the importance of the employee-supervisor relationship. Participant responses indicated that if employees perceived that their relationship with the supervisor was poor there was little chance that their work or their efforts, no matter how good, would be recognised as there was no effective organisational process that could recognise their effort.

*“I think that people are recognised if their supervisor is aware of their work, but if the supervisor is not or does not recognise the value of the work then often the employee will not get any recognition”.*

*“If the supervisor chooses not to recognise employee effort then there is little chance the employee work effort will be recognised”.*

*“Often there is forced feedback through the annual performance assessment process, but if a supervisor has not given you recognition for 12 months how useful is this process as the relationship cannot be that good”.*

The findings of this section suggest that employees in large public service organisations do not believe that performance management processes effectively recognise the

contribution of the individual. Social exchange theory (Blau, 1964) suggests that employees are motivated to seek a fair and balanced exchange with their organisation. This section has brought into question the legitimacy of the formal performance management systems in large organisations and therefore questions whether the “formal system” in a large organisation can provide the fair and balanced exchange that is described by Blau in the construct of social exchange theory. The implication of this finding suggests that employees doubt that the organisation is able to fulfil the exchange requirement.

The findings indicate that employees recognise that acknowledgement of their work, and any benefits associated from this, are more likely to be provided by their direct supervisor. This finding provides further evidence of the importance of the employee-supervisor relationship, in relation to the development of employee commitment. It also suggests that the fulfilment of the exchange agreement by the supervisor is likely to foster the development of employee commitment to the supervisor.

This research builds on the work of Dunham, Grube, and Castaneda (1994) confirming the existence of a significant relationship between employee commitment and supervisor feedback. It extends their work by identifying that the commitment which is developed as an outcome of this relationship is targeted toward the supervisor. This research has identified that in the absence of effective organisational systems the provision of feedback and recognition by the supervisor is likely to foster the development of affective commitment toward the supervisor. The next section of this chapter explores the impact of employee perception of their future opportunities on commitment.

## **5.7 A positive view of future opportunities build commitment**

The concept of self is multiple, each of us holds images in our mind of our various selves (Horstmanshof and Zimitat, 2003); we hold a view of the person who we are now and the person who we believe that we could become in the future (Markus and Nurius, 1986). Human beings view themselves not merely as who or what they are, but also, and importantly, as who or what they have the potential to be (Chang, 2001). Possible selves have been found to exercise a motivation role in achievement (Horstmanshof and Zimitat, 2003). To explore the role of the supervisor in framing what the future may hold for employees, participants were asked to identify whether it was the organisation, owing to the type work that was conducted within the

organisation, or the supervisor that had the greater impact on their view of their future self. This is an important component supporting the development of employee commitment due to the fact that goal attainment was identified in the literature chapter as a key to fostering employee commitment.

If the analysis identified that participants believe that the supervisor has the stronger role in framing future possibilities, this would indicate that employees are likely to develop affective and normative commitment toward a supervisor who assists the employee to achieve their goals. Previous research has identified that employees reciprocate favourable treatment with greater commitment and performance (Meyer and Allen, 1997; Wayne et al., 1997). This research will extend previous research by exploring the concept that the anticipation of desirable outcomes, which would lead to the achievement of a future self, can foster the development of affective and normative commitment toward the supervisor.

The analysis of the data suggests that the majority of participants believed that the supervisor played the greater role in the development of their concept of future self.

*“The supervisor is more aware of where you are and where you want to go as opposed to the organisation”.*

*“The supervisor, they are able to provide you with a pathway”.*

Further analysis identified that this finding was linked to the perceived ability of the supervisor to help shape the direction of the participant’s career. Responses revealed that employees believed that the supervisor could identify and provide opportunities that were in line with the participant’s career and personal goals.

*“It is the supervisor, they are the ones that can guide, direct and develop you to who you want to be. If you have good relationship and they understand your goals and what you want to achieve they can help you to do that”.*

*“It is the supervisor as they can encourage you to expand your knowledge and to broaden your expertise, and look outside your current role and work responsibilities”.*

*“The supervisor can provide or plant ideas about your future and work with you to get you to where you want to go”.*

*“The supervisor has a lot to do with it because they can help you to achieve what you want to achieve, they can help to push you in the direction you want to go”.*

*“For me it has clearly been the supervisor, I have had two or three good supervisors who recognised the opportunities that I needed to develop and provided me with these opportunities”.*

The results of this section indicate that, due to the supervisor’s ability to fulfil the employee expectation of the exchange agreement this action is likely to foster the development of affective commitment to the supervisor. Further analysis of responses identified the importance of the employee-supervisor relationship suggesting that participants recognised that the achievement of their goals was heavily reliant on a good relationship with the supervisor and that, as such, there was a risk that in the absence of a good relationship future possibilities maybe be impacted. A number of participants stated that the supervisor could also hamper their career and that there was little the organisation could do to protect the employee or intervene when this occurred.

*“You can also have a supervisor who can hinder your attempts to develop and progress”.*

*“I think when you have a really good supervisor they will actively help you progress, but if you don’t have good relationship with the supervisor you are in trouble”.*

This section provides further evidence of the importance of the employee-supervisor relationship. The findings indicate that in a large organisation it is the supervisor who influences the development of employees and the framing of their possible future self. This research challenges the findings of Meyer and Allen (1997) who suggest that beneficial treatment by supervisors should increase affective commitment by strengthening employees’ sense of belonging and identification with the organisation. This research found that employees in a large organisation are likely to identify with the supervisor providing the beneficial treatment, in this case the support to achieve their future self.

This finding is consistent with the work of Steijn and Leisink (2006) who state that those supervisors who provide feedback and who support employees get increased

levels of affective commitment. This section provides further evidence of some of the factors that developed affective commitment toward the supervisor. The previous sections of this chapter have identified the importance of the supervisor in large public sector organisations, given this finding, the following section explores the impact of the capability of the supervisor on employee commitment.

## **5.8 The capability of the supervisor foster employee commitment**

This research has identified that the supervisor is central to the employee experience in the work place, in particular the supervisor has been found to have a great impact on the development opportunities that employees have access to. Given this finding participants were asked to consider whether the confidence and capability of the supervisor to perform in their role was an important factor. Becker et al. (1996) and Gregersen (1993) identified two dimensions of commitment to supervisor: identification with the supervisor and internalisation of the supervisor's values.

This section of the research deals with the concept of identification. This is said to occur when an employee admires certain attributes of the supervisor, such as attitudes and behaviours, personality or accomplishments. It will explore the concept that supervisor confidence and capability could support the development of affective commitment to the supervisor in a large organisation.

The findings identified that supervisor self confidence and capability were considered to be critically important and that employees believed that each had the potential to positively impact their experience of work. The analysis found that the majority of the participants considered their supervisor to have “knowledge and skills that they could acquire” and that often the participant was seeking to “develop” these skills in themselves. The findings revealed that a supervisor who was confident, and who instilled confidence motivated employees to achieve greater results in the workplace.

*“They are very confident in how they approach their work and their relationships at work; this is something to aspire too”.*

*“If they build a sense of confidence in you it drives you to do more”.*

*“Because they are confident and have a go it inspires you to have a go”.*

*“I have a supervisor who is very confident, particularly with their people skills which they use to drag the best out of the people”.*

*“I find the confidence of my current supervisor is rubbing off. The outcome is that regardless of what decision we make there is confidence that is the right decision at the time”.*

The findings suggest that highly capable or confident supervisors were likely to achieve results which would have a positive impact on employee experience in the workplace. Further analysis of the data highlighted that employees identified strongly with certain supervisor behaviours and traits. The findings revealed that role modelling, active listening, relationship management and the ability to influence were viewed by employees as behaviours that empowered employees in the workplace.

*“I guess that it is the ability to influence and role modelling that counts, if you have a supervisor who is confident and displays those characteristics then everyone models themselves on these people”.*

*“When you look at supervisors you look for a role model that you can model yourself on to develop. The way they handle a crisis is a good indicator as it is easy to lead when things are good”.*

*“A good supervisor is empowering. I had a supervisor who was a really good role model. She would present issues and arguments in a way that led other people to take action or make a decision”.*

*“Supervisors can impact on you greatly. They make or break the experience of work, it is often how they manage relationships in hard times that is important”.*

*“I had a supervisor who knew how to present an argument and how to influence people, as you knew they had these skills and capabilities it motivated you to work as you knew an outcome would be achieved”.*

Participant responses suggest that behaviours and attributes that build or confirm the integrity of the supervisor are highly likely to support the development of employee commitment to the supervisor. To explore the impact on employees when these behaviours and attributes are absent further analysis was undertaken. The findings indicated that employees perceived there was the potential for significant workplace

consequences if their direct supervisor lacked confidence or the capability to do the job well.

*“It impacts you daily and your ability to do your job as you soon begin to question yourself and what you are doing”.*

*“If the supervisor is not confident or capable you have to devote extra time to them, I had this experience and the impact was that it made me so deflated that I couldn’t care if I came to work or not as I thought the supervisor was an idiot”.*

*“There is a lot more structure and lot more ‘direction’ provided”.*

*“I have found that with supervisors who lack confidence there is often a lot of unnecessary structure, there is a lot less maturity in relation to how they work and their ability to operate within a strategic environment”.*

Critically, the loss of autonomy was reported as an outcome of working for a supervisor who was not capable or confident. Participants believed this reflected a lack of knowledge, understanding and trust, and often ultimately reflected the inability of the supervisor to perform the role. The findings of this section indicate that the development of affective commitment toward a supervisor is likely to be reinforced by the employee experience or knowledge of a workplace where the supervisor lacks the confidence or capability to perform their role.

This research confirms the work of Becker et al. (1996) and Gregersen (1993) who found that identification was a key component of the development of commitment to the supervisor. This research has highlighted role modelling, active listening, relationship management and the ability to influence as behaviours which foster the development of affective commitment to the supervisor. This research has found that supervisor confidence and capability can strengthen the development of affective commitment to the supervisor. The following section explores the second dimension of commitment to the supervisor as reported by Becker et al. (1996) and Gregersen (1993).

## **5.9 Employee values and behaviours are influenced by supervisor behaviour**

The previous section confirmed that employee identification with the supervisor fostered the development of affective commitment to the supervisor. This section

explores the second of the two dimensions of commitment to the supervisor established by Becker et al. (1996) and Gregersen (1993) relating to the internalisation of the supervisor's values. Internalisation is said to occur when an employee adopts the attitudes and behaviours of the supervisor because the supervisor's attitudes and behaviours are congruent with the employee's values system. This concept has potential implications for the organisation, if employees develop a sense of commitment to a supervisor who's attitudes and behaviours are not congruent with the organisation this could result in poor performance or at worst resistant or disruptive behaviour.

To explore the concept of internalisation participants were asked whether their attitudes and behaviours at work were influenced by the knowledge of how employees in the immediate work group were treated by the supervisor. The majority of participants were found to be strongly influenced by how employees in their immediate work group were treated by the supervisor as this provided strong evidence of the supervisor's values.

*"Yes it does – probably too much for my own good".*

*"I watch how people are treated and to a large extent this informs my opinion about those involved".*

*"I am influenced by what I see and hear and it often confirms your view of the supervisor".*

*"It does, my attitudes are influenced by how colleagues are being treated by the supervisor".*

Further analysis of the data identified a theme relating to the confirmation of employee perception, indicating that where a negative interaction had taken place employees felt a sense of disappointment, and that such an event often confirmed their view of the supervisor. Alternatively, a positive interaction served to build or reinforce a positive view of a supervisor.

*"If someone is treated poorly and I have a poor opinion of that supervisor then that confirms my opinion of that supervisor".*

*"The treatment of others confirms opinions and reinforces the need to find and keep working for a good supervisor".*



*“If you see or hear of a colleague being treated poorly by the supervisor you do react and feel disappointed and it often confirms your view of that supervisor”.*

*“If I see someone is treated poorly it confirms my opinion of that supervisor, this can also work the other way if someone is treated well it builds respect for that supervisor”.*

In order to explore the concept of differential treatment of employees in the workplace by the supervisor further analysis of the data was undertaken. The work of Graen and Cashman, (1975) reported that supervisors do not interact with subordinates uniformly because supervisors have limited time and resources. The study identified that participants accepted that employees in the immediate work group were often treated differently by the supervisor. Participants reported that this is an “expectation” of work life in a large public sector organisation.

*“I know that people are influenced by what they see happen around them and it impacts and affects their behaviour, but this is bound to happen in the workplace as people within a team will each have different relationships with the supervisor”.*

*“People are treated differently depending on the relationship they have with the supervisor, if yours is good you want to keep that”.*

*“There are often differences between relationships if my own relationship with the supervisor is strong then this is some thing to maintain”.*

This section confirms the work of Becker et al. (1996) and Gregersen (1993) relating to the internalisation of the supervisor’s values. The findings indicate that the knowledge of how employees in the immediate work group are treated by the supervisor provides employees with evidence of whether the supervisor’s values are congruent with their own. Building upon the work of Graen and Cashman, (1975) this study, firstly, confirms that supervisors do not interact with subordinates uniformly and secondly, extends the findings by identifying that in large public sector organisations employees expect there will be differential treatment.

