

Managing the psychological contract in a changing care context

Abstract

This paper considers the changing context of the health and social care sector, and how this shapes employee perceptions of the psychological contract. First, I review the concept of the psychological contract and then explore this within the care context, where etic and emic dimensions are identified, including the key element of human resource development (HRD). Next, I present selected findings from recent research studies, employing a range of qualitative data collection methods, within care contexts. I consider, for example, the degree of congruence between what is communicated through government and organisation policy (espoused) in comparison with what is acted upon at a local level (in reality). Managers are viewed as agents of the healthcare organisation and I explore how their implementation of local policies influences the construction and development of the psychological contract. In the care context, a significant aspect includes the specific needs of professionals and the distinction between professional and administrative aspects of their contracts. I also consider how care workers perceive and articulate the psychological contract as extending beyond the orthodox 'employment' dimension to include clients/patients. Emerging findings suggest that health and social care workers construct their contracts with line managers, as agents of the organisation, but also with colleagues and particularly clients, key stakeholders identified in policy documents. They also blur the contents of the formal and psychological contract, and grapple with the complex tension between addressing professional and organisational expectations and obligations. Interestingly, care workers are aware of the notion of individual, idiosyncratic psychological contracts but feel uncomfortable negotiating these. As the care sector responds to ever growing challenges, it is important that staff understand and can negotiate appropriate psychological contracts to ensure employee and organisational expectations are met, service delivery is maintained/improved and patient/client care sustained/enhanced.

Key words: Psychological contract, professionals, managers, policy, health and social care