

# ATTACHMENT THEORY: THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN HUMAN RESOURCES AND ORGANIZATIONS

**Dr. Laura Liguori**

Tuscia University, Italy  
laura.liguori@live.com

## **About the Author**

Laura is Italian and 25 years old. She is the Quality Director and Social Media manager for Etruscasa RE and researcher in Organizational Psychology and Medication Communication Psychology at Viterbo's Università della Tuscia. Laura is the author of numerous articles for trade publications such as PsyJob.it, and Psicologiadellavoro.org, AIR news.

## **Abstract**

In this article, Bowlby's attachment theory is related to the organizational context. I have highlighted how the influence and the importance of the relationship between the child and the caregiver (usually the mother-figure) can be compared to organizations and, in particular; the relationship between employees and managers. The purpose of the article is to provide you with an idea for reflection about the world of relationships within organizations.

## **Attachment theory and leadership**

Attachment theory describes an innate predisposition in humans to establish emotional relationships with a reference figure (the caregiver); ensuring the continuity of care essential for psychophysical survival. This relationship performs the

essential function of protecting the person in dangerous situations. For, an adult working in an organization similar attachment relationships develop with internal company figures; offering a marked parallel between the child's relationship with the care giver and the adult one with their leader.

The author of attachment theory is John Bowlby (1969); and he states that picking up a baby who cries is the most appropriate reply, from the carer/mother, to the distress signals of a child. This is a supportive behaviour for the baby and encourages them to develop. Similarly, leaders in the workplace who wish to help employees who are in trouble, for various reasons, aims not to make the employee incapable of personal initiative. The leader will provide the employee with a little help to enable them to resume control over the situation that is causing them difficulty. This principle is often the basis of psychological techniques used within organizations to assist employees; such as mentoring and coaching.

## **Attachment theory and development of relationships**

Bowlby understood that the harmonious development of personality depends pri-

marily on the formation of appropriate attachment to a caregiver figure. The infant and young child should experience a warm, intimate, and continuous relationship with their mother (or permanent mother substitute). Both carer and child should find satisfaction and enjoyment in this relationship; but if they do not this may have significant and irreversible mental health consequences (Bowlby, 1950; Bowlby, 1988; Van der Horst, Van der Veer, & Van IJzendoorn, 2007). This concept, applied to working life, suggests the development of a harmonious work identity relies largely on the presence of an appropriate emotional relationship with the leader. Further, Bowlby believes that 'proximity pursuit' is the most explicit manifestation of attachment. Childhood behaviours seeking proximity are observable such as: smiling, crying, following, approaching, and clinging. Each of these behaviours has the predictable outcome of increasing proximity with the caregiver. People have an innate predisposition to form relationships with the primary parental figures. The mother/ caregiver / close family members (and the relationship with them) gives a child a secure base from which they can go and explore the world giving them a safe base to return to. Personality development is affected by the experience of a solid, secure base. The healthy personality grows to rely on certain people (their base) and, at the same time, to have confidence in themselves and to give their support to others. However, when a child feels there is a threat their exploration will cease and the child promptly reaches for the mother/care giver to receive comfort and safety.

Extending Bowlby's ideas to an organi-

zational context the secure base is the leader and their relationship with them. Without the secure base, workers may develop situations of distress or psychological drift (also phenomena as occupational stalking and the horizontal mobbing). Employees who are more emotionally fragile, or do not have a solid character, are more prone to attacks by people how are emotionally stronger than themselves. Attacks made on an individual by a group is sometimes known as horizontal mobbing. This is not so much to do with incompatibilities within the work environment; but as a group reaction against stress in the work environment. Those individuals who are more fragile and less self-confident of themselves are ideal victims; and they may be used as a "scapegoat" on which to blame of issues of disorganization, inefficiency and failure.