This finding reinforces the importance of a strong relationship between the employee and supervisor. It highlights that employees recognise that supervisors have limited

capacity to interact with all their subordinates and therefore they will attempt to ensure they that have access to the supervisor. The finding suggests that the concept of differential treatment is likely to support the development of commitment to the supervisor if the employee perceives the treatment they receive as positive. This finding indicates that the organisation may experience a situation where a positive or negative outcome for the employee could create a negative consequence for the organisation. A positive experience for the employee is likely to foster and strengthen employee commitment to the supervisor. A negative experience for the employee is likely to confirm to the employee that the organisation is unable to intervene and provide a positive outcome for the employee. This finding suggests that the existence of a strong relationship between employee and supervisor, where the employee considers they receive differential treatment will foster the development of affective commitment towards the supervisor.

## **5.10 Highlighting some of the factors that build employee commitment to the supervisor**

This research has identified supervisor behaviours that foster the development of commitment to the supervisor. To provide further evidence of the supervisor behaviours that support the development of commitment to the supervisor, participants were asked to consider if they had previously felt a sense of commitment toward a supervisor, and if they had, to identify the behaviours that fostered this commitment.

The majority of participants reported that they had previously felt a level of commitment to a supervisor. Participant responses highlighted three interconnected themes which supported the development of commitment to the supervisor. The first was the strength of the employee-supervisor relationship, the second was the attributes and behaviour of the supervisor, and the third was the provision of opportunities, greater responsibility and supporting employee development.

*“I have felt a sense of commitment to a supervisor. This person gave me a lot more opportunity, they encouraged me and wanted my feedback and they were open and honest in providing feedback”.*

*“Previously I have, this person developed and mentored me. I have always felt a level of commitment to this person as they went out of their way to help me”.*

*“I have felt a sense of commitment a supervisor. I worked for someone that cared about me as an individual and was willing to put the time to help me grow and gave increased responsibility and guidance along the way”.*

*“I have to a supervisor who mentored and developed my business acumen; this person was a good communicator, gave feedback and took me into their confidence”.*

The key factors identified by participants which support the development of commitment to the supervisor are captured in Figure 2 which illustrates the importance of the supervisor, the investment of employee effort, and the receipt of benefits with each component serving to foster and strengthen employee commitment to the supervisor. Figure 2 demonstrates how each of the factors contributes to the development of employee commitment to the supervisor. Firstly, the employee recognises the need to develop a strong relationship with the supervisor, the employee then invests effort in the development of this relationship. This action introduces a level of continuous commitment. When the employee receives reward or recognition of their effort they attribute this to the supervisor and their relationship, this inturn serves to strengthen affective and normative commitment toward the supervisor.

Figure 1 highlights that the components of affective, normative or continuous commitment elements may occur in any order, however, each section subsequently influences and supports the development of the next which strengthens employee commitment to the supervisor. The three actions of the employee are described as the components of linking, the investment of effort and the benefits received. This diagram provides a clear depiction of how commitment works in action, within the case study and some of the factors that contribute to a greater understanding of how it is developed.

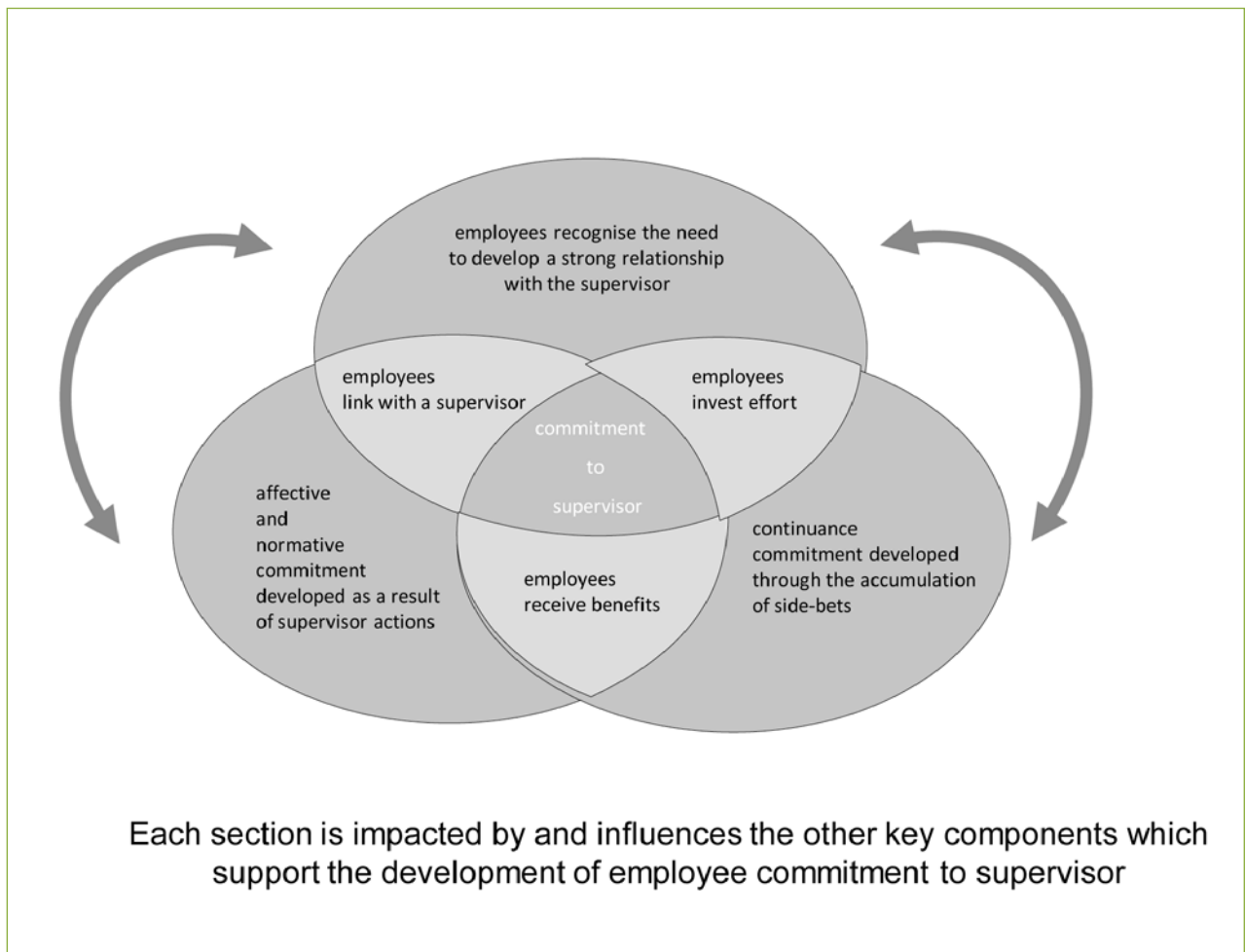
Building on the findings of the previous section a number of participants stated their commitment was based on the fact the supervisor had attributes they wished to develop in themselves.

*“They had strong work effort and took a lot of pride in their work and this flowed on to everyone”.*

*“I saw in this person the opportunity to learn from them”.*

*“This person was transparent and was able to handle stress”.*

**Figure 2** How employee decisions and experiences foster commitment to the supervisor



Further analysis identified that respectfulness and trust were key factors that had built commitment to a supervisor.

*“I have, this was based on mutual trust and respect, it went well beyond work ethic to how we saw and dealt with each other”.*

*“I have and I am still, it developed due to the respect and guidance they provided. I felt I could approach them and that they would support and respect my view”.*

*“I have and this was based on the respect she gave me and the recognition that I had something valuable to contribute”.*

*“I have to a previous supervisor, it was build on the fact she was open and honest”.*

The findings of this section have confirmed that the behaviours and actions of the supervisor can foster the development of employee commitment toward the supervisor. The strength of the relationship between the employee and supervisor has again been highlighted as a key to the development of employee commitment to the supervisor.

## **5.11 Conclusion**

This chapter explored the concept that organisational management practices foster and reinforce the development of commitment to the supervisor. It has highlighted that for the majority of participants the supervisor was most likely to influence their experience of work, care about their well being, foster a sense of future opportunities, and ensure there was equity in the workplace. It has been identified that the devolvement of responsibility to enact organisations policies to the supervisor had created the situation where employees attributed their experience of organisational policies to the supervisor and rather than build organisational commitment this served to build commitment to the supervisor. Moreover a fundamental change in the employment relationship has been identified in which it is the execution of workplace policies by the supervisor which is recognised and acknowledged by the employees. What has been found is that, the management practice to devolve responsibility for the management of employees and the lack of perceived consistency, created the perception that the organisation has little control or influence on the employee experience in the workplace. The outcome of this negatively impacts commitment to the organisation.

This chapter has provided further evidence of the importance of the employee-supervisor relationship in large public sector organisations and demonstrated that the existence of a strong relationship between employee and supervisor can foster the development of affective and normative commitment towards the supervisor. Furthermore, it has found that the behaviours, attributes and actions of the supervisor can foster and strengthen employee commitment toward the supervisor.



# Findings

## the employee perception of their investment in building a relationship with the supervisor

# 6

### 6.0 The employee perception of their investment in building a relationship with the supervisor

So far evidence has been provided of the implications of organisational size on employee commitment and of organisational practices and supervisor actions that support the development of employee commitment to the supervisor. A key finding was that the behaviour and actions of a supervisor and the existence of a strong relationship between employee and supervisor can foster the development of commitment to the supervisor, in particular affective commitment. This finding suggests that an employee will want to work with a particular supervisor due to the strength of the relationship between the two or because of the actions and behaviours of the supervisor.

In this chapter the employee perception of the investment that is required to develop and maintain a strong relationship with the supervisor will be explored. It will detail employee perception of the outcomes that this investment provides, highlighting the implications for employees if the relationship with the supervisor was fractured.

The literature on commitment provides two key concepts for this chapter. Firstly, side-bet theory states that organisational commitment will increase with the accumulation of side-bets (Cohen and Gattiker, 1992). Secondly, Becker (1960) suggests that employees who devote time and effort in mastering tasks or skills are betting that the time and effort invested will pay off. The work by Cohan and Gattiker (1992), and Becker (1960) provides important conceptual frameworks for this chapter. The chapter will seek to confirm the understanding of side-bets and demonstrate that the concept of side-bets is transferable to the construct of employee commitment to the supervisor.

It will highlight the concept that the accumulation of side-bets can occur between employee and supervisor and that where this does occur it will strengthen employee commitment to the supervisor. This chapter will also explore whether the concept that time and effort, which are two fundamental components of the traditional concept of side bets, are transferable to the construct of employee commitment to the supervisor.

## **6.1 The anticipated outcomes of building a relationship with the supervisor**

Currently, there is little empirical research that explores how continuance commitment and the concept of side-bets are influenced by the relationship between the employee and the supervisor. To explore some of the factors that reinforce the development of employee commitment to the supervisor, participants were asked what they perceived were the outcomes of developing and maintaining a strong relationship with their supervisor.

The findings identified that the majority of participants reported a desire and willingness to invest in, and build, a strong relationship with their supervisor. The underpinning premise was reported to be that this investment would lead to positive outcomes for the employee.

*“I feel that this “investment” should lead to better opportunities, autonomy and even promotion”.*

*“The supervisor plays such a strong role in providing rewards, although the organisation provides the actual remuneration this is influenced by the supervisor, as is the achievement of personal goals”.*

*“If you have a good working relationship with your manager they will include you more often, and develop confidence in you, so knowledge is one of the clear benefits”.*

*“Your future job prospects are greatly enhanced by getting along with you supervisor”.*

*“The benefits are clear; greater development opportunities and mentoring”.*

*“An outcome is that you are given opportunities and your career can be fostered, you can be put forward to take up the opportunities that exist”.*



Further analysis of participant responses to this question identified a sub-theme in the broad category of psychological contracts (Puchala, 2007; Rousseau, 1990) which indicated the perception that if you have a strong relationship with your supervisor there was a greater chance that your personal goals will be realised.

This research expands the current understanding of the psychological contract, which states that psychological contracts are an individual's expectations of the exchange relationship with an organisation (Rousseau, 1990). Whilst the study confirms the concept of the psychological contract as an individual's expectation of the exchange, and the factors of that exchange, identified as economic, socio-emotional and ideological (Thompson and Bunderson, 2003), this research has found that the target of the 'contract' was the supervisor rather than the organisation. Significantly, given that psychological contracts are said to have more impact on behaviour and attitudes than formalised contracts (Rousseau and Tijoriwala 1998), the significance of the supervisor being the target of the psychological contract cannot be understated in terms of the implications for organisations.

For the organisation this development introduces a new set of risks associated with job satisfaction and retention. This is due to the fact that many of the factors associated with job satisfaction and retention, such as autonomy and type of work undertaken by the employee, are directly influenced and shaped by the supervisor. One issue confronting the organisation is that it has little ability to influence or repair damage in the situation where an employee's psychological contract is not met because of the absence of systems or processes to surface issues impacting the employee.

Further analysis of the data identified that employees have lower expectations for long-term employment with an organisation, and recognise the importance of the supervisor in facilitating the "exchange" in a timely manner. Previous research has suggested that job loss, organisational downsizing and changes to structures may lead employees to adopt new beliefs or perceptions regarding their jobs and career (Csoka, 1995; Rousseau and Parks, 1992). This research has identified that one of the new beliefs stemming from changes in organisational structure and the devolved management environments is that the supervisor is integral to the employee experience in the workplace, and importantly to the rewards they receive for their contribution in the workplace.

This finding is supported by the fact that although structural change in public service organisations occurs frequently, employees often remain connected to the same supervisor. This outcome reinforces the perception that the relationship with the supervisor can provide additional support and protection. The findings also suggest that employees have low expectations of the organisation's role in the employment relationship; for many the relationship that they consider to be most important is the relationship they have with their supervisor.

