Does an organization’s image matter to its own employees? Does this image affect how employees identify with their work organization? Does image and organizational identification influence employee behavior and productivity in the workplace? According to the analysis conducted by Eunju Rho, Taesik Yun, and KangBok Lee, the answer to each of these questions is yes. While this may appear self-evident, their academic constructs in support are noteworthy. Indeed, they should be considered foundational, and will likely serve to generate new organizational models on which to build stronger relationships between workplace and workers.

Organizational image has usually been evaluated in terms of reputation, mostly by external sources, that is, the public, professional associations, peer organizations, regulatory agencies, and the media. Rho, Yun, and Lee, however, focus on the evaluation of the image of their workplaces by the employees themselves. That image derives primarily from two different sets of perceptions: (1) the member’s own evaluative understanding of the organization, and (2) the member’s perception of others’ evaluations, that is, perceived organizational identity and construed external image. The former, when the employee’s individual value system coincides with the demonstrated values of the organization, coincides with strong identification of the employee/organizational member with the place of employment. As support for this hypothesis, the authors cite stronger organizational identification among employees of not-for-profit entities than among those in governmental agencies. The not-for-profit organization employees appear on average to be more strongly motivated to alleviate varying social, economic, cultural, or environmental inequities than the government employees. In consequence, their personal and organizational value systems blend more easily and consistently.

Why do we need to understand this cognitive process that binds an organization with its members? It is the general contention of the authors that a strong identification between the organization and its members creates, among other things, a sense of pride, loyalty, and belonging, thus building a sense of ownership both individually and collectively. Herein lies the core of the authors’ thesis: “The strength of an employee’s identification with his or her organization is positively associated with extra-role behavior.” An employee is more willing to go above and beyond the basic requirements of the job when driven by a strong sense of organizational identity. In the authors’ analysis, the converse is also true: a weaker level of organizational identification results in employees who do little or nothing beyond their primary functions.
The authors claim that weak levels of organizational identification result in increased absenteeism. Especially as to what the authors code as “involuntary absenteeism,” absences attributable to the employee’s own illness, or “death or illness in the family,” to some extent the authors acknowledge greater difficulty in establishing direct linkage. They address the differences in voluntary and involuntary absences, age group variations, and the differences in male and female absenteeism trends. However, my own managerial experience strongly suggests that too many factors intervene to allow a strong causal relationship between organizational identity and levels of absenteeism.

Further research could benefit from some classic texts that actually did not explicitly address management issues. I suggest Studs Terkel’s 1972 *Working*, or the 1979 text, *Life in Organizations—Workplaces as People Experience Them*, edited by Rosabeth Moss Kanter and Barry A. Stein, or perhaps the preeminent classic, *Democracy in America* by Alexis de Tocqueville. These are individual accounts of people at work, reflecting societal norms. Along with much other scholarly work, these studies show that workers need to balance individualism with association, contribute to a common purpose, and accept some level of civic responsibility. Individual and collective needs apply to the workplace as much as to anywhere else. How individuals choose to associate through family, friends, community, and work continues to change. However, we still need to associate organizationally. The authors might want to broaden their query: what organizational norms need to be present in order to foster a positive organizational image and the strengthening of workplace identification? Such an expanded study might consider the organizational traits that best reflect the needs of a multi-generational workforce. It might also address the varying perceptions of those occupying positions at the top, middle, and lower levels of an organization.

Seemingly some obvious and basic organizational characteristics need to be in place. Taking a page from the two lower rungs on Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, employees have to provide for their basic economic needs. As such, management and labor alike must agree on fair and equitable compensation and promotional systems. Numerous academic studies have concluded that neither excessive nor inadequate compensation enhances employee performance. Trust manifested as fair and equitable treatment in terms of compensation and promotional opportunity induces stronger internal organizational ties.

Organizations need to reaffirm their civic purpose. Organizations that create public value and provide effective public service that makes a difference will attract and retain the next generation of public servants. Governmental organizations in particular need to go beyond their focus on managerial mechanics, process, costs, and efficiency. In simple terms, organizations must balance product with process. Organizations that do so will likely engender stronger links with existing members.

Organizational image and identity may yet prove to be the primary public service motivator. Our authors should be congratulated on advancing our thinking on this important issue.