Peoples' working lives are heavily influenced by the presence or absence of a secure leader. If the worker perceives their leader as a secure base this will instil trust and the formation of a secure base for themselves within the workplace, and for others. Thus, we can see that perceptions of attachment are critical for strong organizational relationships. However, the configuration of attachment relationships are fragile and subject to change; they emerge from a process of small adjustments that are constantly being made to individuals' internal working models and strategies in order to maintain a dynamic balance between self and context.

Aspects of the relationship with the caregiver are internalised and transformed into cognitive schemes, called the Internal Working Models (IWM). The IWM pro-

cess is related to the individual's perception and interpretation of events, allowing them to make predictions and create expectations about the things that are happening in their life. IWMs allow the individual to assess and analyse different alternatives of reality enabling them to select the action they perceive to be the best reaction to future situation. Thus, the IWM process allows the child, and then the adult, to predict the behaviour of others; especially in situations of anxiety or need. These predictions will drive individual's behavioural responses in a given situation. An example of this process is offered by the practice of mentoring. Mentoring is a training methodology which refers to a one-to-one relationship between a person with more experience (the manager) and one with less experience, a pupil (or worker); in order to develop in the latter not only skills, but also the ability to react and manage emotions and situations within the working environment. This relationship is accomplished by building a long-term relationship described as a Guided Learning Path; where the manager serves as a model to encourage the personal and professional growth of the pupil. To enable the mentoring relationship to be effective the relationship between mentor and pupil should be deep and confidential. The pupil must see the manager as a secure base where they can go to in the case of trouble. When the pupil has grown professionally and can act without the manager; they will always consider the mentor as a reference model. In this way the pupil does not become a copy of the manager, but a person with their own personal skills and original ways of acting and thinking. The influence of the manager acts only on the

basic knowledge of the organization and allows the pupil to develop a force that can successfully deal with organizational life.

As a child develops their interpersonal processes, such as the formation of psychic functions, they are dependent on inter-subjective encounters. So, a key element in this development is maternal sensitivity; that is the mother's capacity to implement the child's needs and to respond promptly to those needs when required. This theory is seen not only in relation to the parent-child dyad; but other powerful attachment relationships which exist in the context of a web of relationships. It is hard to appreciate the strength of these relationships unless we fully understand the context in which these relationships occur. Therefore, in order to fully understand the individual-organization relationships we must also obtain information about interactions between leaders, between leaders and individuals, and also between individuals and their colleagues.

### **The leader as a manager of attachment**

The basic skills that are fundamental for a leader to positively advance an organization and to accommodate change are highly similar to that of the caregiver. They are:

- Sensitivity to be able to identify weaknesses and critical issues of the old cultural model (as in *maternal sensitivity*). Organizational culture is the soul of a company, the glue that gives meaning to actions. Culture consists of artefacts, norms, values, and beliefs that are an integral part of the organi-

zation. The leader must be sensitive to know how to build and manage the culture of an organization, and to understand the weaknesses and challenges that face the workers. The leaders' role is to enable change in a way that it has minimal negative impact on the workers (Lizza, 1985).

- Motivation to make the appropriate communications, and develop essential interpersonal and group relationships. (If communication is the essential prerogative of the relationship, motivation is the sine qua non condition of attachment). Thus motivation of employees is a critical factor for the success of an organization and their response to change. Motivation serves as a stimulus that determines the fielding of energies in order to realise a goal of need satisfaction. Thus, these are elements that are “internal” to person.

- Self-esteem, a sense of responsibility, and “representation” of work that matches with the “external” elements; such as organizational culture (which is managed by the leader) and the leader’s ability to motivate. It is crucial that leaders can motivate employees; by first establishing a relationship, and understanding their character and the things that are important to them. Once a strong relationship is built the leader will then be able to use the right motivational levers to motivate employees; such an economic incentive, a compliment, a bonus, professional recognition or a simple way of joking.

- Emotional strength to transfer security over future prospects (the ability to be secure base). It is important that a manager can sweep away fears of employees in order to increase the overall efficiency of the organization. Managers must set standards and operational levels to provide the tools necessary to create a positive environment that encourages cooperation, identification and resolution of problems.