The existence of the psychological contract with the supervisor is likely to support the development of employee commitment to the supervisor. Having identified that the psychological contract has moved from the employee-organisational relationship to the employee-supervisor relationship, it is critical to develop a clear understanding of the underpinning exchange concept and how this may impact employee commitment. This issue will be explored later in this chapter.

## **6.2 The benefits that result from developing a strong relationship with the supervisor**

Exploring the data from the previous section further identified strong “exchange” or “benefit” themes relating to feedback from the supervisor, clarity of role, trust, and the opportunity to provide feedback which was facilitated by an increased flow of information between the supervisor and the employee. Nadler, Cammann, and Mirvis (1980) found that feedback positively impacts performance as an error correlation device and helps to identify problems. Feedback is also reported as bi-directional, with subordinate feedback being an important dimension of organisational effectiveness (Rosebush and Tallarigo, 1991).

*“Developing and keeping a positive relationship with the supervisor is critical as it helps you understand what to deliver and when, so greater communication is the outcome”.*

*“Feedback is a key outcome, you get it quickly and clearly, you know if you have done something good or bad”.*

*“It means that you can have an open and honest discussion about things, and that when things go wrong you feel that you can go and talk about the issue”.*

*“In terms of positives this translates to clear direction, knowing what your role is and what needs to be achieved along the way without fumbling about in the dark”.*

*“You are often more aware of what is going on, and that can only help where you are planning work and trying to ensure that deadlines are met, you often get information and knowledge that others do not”.*

*“I think it makes working life so much simpler, and more enjoyable and rewarding and the benefits that flow are that you know more about what is going on. There is less stress from not being out of the loop and you can get advice and can give feedback”.*

The findings confirm the importance of feedback as a key component of building an effective workplace. The research also confirms the importance of feedback being a bi-directional process that provides employees with clarity and acts as mechanism for employees to provide information to the supervisors. Further analysis of participant responses indicated that having a good relationship with the supervisor simply made coming to work easier. The existence of a strong relationship was reported to reduce employee stress and anxiety levels.

*“A benefit that I see from a strong relationship is that it can make the work environment so much better, you want to come to work if you have a good relationship and can be open and honest with them”.*

*“For me the value is ensuring I don't have a stressful work environment, that I can approach the supervisor and have discussion with them and share what is on my mind, that I can approach them with ideas and show initiate and they are responsive to this”.*

*“I spend a fair amount of time at work so it's important that work itself is not stressful, so this is the incentive for me and means that I can look forward to coming to work”.*

*“I think it just provides a better working relationship and enables things to get done, I have been in circumstances where I have not had a close relationship with the supervisor, and we have not been able to get things done properly and this lead to a miserable and demoralising workplace”.*

This finding provides evidence of the significance of the employee-supervisor relationship in shaping the employee experience of work. It is likely that employees attribute positive outcomes to the investment they have made in developing their relationship with the supervisor. The experience of positive outcomes is also likely to support the development of affective commitment targeted at the supervisor. As Chen et al. (2001) suggest, the psychological state of the employee is likely to be one where the employee demonstrating affective commitment will choose to remain because they want to.

Analysis of the data identified that the decision taken by the employee to develop and maintain the relationship with their supervisor often led to the creation of a trusting and respectful work environment, which often resulted in a sense of greater empowerment. Robinson (1996) defines trust as ‘ones expectation or belief about the likelihood that another’s future actions will be beneficial, or at least not detrimental, to ones own interests’. Nyhan (1999) stated that trust represents the level of confidence that one individual has in another person or entity to act in a fair, ethical and predictable manner. Rotter (1971) defines trust as ‘the expectancy held by an individual or group, that the word, promise, or written statement of another or group can be relied upon’. Participant responses suggested that the development of a trusting relationship led to a number of beneficial outcomes.

*“Building trust is an important outcome, which means that if you need to escalate issues you will get someone who is willing to listen”.*

*“It just makes it a lot easier to get up in the morning and go to work if you have relationships that you can count on and trust”.*

*“Being trusted to get on with the job and feel valued and that if your work is good that you get recognised”.*

*“Trust is important, you have to feel you can trust them and they have to trust you”.*

This research confirms the importance of the concept of trust within the employee-supervisor relationship. It reaffirms the work of Blake and Mouton (1984) who view trust as synonymous with mutual respect and a key to developing affective commitment. Moreover, this research supports the current literature by identifying that the development of a trusting relationship between employee and supervisor

supports the development of affective commitment to the supervisor. This finding also suggests that employees are likely to want to remain working for a supervisor with whom they have a trusting relationship.

An emergent theme of empowerment was identified in the analysis of the data pertaining to trust. Block (1988) indicated that employee empowerment is linked to organisational effectiveness. Nyhan (1999) suggests that empowerment is facilitated by creating an environment in which employees take more responsibility and have more authority for the accomplishment of their work tasks. Participant responses identified the theme of empowerment as an outcome of strong relationship with the supervisor.

*“The empowerment and the trust factor, knowing that I don’t have to wait for them to sign everything off and there are no major ramifications for doing so”.*

*“An outcome is that you can build a sense of trust which encourages and empowers you to be innovative and courageous”.*

The findings of this section indicated that the development of a strong relationship with the supervisor led to employees feeling empowered in the workplace. This research suggests that it is likely that this outcome would foster the development of affective commitment toward the supervisor as employees attributed this outcome to their relationship with the supervisor.

Commitment has previously been found to be related to many attitudinal and behavioural consequences including motivation and job satisfaction (Allen and Meyer, 1990, Meyer and Allen (1997). Analysis of the findings of this section relating to the benefits experienced by employees as a result of developing a strong relationship with the supervisor identified a significant theme which linked empowerment, feedback, communication and trust to one single key outcome: autonomy. The existence of autonomy was reported by participants as the factor that fostered the highest levels of commitment to the supervisor.

Participants reported that the benefit of greater communication and the existence of a trusting relationship with their supervisor provided the framework for greater autonomy and the ability to influence their role at work which resulted in increased job satisfaction and high levels of motivation in the workplace.

*“Autonomy is really important for me because it relates as respect and confidence. If I am allowed to do my own thing it is because the goals we are working toward are clear and I can be trusted to meet those goals, in my view autonomy can be a measure of the strength of the relationship”.*

*“The key outcome is autonomy. I like to operate to the extent that I can be given something to do and I will do it rather than be micro managed”.*

*“Autonomy is the main advantage; it is an outcome of the relationship”.*

*“Having autonomy and role flexibility are very important and these are the outcomes that I seek from the relationship”.*

*“Autonomy is the main outcome you seek as this gives you the freedom to work as you want”.*

*“I think autonomy and the type of work you are given are the benefits, if you have built up a rapport and proven yourself this is what you experience, to direct the work is a reward in itself”.*

In a large public sector organisation where management practices are devolved to the supervisor it is likely that employees who experience high levels of autonomy will attribute this outcome to the strength of their relationship with the supervisor. This outcome will foster a sense of affective commitment toward the supervisor, that is, the employee will choose or want to remain working for the supervisor. The central component supporting the development of affective commitment is that the employee must consider the supervisor as the key to their experience in the workplace.

The findings of this section have identified that employees believe that developing a strong relationship with the supervisor is likely to lead to positive benefits and outcomes. It has been reported that employees who experience positive outcomes in the workplace attribute this to the relationship that they have with their supervisor. This is likely to foster the development of commitment to the supervisor. The next section explores further the operation of side-bets and whether employees will invest effort to develop the relationship that they have with the supervisor with the belief that this investment will provide a positive return. The concept of an exchange based approach to commitment relies on the ability of the parties to fulfil the exchange. The decision by the organisation to devolve responsibility to the supervisor provides the basis for the supervisor to fulfil this expectation.

### 6.3 Side-bets are transferable to the employee supervisor relationship

The literature on side bets and continuance commitment is best described by Becker (1960) who states that the term “side-bets” refers to anything the individual has “invested” (time, effort, money) that would be lost if the individual was to leave the organisation. Allen and Meyer (1990, pg 3) state that this commitment can be developed by “the individual’s recognition of the costs associated with discontinuing the activity or leaving the organisation”. Fundamental to both of these definitions of side-bets is the concept of leaving the organisation. This research seeks to explore two aspects of the concept of side bets as they relate to the employee-supervisor commitment. Firstly, it will explore whether the “side-bets” that employees believe they invest in the development and maintenance of their relationship with the supervisor are consistent with those described by the literature on organisational commitment. Secondly, it will explore whether side-bets are perceived to be lost if the individual leaves or fractures the employee-supervisor relationship?

If the research determines that employees believe that the investment they make in developing the relationship with the supervisor would be lost if the relationship was fractured. This finding would provide a deep understanding of how commitment to supervisors operates. It would also have significant implications for the organisation, as it would indicate that the loss of employee-supervisor side-bets could disenfranchise employees and possibly lead to decreased performance and increased turnover of employees. To begin the exploration of the concept of employee-supervisor side-bets, participants were asked to identify what they believed they had invested in developing the relationship with their supervisor.

The findings indicated that participants believed they invested considerable effort into the development of the relationship with their supervisor. The analysis identified that the side-bets that employees invest in the development of the relationship with the supervisor included time, energy, physical and emotional effort. In several cases the side-bet was reported as being available to do “whatever was required whenever it was required”. This was done with the belief that this action would be recognised and that the employees effort would be rewarded.

*“Time, effort and emotion energy and going above and beyond in terms of managing the individual as opposed to managing the work, and a lot of blood sweat and tears to try and make it work”.*



*“Time, physical and emotional effort is the input. I put myself into my work and I do go out of my way and I put in the extra hours. I can’t separate the emotional factor as it is important”.*

*“I have put a lot into the relationship, it is a combination of time and effort, and being flexible enough to see that everyone has a bad day and not to take things personally when they are having a bad day”.*

*“I have put time and emotional effort, energy, to work out and even watch and listen so to see how they work and what they needed, and what type of personality they are and how to manage them”.*

The findings of this research confirm the existence of side-bets and the form that these side-bets assume as described by the current literature. The findings of this research confirm the work of Griffen and Batemen (1996) who suggested that side-bet theory is an exchange-based approach to commitment. This research has identified that employees believe that they would receive beneficial outcomes in recognition of the contribution they have made in the workplace. What is different from previous research is that the employees have linked the beneficial outcomes they receive directly to helping the supervisor.

This research expands the literature on commitment by identifying that side-bets exist between employee and supervisor. This is a significant finding and provides further evidence of how the concept of employee commitment to supervisor works. It also provides evidence that employees in large public sector organisations perceive their investment of effort or side-bets should be targeted towards the needs and requirements of the supervisor.

This finding has clear ramifications for large public sector organisations in terms of the potential to reduce or damage employee motivation if action is taken by the organisation that has the potential to damage this relationship. This finding may also explain employment trends within the APS particularly pertaining to mobility, as employees will be less likely to fracture the relationship with the supervisor in order to seek opportunities elsewhere. Finally, the finding also suggests that organisational change initiatives and restructures have the potential to disenfranchise employees who perceive their side-bets are lost as a result of a fractured employee-supervisor relationship.



There are numerous implications for large public sector organisations, one of the strongest is the fact that employees will be tempted to do what is asked or required of them by the supervisor, even when this action may not always be in the best interest of the organisation. Another issue is that access to side bets or positive outcomes is reliant on the continuation of the relationship with the supervisor; not only could this impact mobility it may also impact the ability of the organisation to deploy the best resources to key positions in the organisation.

The literature on side-bets suggests that the consequences associated with leaving an organisation increase with age and tenure due to the time and effort that an employee has invested within the organisation. Hackett, Bycio and Hausdorf (1994) reported a significant relationships between continuance commitment and both age and tenure. Further analysis of the data was undertaken to explore whether employees considered that the investment of time, effort and emotional energy required to develop and maintain the relationship with the supervisor increased the perceived side-bets that would be lost if the relationship was fractured. The findings indicated that participants believed that the greater the investment they had made in building and maintaining the relationship with the supervisor, the more difficult it was to leave or fracture the relationship.

*“The investment I have made in building the relationship makes it hard or difficult to leave a supervisor, if I had not put so much into the relationship it would be easier to work elsewhere”.*

*“For me if I had not put a lot into the relationship it would be easier to move to another role”.*

*“The size of the investment and effort you put in makes it harder to leave. I have devoted time and emotional effort and been prepared to do what is required when required, even if it is out of the ordinary. This is what is required to build a relationship”.*

*“If you have worked to develop the relationship you have to think twice about moving particularly if you have built up a strong relationship with the current supervisor”.*

*“I recognise the need to commit an amount of time to building a relationship with the supervisor, but the more you commit the harder it gets leave and work else where”.*

*“There have been times where I have put in a lot of effort and time and as a result it was very hard for me to move from this relationship—the time aspect is a key factor”.*

This finding provides strong evidence of the impact of side-bets on employee commitment to the supervisor and the extent to which the supervisor has become the key figure in public service organisations. It also confirms that side-bets are transferable to the construct of employee-supervisor commitment.

Further analysis identified a supporting correlation whereby participants who did not believe they had invested a lot into the development of the relationship with the supervisor, or who thought that the investment had not resulted in positive outcomes found the decision to fracture the relationship easier. This result provides a clear example of the concept of the exchange approach to commitment in action, the failure of one party to fulfil the exchange agreement ultimately limiting the development of commitment.

*“I believe I do invest a large amount, it takes a lot of my time and you have to give extra effort, where I feel I have not put so much into the relationship it is easier to leave”.*

*“I do feel that I have put an enormous effort in, and if I had not put so much into the relationships it would be easier to move”.*

*“I have an example where I had put a lot into a previous relationship at work, this effort was not acknowledged so in the end it was an easy decision to go, I was not getting anywhere and I was putting in all the effort”.*

*“I do put a lot into the relationship and I am not prepared to walk away quickly but once I get to the point where I feel this has not been recognised I don't care how much work that I have put in. I walk away”.*

The findings indicate that the level of the investment, or side bet, between supervisor and employees operates in the same manner as the traditional understanding of the concept in fostering commitment. It has demonstrated that the accumulation of side-bets have a direct impact on the strength of employee commitment to the supervisor. Moreover it has identified that the greater the perceived investment in the relationship the more employees considered they potentially stand to lose should the relationship

with the supervisor be fractured. What has also been highlighted is that where the investment is not considerable or where there has been little beneficial outcome that the decision to leave the supervisor is much easier. This confirms the longstanding understanding of the impact of side-bets on commitment. However an important question has been raised: how much time will an employee invest in developing a relationship before deciding the relationship is not beneficial to them? The next section explores this critical question and identifies a two stage process which employees have been found to use to inform their decision.

## **6.4 Employees invest their time to build a relationship with the supervisor**

The previous section identified that the concept of side-bets was transferable to the construct of employee-supervisor commitment. Chapters three and four of the research established that in a large public sector organisation the employee-supervisor relationship has greater significance due largely to the delineation of power and responsibilities to manage the workplace to the supervisor. Given the importance of the relationship between the employee and the supervisor participants were asked how long they believed it took to build a relationship with a supervisor, and what length of time would they invest in developing a relationship with a supervisor before making a decision that the relationship was likely or not to be beneficial.

The findings indicate that participants believed they could quickly identify and make a judgement on the likelihood that a relationship with the supervisor could be beneficial to them. For the majority of participants this decision could be made within three months.

*“I normally work out that a relationship will not work quickly – within three months you will know if there is a complete gulf between your values and theirs”.*

*“I would know within 6 to 8 weeks if a relationship would work or not, when it got to the 3 month stage I would be actively looking to leave”.*

*“I will give a supervisor 3 months before leaving, during this time I will attempt to foster a productive and positive relationship with the supervisor”.*

*“I will do the best I can to abide by a new supervisor but if I feel my values don’t align then I will leave. I usually decide this within a month or two”.*

*“It takes me about three months with a new supervisor, I try my hardest to do what is required of me, and in a number of cases I have decided at about 3 months that it would not work as we were too different”.*

The findings of this section demonstrate that employees will form a judgment about the potential of a relationship with the supervisor and, therefore make an early assessment and a decision to stay or leave, very early in the working relationship. A number of participants stated that this was often based on the belief that if their values did not align with the supervisor, over time they would find it hard to work for the supervisor. This finding is not inconsistent with the work of Wayne (1987) who found that the extent to which supervisors liked their subordinates was positively related to the subordinate’s performance appraisal.

The decision by an employee to move on to another role quickly is consistent with the findings of chapters three and four, which identified that due to the devolved management practices employees in large public sector organisations recognise the employee-supervisor relationship has a critical impact on employee development, and the opportunities they receive in the workplace. The findings indicate that employees are less likely to invest significant effort if they consider the relationship is not likely to provide beneficial outcomes.

This finding is consistent with an exchange based approach to commitment and it suggests that employees are aware that the supervisor is critical to their experience in the workplace and that they will make a decision about the potential of a relationship with the supervisor to deliver positive outcomes within a short period of time.

The findings also highlighted that once an employee had determined that they could develop an effective and beneficial relationship with a supervisor the employees were willing to invest a considerable period of time to build the relationship. The employees reported that it took 6 to 12 months to build a strong relationship with the supervisor.

*“I say it would take 12 months to build a good rapport”.*

*“I think it takes 6 to 12 months for the relationship to build to the point that I can say that I know exactly where this person is coming from and, therefore, understand their qualities”.*

*“It does take a time to feel that you have developed a strong relationship with a supervisor, on average I would suggest 8 to 12 months”.*

*“For the most part you will know within a month that you can build a relationship and a rapport but that may take some time to develop. I would say 12 months”.*

On exploring this further it was identified that participants believed their relationship with the supervisor needed to be tested across a range of situations and under varying degrees of work pressure before they would make a decision on the true worth of the relationship relative to the investment they had made.

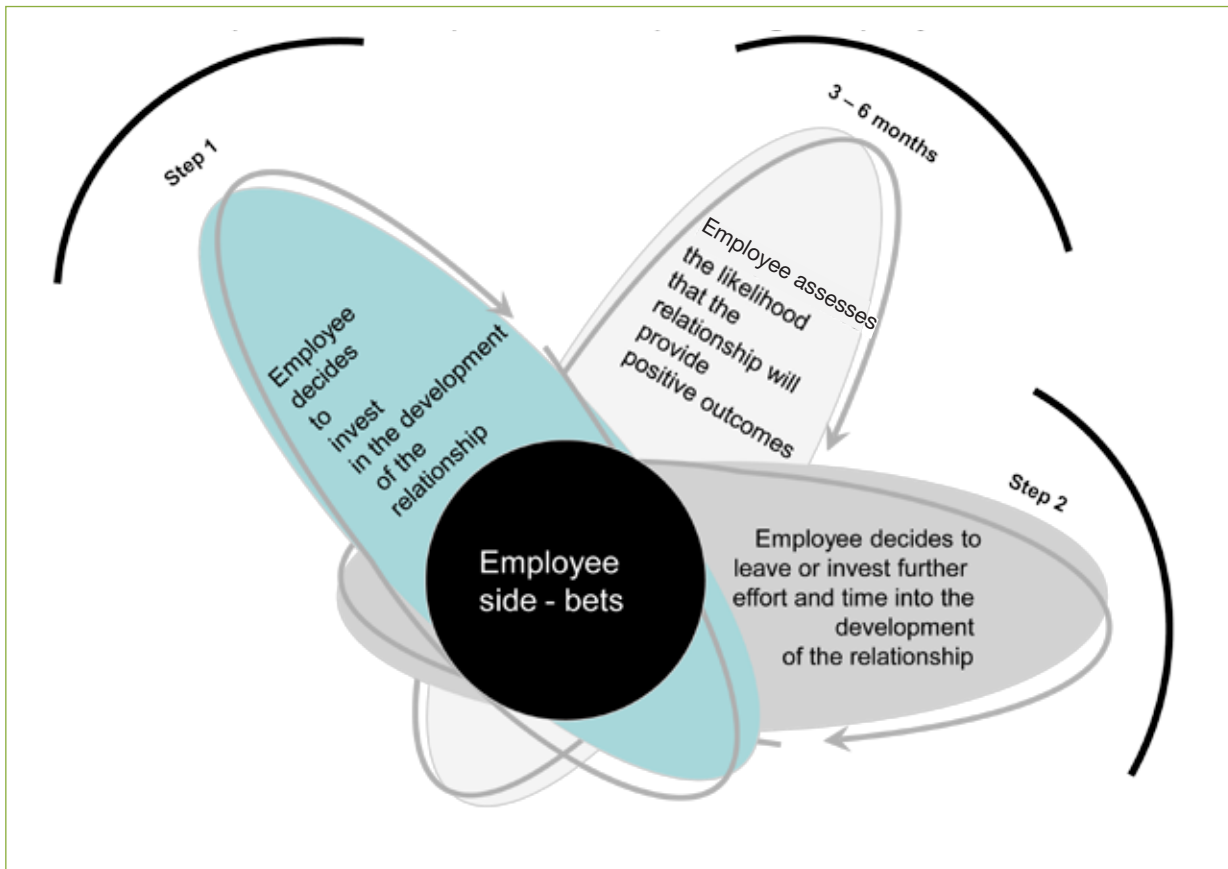
*“You have to work with someone for a period of time – a person’s values are tested by situations, you may take on face value and believe they have the same values as you, but until they are tested you can’t know how they will react and it is then that you see their core values are”.*

*“How the relationship stands up to pressure and failures, the advice you get to give and what you deliver for the supervisor, and their personality, all of these things will play out over this time.”*

This research adds to the knowledge on side-bet theory by introducing a two stage side-bet decision making process as illustrated in Figure 3. The analysis has identified a new element to the commitment model which provides new insight into how commitment develops and the actions that support this process. The findings of the research indicated that an employee will invest a set amount of time to develop and test their relationship with the supervisor. After this period the employee will make an assessment and decision on the perceived worth of the relationship, and whether it is beneficial for them to stay or that they are best to leave. The decision to stay and, therefore, to invest further in the development of the relationship increases the side-bets that the employee has invested in the relationship. Employees were aware that this also meant that they would have more to lose should the relationship not work out.

This provides new evidence into how concept of commitment to the supervisor works in practice, providing further insight into how the accumulation of side-bets directly impacts the employee commitment to the supervisor. This builds on the earlier findings of this chapter which identified that the greater the perceived investment in the relationship, the more employees considered they potentially stand to lose should the relationship be fractured.

**Figure 3** The two step side-bet process impacting employee-commitment



The current understanding of side-bet theory, based on the concept of commitment to the organisation, suggests that the accumulation of side-bets will build continuance commitment and therefore commitment to the organisation. The two stage process, as presented in Figure 3, has emerged as a new concept resulting from the increased significance of the supervisor and the emergence of the concept of employee commitment to the supervisor. In the first stage, the employee quickly determines the likelihood of the development of a successful relationship with the supervisor. In the second stage the employee then makes a second side-bet decision to invest a further amount of time to develop and test the relationship.

This research has found that employees perceive that a return on their investment should start to occur from the 12 month mark. This finding raises the question: what is the impact of fracturing the employee-supervisor relationship? Is this the same as the traditional understanding of side-bets which would suggest that these side-bets are

linked to the primary relationship? Therefore, from the perspective of the employee, maintaining the relationship with the supervisor is critical for realisation of the side-bet. The findings of these questions may have clear ramifications for the organisation in terms of the potential for greater turnover and reduced levels of employee engagement.

## 6.5 The impact of fracturing the employee-supervisor relationship

There is little empirical evidence on the employee perception of the costs associated with fracturing the employee-supervisor relationship. In describing a traditional perspective of organisation commitment Meyer and Allen (1984) state that side bets refer to anything of value the individual has invested that would be lost if he or she was to leave the organisation. To explore whether the concept of a lost investment was transferable to the construct of commitment to the supervisor, participants were asked what they perceived were consequences of fracturing the employee-supervisor relationship. The findings indicated that if the relationship with the supervisor was fractured, all of the effort in developing the relationship with the supervisor and the potential for future benefits were lost.

*“If you leave the supervisor, or they leave, you lose all the effort that you have put into that relationship”.*

*“The effort is lost, this has happened to me when my last supervisor left the organisation, they knew how I operated and had the history and knowledge of how I worked and what I had achieved”.*

*“It becomes wasted effort. The fact is that only the current supervisor knows the amount of effort and the work that you have put into something. I think the biggest thing that you lose is the development opportunities that stem from a good relationship”.*

*“I don’t think that the knowledge they have on what you have done and the effort you have put is transferable to the next supervisor so the effort is lost”.*

This is a key finding as it suggests that the side-bets that serve to strengthen commitment to the supervisor operate in the same manner as the traditional understanding of continuance commitment. Further analysis identified that, in



addition to the perception that the effort invested in building the relationship was lost, participants also believed that access to future opportunities and, therefore, their career, was impacted when this occurred.

*“The effort is lost, but it is more than this as you also lose access to future opportunities. The supervisor knew exactly what you did and what you were capable of. When the change happens it is virtually a clean slate and you might not get the same sort of opportunities”.*

*“All the effort is lost and in the situation of the supervisor leaving your career can stall for a period as it takes time to build a new relationship”.*

*“I feel that if you leave a supervisor you lose a lot of the benefits that you have built up. I have seen a number of supervisors move on, each of who were good mentors and at the time were teaching me a lot, not being able to gain from their experience and what they can teach had an impact on my career development”*

*“What you have developed and the outcomes that you experience are not transferable. I think that you lose all of the intangibles, so it is a waste of your time and effort”.*

This finding has strong implications for employee motivation and engagement. It could also result in higher turnover or lead to disengaged and disempowered employees. It suggests that when the employee-supervisor relationship is fractured employees feel that they have to start again from the beginning and build a relationship with the new supervisor. It highlights that employees believed that they were disadvantaged by this, and that they would have to invest greater effort into the new relationship to ensure that they limited the disadvantage experienced by the loss or fracture of the previous relationship.

*“Each time the relationship is broken you have to start from scratch with someone new”.*

*“Starting and building up the relationship again, each time you have put in significant effort to do this and it can take time”.*

*“You have to start again and it is like any new relationship you have to learn about each other and develop trust”.*



*“You have to prove yourself again, and there is always an uncertainty that what you will deliver is what they are after, if you get this wrong it can take a long time to recover”.*

This finding provides evidence of the importance of the employee-supervisor relationship and the implications of fracturing the relationship for employees. Chapters three and four identified the role of the supervisor as key to the employee experience of work. Further analysis of the data identified that employees feared that any fracture of the relationship could create the situation where they could end up with a poor supervisor. This would result in wasted effort, and create the situation where they would need to move on and therefore invest even more effort to develop a relationship that provided the same level of outcomes that they currently received.