- Ability to change cultural assumptions. As individual development is based on interpersonal processes, so the leader needs to act in relation to specific patterns of behaviour that aimed to change the IWM of individuals and thus benefit the organization.

- Depth of vision. The ability to assess adequately the cultural characteristics both inside and outside the organization; in order to build the best tools with which to manage attachment relationships. This means understanding the potential of workers, their aspirations and weaknesses, and to use this knowledge in the best way to build a strategy of effective action against competitors.

### **Conclusion**

Leadership is an essential component of managing people (Human Resources); and successful leaders do this is partly by managing attachment relationships. I have shown that it is necessary that leaders know how to act as caregivers, seeing and monitoring what it is necessary to act for the sake of individuals’ and groups’ survival.

## References

Albanese, F (may 2012), *L'attaccamento nella relazione psicoterapeutica con adulti*, on [www.psicoterapia.it](http://www.psicoterapia.it).

Bowlby J. (1950). *Maternal Care and Mental Health. The Master Work Series*. London: Jason Aronson

Bowlby J. (1969). *Attachment and Loss, Volume 1: Attachment*. London, Tavistock.

Bowlby, J. (1979). *The Making And Breaking Of Affective Bonds*. London, Tavistock.

Bowlby J. (1988). *A Secure Base: Parent-Child Attachment and Healthy Human Development*. New York: Basic Books

Cardani, M., Martone, A., Quintarelli, L., & Tassarotti, S. (2008). *Business Coaching. Una tecnica per migliorare le performance aziendali*, Italy, Ipsa.

Cena, L., Imbasciati, A., & Baldoni, F. (2010), *La relazione genitore-bambino. Dalla psicoanalisi infantile alle nuove prospettive evoluzionistiche dell'attaccamento*, Milan, Spinger Verlag.

Crittenden, Patricia M. (1997). *Pericolo, sviluppo e adattamento*, Milan, Elsevier.

Donley, M. (1993, July). Le teorie dell'attaccamento e l'unità emozionale. *Terapia Familiare*, 42, 5-23.

Ege, H. (2005). *Oltre il Mobbing. Straining, Stalking e altre forme di conflittualità sul posto di lavoro*. Milan: Franco Angeli.

Gabassi, P.G. (2006). *Psicologia del lavoro nelle organizzazioni*, Milan: Franco Angeli.

Geof, A., & Garvey, B. (2010). *Mentoring pocketbook 3rd Ed*, Alresford: Management Pocketbooks Ltd.

Giachino, C. (2012). *La strategia di sviluppo prodotto: il DNA dell'azienda*. Torino: Giappichelli.

Holmes, J. (1993). In J. Bowlby (Ed.) *Attachment Theory*. London, Routledge.

Lizza, P.(1985). *La cultura aziendale. Profili di analisi e di management*. Milan: Giuffrè Editore

Schein, E. (1985). *Organizational Culture and Leadership*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers

Lorenz, K. (1949). *L'Anello Di Re Salomone*, Munchen. Adelphi.

Loriedo, C., & Picardi, A. (2000). *Dalla teoria generale dei sistemi alla teoria dell'attaccamento. Percorsi e modelli della psicoterapia sistemico-relazionale*. Milan: Franco Angeli.

Mantovani, S. (1976). *Psicologia e Pedagogia*. Milan: Angeli.

Meldolesi, G.N. (2011). *Panico, ossessioni e fobie: psicobiologia dell'ansia. Dalle origini del comportamento ai rapporti familiari*. Milan: Franco Angeli.

Nesurini, M. (2007), *Good Morning Mr. Brand. Il senso, il valore e la personalità del brand*. Milan: Hoepli.

Trentini, G. (2012). *Oltre il mobbing: le nuove frontiere della persecutività*. Milan: Franco Angeli.

Van der Horst F.C.P., Van der Veer R., & Van IJzendoorn, M.H. (2007, December) John Bowlby and ethology: An annotated interview with Robert Hinde, *Attachment & Human Development*, 9(4), 321-335.