*“One of the biggest factors with a break in the relationship is the chance that you will get a poor supervisor, if you had a supervisor who you thought was good and supportive, this becomes a major consideration as if you leave you may get someone who does not provide or support these opportunities”.*

*“There is inherent risk in moving to work for someone you don’t know as they may not be as open or supportive as your previous supervisor”.*

*“There is a real fear of the unknown and what type of supervisor am I going to end up with”.*

The findings of this section demonstrated that employees perceive there are clear consequences associated with the fracturing the relationship with a supervisor. This includes the perception that the side-bets invested in building the relationship and the outcomes from this investment are lost. Furthermore, employees believe that there is a risk that they may have to invest considerable effort, at worst on a number of occasions, before they experience benefits similar to those they associated with their current supervisor. This research extends the concept of continuance commitment and side-bets beyond the current definition of an attachment or linking of the employee to the organisation, thereby indicating that the concept of continuance commitment and side-bets is transferable to the construct of employee-supervisor commitment.

This research adds to the knowledge of commitment theory by identifying that any fracture of the employee-supervisor relationship has the potential for negative consequences for employees. It also requires employees to invest new and often

additional effort to build a comparative relationship with a new supervisor. This research has also found that employees fear that the next relationship may not develop as well as the previous which as a result could impact their experience of work and future opportunities. The next section of this chapter explores the implications of an employee re-linking with a supervisor. The literature on commitment and side-bets is yet to explore the implications on side-bets if an employee was to rejoin the organisation after a separation. This research explores this concept by identifying the potential for the re-emergence of side-bet benefits and the associated beneficial outcomes if the employee re-linked with a supervisor.

## **6.6 Side-bet outcomes re-emerge if the employee re-links with the supervisor**

The findings of the previous section indicated that if the employee-supervisor relationship was fractured the benefits that the employee received as a result of the effort they had invested in the relationship could be lost. In response to this finding the participants were asked a supplementary question which explored the concept that if the employee re-linked with the supervisor at a later stage would the benefits they had experienced during the previous relationship return? There is little, if any, literature on the concept of side-bet re-emergence on the occasion of an employee re-linking with a previous supervisor.

This research adds to the knowledge and literature by identifying the re-emergence of side-bet outcomes if the employee re-links with a supervisor. The findings of this section highlighted that the majority of participants believed, based on their own experience, that if they re-linked with a supervisor with whom they had had a strong relationship that many, if not all, of the positive outcomes that they had previously experienced, such as autonomy, trust and high levels of communication would return. This finding suggests that employee side-bets are not restricted to a point in time relationship with the supervisor.

*“The benefits can reappear down the track. I have been in the public service for long enough to have noticed that opportunities and benefits that disappeared with a change of supervisor reappear if you link back with a previous supervisor down the track”.*

*“If you re-link with a supervisor the investment and the benefits from the previous relationship carry forward”.*

*“I have had the experience each time I have re-linked with a supervisor, the relationship reformed and I experienced the benefits built from the previous working relationship”.*

*“I have experienced this when a supervisor has moved, down the track I worked again for this person and all of the key aspects of the relationship came back immediately”.*

*“If you go back to work for a supervisor the rapport and effort or the memory of what you put in is transferable to that new relationship”.*

This is a significant finding in relation to our understanding of commitment and how commitment works in practice. The findings of this research add to the knowledge on commitment by identifying that employee side-bets and the outcomes experienced as a result of the relationship they have with the supervisor can return if the employee re-links with the supervisor who was the target of the side-bets at a future time. This finding suggests that the employee-supervisor relationship has the potential to provide positive outcomes both now and into the future. It provides strong evidence of the significance of the employee-supervisor relationship.

The findings of this research indicate that the potential for re-linking with a supervisor creates the situation where an employee may consider that future benefits and opportunities may be influenced or even dependant on the strength of the employee's current relationship with the supervisor. This realisation may influence the way that the employee behaves and it could encourage them to invest considerable effort into the development of the relationship with the supervisor. Given this, the next section explores the idea that employees target their efforts (side-bets) at supervisors who they believe are likely to be successful in the future. Such a finding would expand the understanding of commitment as we currently know it to include a component of commitment that is focused on the future.

## **6.7 Investing in future opportunities**

According to the traditional view of side-bet theory, organisational commitment will increase with the accumulation of side-bets (Cohen and Gattiker, 1992). This research has found that the concept of side-bets is transferable to the employee-supervisor relationship. The research has also identified that employees perceive that they invest considerable effort (side-bets) in developing and maintaining a relationship with their

supervisor, and that this investment often can lead to beneficial outcomes for the employee. This research has previously established the importance of the supervisor in a large public sector organisation in relation to the provision of development of career opportunities.

There is, however, little empirical research that explores the concept that an employee will invest effort into a relationship due to their perception that the supervisor is likely to be successful, which may, in turn, provide greater opportunities for the employee into the future. To explore this concept the participants were asked if they had assisted their supervisor in a manner which, as a result, would enhance the performance and standing of the supervisor and, if so, what was the motivation for this action?

The findings indicated that the majority of the participants believed they individually went well beyond the standard requirement and that they had directly assisted the supervisor to achieve outcomes that would increase the standing of the supervisor within the organisation.

*“I do with the full awareness that they will be seen as the high performer.”*

*“I do, it is my nature, I like to help people out and I try to protect or help my supervisor so that they are seen in a positive manner”.*

*“I think it is my role to help the supervisor, if I can help in any way to lift their level of performance or work standards then I believe I should”.*

*“I would say yes, and if and when I get the opportunity or am required I do go beyond what is expected and do the extra yards for them”.*

The data highlighted that employees will invest effort that would as a result increase the performance and standing of the supervisor. However, it was also revealed that a large number of the participants had strategically aligned themselves with an identified supervisor due to their belief that this person would be successful. The analysis highlighted that the majority of participants believed that as they had invested considerable effort into building a strong relationship with the supervisor they had an interest in the continued success of the supervisor as this may provide opportunities for the employee.

*“I do align myself to particular supervisors and invest effort to help them succeed, this can set you up, not just for the job you are doing now rather for the job that you maybe doing into the future”.*

*“Self interest, you take the gamble that there will be benefit as a result of the extra effort and work; most of the time there is”.*

*“In a large organisation if you improve the ‘value’ of someone to the organisation, this often leads to better things for them and then potentially for you”.*

*“I have gone beyond to achieve results for the supervisor I did this to help achieve the outcomes the organisation wanted but I did it with a view that if they succeeded there would be a benefit for me in turn”.*

This research has expanded the literature on continuance commitment by introducing the concept that employees actively invest effort (side-bets) which the employees consider have the potential to provide both short and long-term outcomes. This finding provides further evidence of the perceived importance of the supervisor in a large public sector organisation. It also clearly highlights the extent to which employees now believe that it is the supervisor, rather than the organisation, which has the strongest influence on their career. This research introduces the concept that employees will actively target and invest effort into a relationship with a supervisor who they believe is likely to have a successful career as this could provide benefits and outcomes to the employee in the future. In this situation the employee is not only investing effort with the expectation of a return in the short term, the effort is considered to be an investment in future opportunities as well.

The concept of a form of employee commitment based on the idea that the employee will, at a later stage, receive a positive outcome from the investment (side-bets) has not been explored in the literature. This research acknowledges that for this to occur it requires the supervisor to be successful and for the employee to re-link with the supervisor at a later stage. The failure of either to occur will render the side-bet as unrealised. Regardless, the findings of this section suggest that employees in large public sector organisations have low expectations of the organisations role in providing for future opportunities and will invest effort into building and strengthening the relationship that they have with their supervisor with the view that this investment will also provide future positive outcomes. The analysis has identified that employees believe that it is from a strong network of relationships that future opportunities will emerge.

## 6.8 Conclusion

The objective of this chapter was to explore employee perception of the investment that is required to develop and maintain a strong relationship with the supervisor, and to identify the outcomes and impact of this investment on the employee-supervisor relationship. The chapter demonstrated that the concept of side-bets was transferable to the employee-supervisor relationship and that the accumulation of side-bets between employee and supervisor serves to strengthen employee commitment to the supervisor. The chapter highlighted that time, effort and emotional energy were considered by employees as their investment (side-bets).

The chapter found that the majority of participants reported a desire and willingness to invest in, and build, a strong relationship with their supervisor and that, in their view this will provide a range of outcomes including increased autonomy. Employees believe the strength of the relationship with the supervisor largely determines the opportunities and rewards that they received. The importance of feedback and trust between supervisor and employee were confirmed. The chapter introduced a two stage framework for employee side-bets. The first stage is the decision by the employee to invest up to 3 months to determine the likelihood of a strong relationship forming between the supervisor and the employee. The second stage requires a further decision to invest up to 12 months to build a strong relationship with the supervisor. It was reported that this was the point at which employees consider that they would start to experience benefits such as greater autonomy.

The chapter also identified that if the relationship with the supervisor is fractured the side-bets and benefits are potentially lost. The research also highlighted that if the employee re-linked with the supervisor the benefits and outcomes they previously experienced were likely to re-emerge. Finally, this chapter highlighted that employees will target and invest considerable effort to build a strong relationship with supervisors who they feel have high potential. This decision is made with the view that if the supervisor is successful this could lead to greater opportunities for the employee into the future.

# What are the implications of this research?

# 7

## 7.0 Research discussion: the implications of this research

This research set out to explore and develop a deeper understanding of the factors, relationships and drivers which support the development of employee commitment to the supervisor. The research has provided evidence of how employee commitment to the supervisor is developed and how this form of commitment impacts the employee and the organisation.

The research questions which guided this work were:

1. What is the impact of the employee-supervisor relationship on employee commitment?
2. What are the factors that support the development of the foci of commitment to the supervisor?
3. How do the traditional components of affective, normative and continuance commitment, including the concept of side-bets and exchange impact the foci of commitment to the supervisor?
4. How does commitment work in practice from the perspective of the employee?

In relation to the question of identifying the factors that support the development of the foci of commitment to the supervisor and the objective of building a deeper understanding of how commitment works, this research has demonstrated that the size of the organisation and the management practices used within the organisation can lead to a change in the way that employee commitment works. The implication of the findings is that the construct of employee commitment in its present form is incomplete and it should be expanded. It also suggests that the way commitment is



fostered within organisations needs to be re-examined to take into account the role of the supervisor. This research adds significant insight into the impact of organisational size and management practices on the development of employee commitment, which prior to this research had received little attention in the literature.

The research has explored the development of commitment from the perspective of the employee. The findings of this research provide new insight into how employee commitment works and how it is developed. The research has identified a range of drivers that support the development of employee commitment to the supervisor. This form of commitment has received little attention in the literature and or within APS organisations. As a result, the implications of this form of commitment for the organisation and employees have been largely ignored.

The current paradigm of employee commitment is built on the concept that it is the relationship between the employee and the organisation that forms the basis of employee commitment. This research has shown that the size of the organisation can create the situation where the idea of a relationship or link between the employee and the organisation is brought into question. What this research has demonstrated is that due to the size of the organisation many employees do not believe that they are individually important, these employees do not feel a sense of attachment to the organisation, and do not believe that the organisation can fulfil the exchange component that is crucial to the development of employee commitment.

This has created the situation where the employees have sought an attachment and a sense of their importance from other relationships within the organisation. This research has identified that, in a large organisation the void which has been created is being filled by the role that the supervisor is playing in the organisation. The research extends the knowledge on how employee commitment is developed from the perspective of the employee, by highlighting that the relationship the employee has with their immediate supervisor is the key to building employee commitment. Furthermore, the research has found that employees recognise the need to invest time and effort into developing and maintaining this relationship.

This research provides a greater understanding of how commitment works and some of the factors that impact the development of employee commitment, these factors are highlighted in Figure one and demonstrated in Figure two. These findings meet the objective to build a deeper understanding of how commitment works in practice



from the perspective of the employee. Figure two highlights that the components of affective, normative or continuous commitment elements may occur in any order, however each section subsequently influences and supports the development of the next, which strengthens employee commitment to the supervisor.

What is illustrated is that each component of commitment can serve to foster and subsequently strengthen employee commitment to the supervisor. Firstly, the employee recognises the need to develop a strong relationship with the supervisor, the employee then invests effort in the development of this relationship. This action introduces a level of continuous commitment. When the employee receives a reward or recognition for their efforts this is attributed to the supervisor and the relationship they have formed. The key aspect of Figure 2 is that it highlights that the development of affective, normative or continuous commitment can occur in any order. It also indicates that each section subsequently influences and reinforces the development of the next, therefore, strengthening employee commitment to the supervisor.

In relation to the question to explore the impact of the employee-supervisor relationship on employee commitment the findings of this research indicate that a participative management style is likely to support the development of employee commitment; however, in a large organisation this commitment is likely to be to the supervisor. This research has also demonstrated that in a large public sector organisation the employee-supervisor relationship is the main conduit by which employees consider that they have a voice. In practice, the decision of a supervisor to foster a participative management style which acknowledges and considers employee views and opinions not only provides employees with a sense of voice this action builds employee commitment to the supervisor.

The research found that employees perceive that equity in the workplace is directly impacted by the supervisor and that employees are likely to develop a sense of affective commitment toward a supervisor who maintains equity in the workplace. The research demonstrated that employees who perceive that their position is equitable are likely to attribute this to their direct supervisor rather than the organisational policies. Finally, this research has identified that once an employee locates a supervisor who they believe provides an equitable working environment they often will choose to remain working with this supervisor.

In relation to the question to identify factors that support the development of the foci of commitment to the supervisor this research has identified that many of the people management practices and systems used within the organisation serve to elevate the role and importance of the supervisor, critically this includes the ability of the supervisor to provide recognition, opportunities and rewards. The research highlights the need for the organisation to examine the people management systems, practices and processes used within the organisation to ensure that they are driving appropriate behaviours and performance. Importantly, the people management systems must be equitable and recognise the value of all employees to the organisation.

The failure by the organisation to recognise and respond to this new form of commitment has the potential to create the situation where the management practices implemented by the organisation to increase performance and build commitment to the organisation may actually have a negative impact because these practices are attempting to build a form of commitment which is not considered relevant by employees.

This research provides new insight into how commitment is developed and works within the public service. It has found that the people management practices used within a large public sector organisation to foster commitment may be ineffective due to the fact that the application of the practices is left to the supervisor and that, as a result, the employee attributes their experience of the process to the actions of the supervisor. As a result this is serving to support the development of employee commitment to the supervisor.

This research has identified that the perceived lack of trust in the people management policies and processes such as performance management may already be affecting employee performance. This is because employees have recognised the significance of the role of supervisor in determining performance outcomes and rewards, as a result those employees who have not formed a strong relationship with the supervisor do not believe that their effort in the workplace will be recognised and rewarded. This has the potential to create a performance plateau; in this situation it is likely that employees will ensure they achieve an effective level so not to be considered as an underperformer, but they will not invest extra effort due to the fact that this effort is unlikely to be recognised or rewarded by the organisation.

The growing workloads of many supervisor, time pressures and the emotional energy required to develop and manage many employee relationships suggests that there is a limit to the number of employees that a supervisor can form and maintain a strong relationship with. As a result many employees may not be afforded the opportunity to develop the relationship they seek with the supervisor due to the fact the supervisor may not have the capacity in terms of time to foster a relationship. In some situations this could create a dangerous sub-culture of the 'haves', in this case they have a relationship with the supervisor, and the 'have nots'. The consequences of this outcome may create division and resentment between employees of both sections, which could further damage the performance of the organisation. This outcome may lead to increased employee turnover, absenteeism and disengagement.

## **7.1 The impact of the concept of exchange on employee commitment to the supervisor**

This research has found that as a consequence of organisational size and management practices, employees are now focusing their attention toward the supervisor and developing a relationship with them. This is an important finding for this research. It provides the catalyst to suggest that the construct of employee commitment needs to be expanded. Employee commitment has often been conceptualised as part of the exchange agreement between the individual and the organisation (Angle, Perry and Rousseau, 1995). Recognition is considered to be a vital part of this exchange agreement.

In relation to the objective to examine the relationship between the traditional components of commitment, including the concept of side-bets and to build a deeper understanding of how commitment works in practice this research has found that the size of the organisation creates the perception that the contribution of the individual was hard to measure or value. The perceived inability of the organisation to effectively recognise the contribution of the individual suggests that there is a problem with the concept of the employee organisational exchange. This research has found that this void was being filled by the supervisor and that it was the supervisor who was perceived as recognising and rewarding employee effort. As a result of this outcome there has been a change in how the exchange agreement operates. The provision of rewards and recognition by the supervisor to the employee supports the development of affective commitment which is targeted toward the supervisor.

This research adds to the knowledge on how employee commitment to the supervisor works by highlighting that this form of commitment, which has resulted due to the size of the organisation and the perceived inability to recognise, reward or value the individual is strengthened by management practices and processes which transfer greater authority, delegation and management responsibility to the supervisor. It is this combination of formal authority and positional power which provides the foundation for the development of employee commitment to the supervisor.

The importance of the supervisor in supporting the timely achievement of the exchange agreement is strengthened by the finding that employees have lower expectations for long-term employment with an organisation, and recognise the importance of the supervisor in facilitating the “exchange” in a timely manner. Previous research has suggested that job loss, organisational downsizing and changes to structures may lead employees to adopt new beliefs or perceptions regarding their jobs and career (Zhoa et al. 2007, Csoka, 1995; Rousseau and Parks, 1992). This research has identified that one of the new beliefs stemming from changes in organisational structure and devolved management environments is that the supervisor has become integral to the employee access to rewards and recognition employees receive for their contribution in the workplace.

This research has found that the construct of commitment needs to be re-examined due to the fact that the nature of the relationship between employee and the supervisor has changed significantly. The role of the supervisor in terms of providing rewards and recognition creates the situation where employees attribute the outcomes they experience to the actions of the supervisor. This finding suggests that the way we have understood the development of employee commitment has been incomplete. It may also provide insight into why many change initiatives and culture building programs initiated by organisations to develop greater levels of employee commitment fail. The reason for this statement is two-fold. Firstly, it could be argued that these programs attempt to build a form of commitment that is no longer perceived as critically important by employees. Secondly, as the responsibility to implement such programs falls to the supervisor, this action serves to reinforce and strengthen the significance of the role of the supervisor; supporting the development of employee commitment to the supervisor.

It may be that the phenomena of employee commitment to the supervisor has been in existence for some time, but that organisations have not understood how

it is developed, its significance, or the potential impact on the performance of the organisation. From the perspective of the management of the organisation, the formal recognition of the importance of the construct of employee commitment to the supervisor would require changes to the people management systems, practices and policies used to manage employees. Failure to do so may create the perception that people management practices are potentially irrelevant, this includes current approaches to performance management and learning and development.

The research identified a problem with current people management systems by highlighting that employees in large public sector organisations do not trust that the systems and processes put in place by the organisation will support them in the workplace or in relation to their career development. In addition, the research highlighted that the lack of perceived consistency in the manner in which employees are treated across the organisation creates the perception that the organisation has little control or influence on the employee experience in the workplace. The lack of trust in the systems was evidenced by the employee perception that the performance management system did not provide the balanced exchange that was expected by employees. As a result employees did not believe that the organisation could fulfil the exchange agreement in the manner expected by employees. The fulfilment of the exchange agreement by the supervisor, in this case the provision of recognition and rewards, has been reported to foster the development of employee commitment to the supervisor. However: there is a risk with the approach, should the supervisor fail to fulfil the exchange agreement in a manner acceptable by the employee, the employee's level of commitment and their performance is likely to be impacted. Organisations need to take action to ensure that supervisors are aware of the responsibilities that they have in fulfilling the exchange agreement, and supervisors need to be educated about their role in fostering this form of commitment.

The existence of the foci of employee commitment to the supervisor should be given deep consideration by the organisations due to the fact that employees who do not have a strong relationship with their supervisor are potentially disadvantaged. This could result in a reduction in the effort that they put into their work and increased absence and turnover. However, the benefits of the development of commitment to the supervisor could be used by the organisation to achieve higher levels of performance and ensure a committed workforce. To do so the organisation would need to find ways of fostering the development of commitment to the supervisor which ensures

the organisational goals are achieved and, importantly, that all employees are provided with mechanisms which effectively capture their work effort and the quality of their work. It would require the introduction of new ways to capture employee effort and a change in the structures and accountability frameworks within the organisation.

## **7.2 The execution of organisational policies builds employee commitment to supervisor**

In regard to the objective to build a deeper understanding of how commitment works in practice from the perspective of the employee this research has extended the understanding of how commitment is fostered and works in large public sector organisations by identifying that the decision to devolve key management processes and authority to the supervisor supports the development of employee commitment to the supervisor. The research has highlighted that as a result employees attribute the achievement of their workplace goals and the provision of intrinsic and extrinsic rewards to the supervisor. This research has built on the work of Romzek (1989) who contends that in the public sector affective commitment can be influenced through a strategic use of intrinsic incentives. Importantly, this research has identified that employees consider that it is the supervisor who provides access to those intrinsic rewards, suggesting that employees will invest in the development of the relationship with the supervisor so that they are positioned to access intrinsic and extrinsic rewards.

This research extends the understanding of how commitment works by identifying that it is the execution of the organisational policies, which includes the provision of rewards which is recognised and acknowledged by the employees. Consistent with the exchange concept, it is the action by the supervisor which fosters the development of employee commitment. This has resulted in a shift in the way that commitment is fostered and works in large public sector organisations. The relationship between supervisor and employee is more critical and significant than previously reported and what has emerged is evidence that employees are actively seeking to build a strong relationship with their supervisor.

The significance of the supervisor was evidenced by the employee experience of access to learning and development. Participants reported that the supervisor, the person who was directly and most often in contact with the employee, was in their view rightly given the delegation and authority to assist the employee to achieve

their workplace goals. This decision was found to have strong implications on how employee commitment was developed as it was found to create the situation where employees perceived that the exchange relationship, fundamental to the development of employee commitment, existed between themselves and the supervisor because it was the supervisor who supported the employee to achieve their goals. This finding provided strong evidence that employees believe that the attainment of their goals is largely dependant on the relationship the employee has with the supervisor, and it also provides evidence that current management practices are contributing to the development of commitment toward the supervisor.

This research has highlighted that the impact of devolving the management and execution of organisational policies to the supervisor has created the perception that the supervisor has the greatest influence on employee experience in the workplace and in framing what the future may hold for the employees. The research extends the understanding of how employee commitment to the supervisor is developed by highlighting that employees attribute positive experiences in the workplace to the actions of their supervisor.

### **7.3 The implications of employee–supervisor side-bets on commitment**

One of the objectives of this research was to examine the relationship between the traditional components of affective, normative and continuance commitment, including the concept of side-bets on the foci of commitment to the supervisor. This research has identified that the current understanding of side-bets is incomplete by demonstrating that the concept of side bets is transferable to the employee-supervisor relationship. The research has also identified that employees perceive that they invest considerable effort (side-bets) in developing and maintaining a relationship with their supervisor, and that this investment is likely to lead to beneficial outcomes for the employee. The research contributes to the understanding of side bets by identifying that the “side-bets” that employees believe they invest in the development and maintenance of their relationship with the supervisor are consistent with those described by the current literature on organisational commitment.

This research has highlighted that employees believe they invest considerable effort into the development of the relationship with their supervisor. This is a significant finding, not only does it provide strong support for the concept of employee



commitment to the supervisor it also provides great insight into how commitment is developed from the perspective of the employee. The finding that employees believe their investment of effort is best targeted towards the needs and requirements of the supervisor. In regard to the management of the organisation this finding suggests that the formal power that has been devolved to the supervisor has not only elevated the importance of the role of the supervisor it has increased the significance of the supervisor in the career of employees. This means that there is the potential for adverse impacts on commitment, performance and retention should the supervisor not be able to meet the expectations of the employee, this could include that situation in which the employee's expectations are unable to be met.

The concept of exchange has been identified as key to the development of continuance commitment. This research has identified that employees in large public service organisations believe that the exchange is facilitated by the supervisor. What has been demonstrated is that employees report a desire and willingness to invest in, and build, a strong relationship with their supervisor because this investment is likely to lead to positive outcomes for the employee. The research has highlighted the potential for employees to demonstrate behaviours that are intended to ensure that once developed their relationship with the supervisor is maintained at any cost.

This research expands the current understanding of the psychological contract, which often states that psychological contracts are an individual's expectations of the exchange relationship with an organisation (Rousseau, 1990). Whilst the study confirms the concept of the psychological contract as an individual's expectation of the exchange, and the factors of that exchange, identified as economic, socio-emotional and ideological (Thompson and Bunderson, 2003), this research has found that the target of the 'contract' was the supervisor rather than the organisation.

In terms of the objective to identify factors that support the development of the foci of commitment to the supervisor this research contributes to the understanding of some of the factors that support the development of commitment to the supervisor by identifying that employees consider that it is the supervisor who provides access to intrinsic motivational factors such as opportunities to use their knowledge, skills and capabilities (Locke and Latham, 1990; Perry and Wise 1990). The importance of intrinsic rewards is well established in the literature, therefore the finding that employees consider that access to such opportunities are influenced by the supervisor provides an indication of the significance of the employee relationship with the



supervisor. It also suggests that employees who experience intrinsic benefits are likely to attribute this experience to the supervisor. This finding provides great insight into how commitment is fostered and developed from the perspective of the employee. The research confirms the literature on public sector motivation which highlights that the provision of intrinsic rewards is a strong incentive for employees. From the employee perspective, access to such rewards is considered to be of great worth and reward. In this regard the act of providing access to intrinsic benefits may actually be symbolic in the public sector as an indicator of high performance and achievement.

In relation to the objective to explore the impact of the employee-supervisor relationship on employee commitment this research expands the understanding of how employee commitment to the supervisor is fostered by identifying that employees considered that the supervisor played the greatest role in the development of their concept of future self. This finding was based on the perception that the supervisor was best positioned to shape the direction of the participant's career and to provide opportunities that were in line with the participant's career and personal goals. The findings suggest that employees do not believe that current approaches to career management are effective at supporting the development of the individual. To change this perception the organisation may need to invest in people management systems that accurately capture employee career goals, workplace effort and performance. One way to build employee trust is to ensure that future systems are transparent and that employees are given the opportunity to contribute to the information that is captured.

The significance of the supervisor being the target of the psychological contract has ramifications for public sector organisations. This includes risks associated with job satisfaction and retention which the organisation will need to monitor and manage. This finding may also lead to a greater level of understanding of employment trends and mobility patterns within the organisation, and potentially the wider APS. This is due to the fact that the employee needs to remain working with the supervisor and will as a result seek to maintain this link. As a result of this action it is likely that an employee will seek to follow a supervisor across the organisation and even the APS, as this provides a benefit to the employee as all side-bets are maintained. It could also lead to a greater variety of work and opportunities for the employee. This scenario would reinforce the perception that the supervisor and the relationship the employee has with the supervisor is critical. Alternatively, this action could create the situation where employee and organisation performance reduces over time because of a lack of stimulation, group think and the continuation of negative workplace behaviours.

The role of the supervisor and the lack of trust in the organisation's processes and system creates the perception that it is only through strong support of the supervisor that employee objectives can be achieved. The investment in the relationship with the supervisor is not without risk for the employee. The research reported that employees made an assessment of supervisor self confidence and capability as employees believed that each of these factors had the potential to impact their experience of work. If the supervisor's own career stalls or the supervisor is replaced the effort that the employee has invested into the relationship is lost. This could result in a disengaged employee, reduce commitment and turnover. The employee may also become linked unofficially with the performance of the supervisor which may impact on the perception of the employee's performance.

In relation to the objective to identify factors that support the development of the foci of commitment to the supervisor this research has found that the frequency and type of change programs implemented by large public sector organisations has created low expectations of long term continuity which as a result has served to increase the importance of the supervisor and in the facilitation of the "exchange" in a timely manner. This finding may also be indicative of poor knowledge and performance management processes, protocols and frameworks across the organisation. This research identified strong "exchange" themes relating to clarity of role, trust, and the opportunity to provide feedback facilitated by an increased flow of information between the supervisor and the employee. The research has confirmed the importance of feedback as a key component of building an effective relationship. The research has identified that a strong relationship with the supervisor contributed to link the concepts of empowerment, feedback, communication and trust to one single key high level commitment outcome; employee autonomy. The existence of autonomy was reported as the factor that fostered the highest levels of employee commitment to the supervisor.

The findings of this research have implications for organisational change initiatives, as they indicate that change initiatives have the potential to disenfranchise employees due to the fact that there is the potential for accumulated side-bets to be lost as a result of a fractured employee-supervisor relationship. This finding may provide an insight into why many public service organisations are resistant to change. The absence of trusted knowledge and performance management systems add to the perception that the employee effort, recognition and the benefits they have received would be lost.

This raises the question of whether employee effort can be captured by the current supervisor and passed onto the next. At present this does not occur; as a result the employee is likely to feel disheartened when the relationship is fractured. The research identifies the need to develop processes that capture employee effort accurately and fairly.

The literature on side-bets suggests that the consequences associated with leaving an organisation increase with age and tenure due to the time and effort that an employee has invested within the organisation. In relation to the objective of this research to examine the relationship between the concept of side-bets and the foci of commitment to supervisor this research has provided new evidence and insight. This research extends the understanding of how side-bets are developed by identifying that the employees investment of time, effort and emotional energy to develop and maintain the relationship with the supervisor increased the perceived side-bets that would be lost if the relationship was fractured. The implication of this finding for organisations suggests that the greater the investment made in building and maintaining the relationship with the supervisor the less likely the employee is to seek to leave or fracture the relationship. This has the potential to impact mobility and prevent the organisation from developing employees and expanding employee career experiences, the result of which could create long term capability and skill gaps for the organisation as employee development is restricted.

The finding pertaining to the accumulation of side-bets is consistent with the traditional view of employee commitment. It introduces a number of new concerns for the organisation, including the potential to limit knowledge creation, organisational agility, and it could create the situation where the employee and the supervisor begin to suffer from symptoms such as group think. Groupthink is said to occur when members of a team do not consider all alternatives and desire unanimity at the expense of quality decisions. Groupthink, first identified by social psychologist Irving Janis (1972. p 9), occurs when a group makes faulty decisions because group pressures lead to a deterioration of “mental efficiency, reality testing, and moral judgment”. A further consequence of the emergence of commitment to the supervisor is that it may also limit workplace diversity as the employees who have strong relationship will be motivated to keep and protect the relationship that they have with the supervisor. This finding raises concerns that employees who consider that they have a valuable relationship with the supervisor, may resist the introduction of new members to the

workplace. Employees may also actively undermine the work of other employees in order to ensure their own standing is maintained. As a result this could create negative cultural implications for the organisation and impact employee performance and retention.

The research also highlighted that employees who did not believe they had invested a lot into the development of the relationship with the supervisor, or who thought that the investment had not resulted in positive outcomes found the decision to fracture the relationship easier. The finding indicates that the level of the investment, or side bet, between supervisor and employees operates in the same manner as the traditional understanding of the concept in fostering commitment. The research provides a clear example of the concept of an exchange approach to commitment in action, and the impact of the failure of one party to fulfil the exchange agreement limiting the development of commitment.

This research has demonstrated that employees are less likely to invest significant effort if they consider the relationship is not likely to provide beneficial outcomes: this is consistent with an exchange based approach to commitment. It provides insight into how employee commitment works in action and suggests that employees are aware that the supervisor is critical to their experience in the workplace. Importantly for the organisation, this finding may indicate that the performance of the organisation is likely to be impacted as employees are unlikely to invest significant effort in the workplace if they do not believe there will be an adequate exchange or outcome.

The research adds to the knowledge and understanding of the concept of side-bets, and how commitment is developed, by identifying the length of time an employee will invest in developing a relationship with a supervisor before making a decision that the relationship was likely to be beneficial. The research introduces the concept that employees will quickly make a judgement on the likelihood that a relationship with the supervisor could be beneficial to them, the period of three months being identified as the standard by this research. This finding has a number of implications for organisations as it suggest that employees, either new recruits or those who have moved roles or have a new supervisor, may start looking to move roles or leave the organisation within three months of taking on a new role. This has the potential to result in significant costs to the organisation in terms of lost productivity and recruitment expenses.

This research has found that once an employee had determined that they could develop an effective relationship with a supervisor they are willing to invest a considerable period of time to build the relationship. Employees reporting that it took 6 to 12 months to build a strong relationship with the supervisor. This research contributes to the knowledge on commitment theory by identifying a new element to the commitment model. The two stage side-bet decision making process. The two stage process identified in this research has emerged as a new concept as a result of the increased significance of the supervisor and the emergence of the concept of employee commitment to the supervisor. The first stage requires the employee to quickly determine the likelihood of the development of a successful relationship with the supervisor. The employee then makes a second side-bet decision to invest a further amount of time to develop and test the relationship. The research expands the understanding of an exchange based approach to commitment by highlighting that employees perceive that a return, or beneficial outcomes such as increased autonomy, development opportunities or promotion, should start to occur from the 12 month mark.

There is little if any empirical evidence on the employee perception of the cost associated with fracturing the employee-supervisor relationship. This research expands the understanding of how commitment works by identifying the employee perception that if the relationship with the supervisor was fractured, all of the effort invested in developing the relationship with the supervisor and the benefits that result are potentially lost. This finding has clear implications for organisations as employee motivation and engagement may suffer and at worst it may result in employee turnover.

This research expands the understanding and knowledge of commitment theory by identifying that any fracture of the employee-supervisor relationship creates a situation which requires the employees to invest new and often additional effort to build a comparative relationship with the new supervisor. Where change is frequent this could lead to the situation where employees become disengaged and decide not to invest extra effort to develop the new relationship, the outcome of which could impact organisational performance, employee motivation and employee work intention.

This research adds to the knowledge of commitment by introducing the concept of side-bet re-emergence on the occasion of an employee re-linking with a previous

supervisor. The research has highlighted that if an employee re-linked with a supervisor with whom they had had a strong relationship many of the positive outcomes that they had previously experienced, such as autonomy, trust and high levels of communication would return. This finding introduces the concept that side-bets are not restricted to a point in time in the relationship with the supervisor. This is a significant finding in relation to the understanding of how employee commitment operates, and it may explain employment patterns of staff who migrate to work with a key person.

This research has established the importance of the supervisor in a large public sector organisation in relation to employee career opportunities. The significance of the supervisor is further highlighted by the emergence of the finding that employees will invest effort into a relationship because of their perception that the supervisor is likely to be successful which as a result may provide opportunities for the employee in the future. This finding expands the literature on continuance commitment by introducing the concept that employees actively and knowingly invest effort (side-bets) which the employees consider may have the potential to provide both short and long term outcomes. The concept of a form of continuance commitment, based on the idea that the employee will at a later stage receive a positive outcome from the investment (side-bets), has not been explored in the literature and this could present topic for future research.

## **7.4 The impact of the supervisor on sub-cultures and climates**

The importance of culture is well documented in the literature. Organisational culture is important because shared beliefs and norms affect employee perceptions, behaviours and emotional responses in the workplace (Aarons and Sawitzky, 2006). This research has identified that in a large organisation the supervisor can directly impact the work place culture experienced by subordinate employees. The research also found that the supervisor, through their actions and behaviours, can build sub-cultures that are independent from the wider culture of the organisation. This finding suggests that there is a problem with the concept that there is a defining culture in large public sector organisations; this should be the subject of further research. In this research the existence of sub cultures was reported to contribute to the perception that the culture of the organisation is confused.

The strength of the reported sub-cultures provide further evidence of the significance of the role of the supervisor in large organisations. The research also identified

that sub-cultures supported the development of affective commitment toward the supervisor. The existence of sub-cultures has the potential to create negative consequences for the organisation as it is likely that some employees will respond positively and others will react negatively to the culture created by the supervisor. In the advent that the response is negative the employee may pressure to change, ultimately this could lead to poor or disruptive behaviour, a lack of diverse thinking and in the worse case bullying and harassment. The research reported that negative workplace cultures led to increased employee turnover, reduced employee engagement or poor performance.

The emergence of the sub cultures may also limit the impact and success of policies and practices designed to build organisational performance and culture, as the sub culture created by the supervisor provides a buffer from the wider organisation. It is also probable that the actions and behaviours of the individuals within a particular sub-culture may protect particular interests and beliefs. The organisation, therefore, will need to consider new approaches to the development of organisation culture which acknowledge and respond to the role that is played by the supervisor.

This research extends the understanding of the impact of sub-cultures on employee commitment. What has been highlighted is that when employees' experience a positive sub culture they attribute this culture to the actions of the supervisor and that their experience of the culture fosters the development of affective commitment targeted toward the supervisor. The research also identified that a sense of affective commitment toward the employees' current supervisor is reinforced by the knowledge of other sub-cultures across the organisation which are considered by the employee to be less desirable. The impact of this finding suggests that employees are less likely to seek opportunities and mobility because they are concerned about the sub-cultures that have been created in different sections of the organisation. This may over time impact employee performance, limit mobility and create skills and labour shortages within sections of the organisation.

The impact and strength of sub-cultures was further evidenced by the findings that emerged in relation to employee perception of the organisational climate. This research has demonstrated that employees distinguished the wider organisational climate from their immediate team climate. This research found that employees held a positive view of the workplace climate associated with their immediate team whilst holding



a negative view of the wider organisational climate. The difference between the two climates was attributed to the behaviours and actions of the supervisor. This finding could have a significant impact on mobility within the organisation, and create the situation where employees are reluctant to move from their current role.

The research demonstrated a strong link between the employee's perception of the workplace climate and the strength of the relationship with their supervisor. This finding indicates that the supervisor can play a key role in the creation of a positive or desirable workplace climate for the employee. This research expands the work of Lawler et al. (1974) by highlighting that an employee could feel removed or distant from the organisational climate but identify positively with the local climate developed by the supervisor.

## 7.5 Summary

This chapter has detailed the implications and insights of this research in relation to the construct of employee commitment to the supervisor. It has demonstrated that the size of the organisation and the management practices used within the organisation can lead to a change in the way that employee commitment is developed and works. Importantly the research has identified a range of drivers that support the development of employee commitment to the supervisor. What has been demonstrated is that the size of the organisation can create the situation where the idea of a relationship or link between the employee and the organisation is brought into question. As a result this has created the situation where the employees have sought an attachment and a sense of their importance from other relationships within the organisation.

The perceived inability of the organisation to effectively recognise the contribution of the individual suggests that there is a problem with the concept of the employee-organisational exchange. This research has found that this void was being filled by the supervisor and that it was the supervisor who was perceived by employees as recognising and rewarding employee effort. The fulfilment of the exchange agreement by the supervisor, in this case the provision of recognition and rewards, was reported to foster the development of employee commitment to the supervisor.

The research has also identified that employees perceive that they invest considerable effort (side-bets) in developing and maintaining a relationship with their supervisor,



and that employees perceive that this investment is likely to lead to beneficial outcomes for the employee. In relation to the objective of this research to examine the relationship between the concept of side-bets and the foci of commitment to supervisor, this research has provided new evidence and insight. This research extends the understanding of how side-bets are developed by identifying that the employees investment of time, effort and emotional energy to develop and maintain the relationship with the supervisor increased the perceived side-bets that would be lost if the employee-supervisor relationship was fractured.

The implication of this finding for organisations suggests that the greater the investment made in building and maintaining the relationship with the supervisor the less likely the employee is to seek to leave or fracture the relationship. The research also highlighted that employees who did not believe they had invested a lot into the development of the relationship with the supervisor, or who thought that the investment had not resulted in positive outcomes found the decision to fracture the relationship easier. This finding provides a clear example of the concept of an exchange approach to employee commitment in action, and the impact of the failure of one party to fulfil the exchange agreement limiting the development of employee commitment.

This research identified that in a large organisation the supervisor can directly impact the work place culture experienced by subordinate employees. The research found that the supervisor, through their actions and behaviours, can build sub-cultures that are independent from the wider culture of the organisation. This finding suggests there is a problem with the concept that there is a defining culture in large public sector organisations. This concept should be the subject of further exploration and research.



# Conclusion and contribution

# 8

## 8.0 Contribution to the literature and the field of employee commitment

The current paradigm of employee commitment is built on the concept that it is the relationship between the employee and the organisation that forms the basis of employee commitment. The aim of this research was to demonstrate that the structure of the organisational and the people management policies used by the organisation can create the situation where the idea of a relationship or link between the employee and the organisation has been brought into question. This research sought to demonstrate that as a result of development there has been a change in the way that employee commitment is developed and works. The research aimed to highlight that employees do not believe that the organisation is best placed to fulfil the exchange component that is crucial to the development of employee commitment, and that as a result new forms of employee commitment have emerged.

Most of the previous research undertaken on commitment has explored the construct of commitment from the perspective of the impact of employee commitment on the organisation, and organisational outcomes. This research explored the construct of employee commitment from the perspective of the employee, and identified how employee commitment to the supervisor is developed and works from the perspective of the employee. This research has detailed the implications, for the organisation and employees, of employees developing a sense of attachment or linking to the supervisor. The research has demonstrated that the construct of employee commitment in its present form is incomplete and it should be expanded, it also found that the way commitment is fostered within organisations needs to be re-examined. The research

has provided significant new insight into the impact of organisational structure, management practices and supervisor behaviour on the development of employee commitment to the supervisor.

This research has provided an expansive examination into some of the factors that support the development of employee commitment to the supervisor, it has also found that a change has occurred in the way that employee commitment works and is developed in large public sector organisations. The research makes a number of contributions to the literature and knowledge of commitment theory including the provision of empirical evidence of the development and impact, of employee commitment to the supervisor. The research also provides a modern understanding of how employee commitment is developed and operates in large public sector organisations.

The current literature on commitment theory has concentrated on the relationship between the employee and the organisation. This research adds to the knowledge and literature on commitment theory through an examination of the impact of the relationship between the employee and the supervisor. This research not only confirms the existence of the foci of employee commitment to the supervisor. It adds to the knowledge of employee commitment to the supervisor by identifying the supervisor actions and organisational factors that foster the development of employee commitment to the supervisor.

The research expands the literature on commitment theory by identifying a range of factors that support the development of employee commitment to the supervisor. This includes the size of the organisation, the management practices used within the organisation, the attributes, traits and behaviours of the supervisor, and the effectiveness and impact of the people management systems such as performance management.

This research extends the literature by finding that the traditional components of the construct of organisational commitment known as affective, normative and continuance commitment, including the concept of side-bets are transferable to the construct of employee commitment to the supervisor. The research adds to the knowledge and understanding of commitment by demonstrating that these factors operate in a similar manner to the long term understanding as presented in the literature on organisational commitment.

The research provides considerable new insight and knowledge on how commitment works by providing empirical evidence on how the concept of continuance commitment and side-bets operate from the perspective of the employee. This includes identifying a range of employee side-bets such as time, effort and emotional energy which are invested in the development of the relationship with the supervisor, which forms the basis for the development of employee commitment. This research also adds to the literature by identifying the outcomes or the exchange that employees attribute to their investment, these included increased autonomy, trust and increase awareness through better communication.

This research extends side-bet theory by introducing a two stage side-bet decision making process as illustrated in Figure 3. In the first stage the employee quickly determines the likelihood that a beneficial relationship could form with a supervisor. The employee then makes a second decision to invest a further amount of time to develop and test the relationship. This research adds to the knowledge on how commitment works in action by the findings that employees perceive that a return on their investment should start to occur from the 12 month mark.

This research expands the literature on continuance commitment by introducing the concept that employees actively invest effort (side-bets) which the employees consider provide both short and long term outcomes. This research introduces the concept that employees will actively target and invest effort into a relationship with a supervisor who they believe is likely to have a successful career as this could provide benefits and outcomes to the employee in the future. This form of employee commitment has not been explored in the literature and requires further exploration.

The research adds to the literature by identifying the re-emergence of side-bet benefits and outcomes if the employee re-links with a supervisor. This included the positive outcomes previously experienced, such as autonomy, trust and high levels of communication. This finding suggests that employee side-bets are not restricted to a point in time relationship with the supervisor. This is a significant finding in relation to the understanding of how commitment works and introduces a construct that should be explored in future research. The findings of this research add to the knowledge on commitment by identifying that employee side bets and the outcomes experienced as a result of the relationship employees have with the supervisor can return if the employee re-links with the supervisor.

## **8.1 Components of this research have extended our understanding of the literature**

This research confirms the existence of distinct sub-cultures and climates within the organisations. The finding adds to the knowledge and understanding of how these sub-cultures are developed by identifying the role that the supervisor plays in the development of the sub-cultures and climates.

This research expands the current understanding of the psychological contract, which often states that psychological contracts are an individual's expectations of the exchange relationship with an organisation (Rousseau, 1990). Whilst the study confirms the concept of the psychological contract as an individual's expectation of the exchange, this research extends the literature by identifying that the target of the 'contract' was the supervisor rather than the organisation.

The findings of this research confirm the importance given in the literature to the employee-supervisor relationships in large public sector organisations. Prior to the completion of this research there has been little empirical evidence of the employee perception of the cost associated with fracturing the employee-supervisor relationship. In describing a traditional perspective of organisation commitment Meyer and Allen (1984) state that side-bets refer to anything of value the individual has invested that would be lost if he or she was to leave the organisation. This research extends this concept to the employee-supervisor commitment. The findings of this research confirm the current understanding of how continuance commitment works in practice. What was demonstrated was that if the relationship with the supervisor was fractured, all of the effort in developing the relationship with the supervisor and the benefits that resulted were lost.

## **8.2 Why this research matters?**

The management of the workforce is a critical issue for the APS. Organisations within the APS face a growing range of challenges to ensure the effective deployment of employees. Understanding how to foster greater employee commitment and performance should be a key focus of all organisations. Despite the apparent importance of the supervisor in the APS employment setting, little research has been undertaken on the construct of commitment to the supervisor in the APS. This research takes on significant importance due to the fact that a large percentage of APS employees perform supervisory functions and activities.

This research is important due to the fact that little is known about this new form of employee commitment. From the perspective of the organisation work needs to be undertaken to explore the implications of this new form of commitment on employees and the organisation. As a result of this research organisations may look to introduce new approaches to building and maintaining commitment that take into account the existence of employee commitment to the supervisor.

This research has surfaced new insight into why many organisational change programs are resisted by employees. The findings of this research highlight that when the employee-supervisor relationship is fractured, possibly because of the actions of an organisational change program, employees feel that they have to start again from the beginning and build a relationship again. This research found that employees believed that they were disadvantaged by this action and that employees feared that the next relationship may not develop as well as the previous, which could impact their experience of work and future opportunities. This finding has direct implications for employee motivation and engagement, and it suggests that such action could result in higher turnover or lead to disengaged and disempowered employees if managed poorly.

### **8.3 What are the limitations of this research and what has not been discussed?**

The use of a single case study and a single source of data for this research is a limitation and may limit the generalisability and credibility of the findings of this research. The inductive nature of the research design may have surfaced only some of factors influencing the construct of employee commitment to supervisor and is a limitation. The use of a qualitative approach prohibited a greater number of interviews being undertaken. To overcome this issue and to provide validity and reliability the researcher could have undertaken a larger hypothesis focused quantitative enquiry based on the key issues which surfaced through the analysis of the interviews. This may have provided confirmation of the factors influencing the construct.

This research assumes that the basic conditions of employment, including conditions of service and remuneration are met by the organisation. This research did not discuss the impact on employee commitment if these factors are not met or if there is a perceived level of inequity in the level of remuneration received by the employees. This research did not investigate the impact of team member behaviour or the concept of

commitment to a profession or role. This research has not explored the concept or impact of commitment to a leader or a senior figure in the organisation.

This research has not discussed or identified mechanisms that the organisation could introduce to capture and record employee effort or side-bets as described within this research. An area of future research could explore the impact of the need for employees to develop and maintain a strong relationship between the employee and the supervisor and the potential of this action to drive negative behavioural responses and organisational outcomes.

This research does not claim to give the answer or that it can be extrapolated across the whole of the APS or public service. There are however, gaps in the literature that need to be explored including through qualitative research. The evidence demonstrates that there is a lot that is not understood, in particular to what or who employees commit and that the supervisor needs to be one focus of this research.

#### **8.4 Why are the findings of this research important?**

There is a gap in the commitment theory that needs exploring. This research has provided new insight into the construct of employee commitment. It has demonstrated that employee commitment to the supervisor is a phenomenon that organisations must acknowledge and learn to manage so to harness the potential of this form of employee commitment. As a result of this research the management practices and frameworks currently used within organisations will require re-examination to ensure relevance and their ability to drive desired behaviours.

The finding of this result are important for APS organisations as the research suggests that organisations will need to develop a deep understanding of some of the factors that foster this form of commitment and take into account the potential positive and negative outcomes for employees and risks to the organisation that stem from this form of employee commitment. APS organisations will need to develop a greater level of understanding of the implications that this form of commitment could have on the organisation, supervisors and employees.

As a result of this research APS organisations will need to develop strategies and management practices that take into account employee commitment to the supervisor. Organisations will need to examine their approaches to the management of employees,



including through change management programs, and assess the effectiveness of their people management systems such as performance management to provide valid assessments of performance.

As a result of this research further investigation should be undertaken to develop new and dynamic approaches to building and maintaining organisational commitment that recognise and capture the employee-supervisor relationship. This should include ways to record employee effort and to transfer the record of this effort to future employee-supervisor relationships. New approaches to managing this form of commitment will be particularly critical during periods of change, during which side-bets that may exist between an employee and a supervisor could be lost, the result of which could negatively impact on the employee. The surfacing and confirmation of the concept of employee commitment to the supervisor will assist employees to actively manage their workplace and their careers due to a greater understanding of how exchange relationships work in a large organisation.



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## Appendix 1

# Interview questions

Research Aim	Supporting interview questions
1. What is the impact of the employee-supervisor relationship on employee commitment?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do you feel there is congruence between your and your supervisor's values?</li> <li>• Do you feel that your current supervisor is considerate of your opinions and views? How does this impact you?</li> <li>• Have you or do you often feel that issues or problems impacting your supervisor's impact you or are yours? Why do you feel this way?</li> <li>• Are your attitudes and behaviours influenced by the knowledge of how others are treated in the group?</li> <li>• The concept of self is multiple each of us holds images in our mind of our various selves. Which has the greater impact on your concept of future self the organisation or your supervisors? Why do you feel this way?</li> <li>• Are you interested in maintaining a strong relationship with your current supervisor? Why was this so? What are the positives/negatives of this action?</li> <li>• Have you ever felt a level of committed to a previous supervisor?</li> <li>• Does your supervisor show concern for you?</li> </ul>
2. What are the factors that support the development of the foci of commitment to supervisor?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How do you describe the organisation culture?</li> <li>• Are there different cultures in your work place—sub groups—how are these created?</li> <li>• How would you describe the organisational climate?</li> <li>• Do you feel that you are a valuable part of the work group/team?</li> <li>• Do you feel that you are important to the organisation?</li> <li>• What is more important Intrinsic or extrinsic rewards?</li> <li>• Do you feel that it is your supervisor or the organisation that cares about your personal well-being? Why is this so?</li> <li>• Do you feel a sense of commitment to your current role? Why is this so?</li> <li>• How is the contribution of the most efficient employees recognised?</li> <li>• Do you feel a sense of belonging to the organisation? Why is this so?</li> <li>• Which has the greater influence on equality; the supervisor or the organisation?</li> <li>• In your view is it the organisation or your supervisor that considers your goals and values, personal requirements/needs?</li> <li>• Do you feel an attachment to this organisation?</li> <li>• Do you feel an attachment to your supervisor? Have you ever felt an attachment to an organisation or a supervisor? Can you explain this?</li> </ul>

Research Aim	Supporting interview questions
<p>3. How do the traditional components of affective, normative and continuance commitment, including the concept of side-bets and exchange impact the foci of commitment to supervisor?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Would you be happy to spend the rest of your career, or a considerable part of it, with this organisation? What stage of your career do you feel you are?</li> <li>• Right now, is staying with this organisation a matter of necessity as much as desire? Why is this so?</li> <li>• What do you perceive as the negative consequences of leaving your current supervisor?</li> <li>• What do you see as the benefits of developing and maintaining a relationship with your supervisor. Development opportunities? Promotional opportunities? Autonomy/type of work?</li> <li>• What do you perceive as the negative consequences of leaving the organisation?</li> <li>• Do you feel that you have put a lot of yourself into maintaining your relationship with your supervisor?</li> <li>• If you had not put so much into the relationship would it be easier to consider working elsewhere? What do feel you have you put in this relationship?</li> <li>• Would it be difficult for you to leave your current role and therefore your supervisor right now, even if you wanted to? Why is this so? Are there things that you stand to loose?</li> <li>• Would your life be disrupted if you decided that you wanted to leave the organisation right now? Why would this be so?</li> <li>• What is more important Intrinsic (competence use of one skill) or extrinsic rewards (pay and rewards)?</li> </ul>
<p>4. How does commitment work in practice from the perspective of the employee?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Does the organisation have a great deal of personal meaning for you?</li> <li>• Do you have a perception concerning the extent to which the organisation values your contribution and cares about your well-being?</li> <li>• Do you assist your supervisor in such a way that results either directly or indirectly in enhanced job performance for them? What factors influence you to do this?</li> <li>• Does your supervisor's confidence and belief in their capability to perform impact your experience in the workplace? What is the impact?</li> <li>• Do you feel that you have to few options to consider leaving the organisation? Why do/don't you feel this way?</li> <li>• Do you believe you invest extra effort in building relationships at work? What do you see as the benefit? What would make you choose not to invest in a relationship?</li> </ul>



