

Effects of Abusive Supervision and Coworker Support on Work Engagement

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Abstract. This study examined the direct and interactive effects of abusive supervision and coworker support on work engagement. Employees from diverse organizations in Malaysia ($N = 140$) were surveyed. Multiple regression analysis results showed that abusive supervision related negatively and coworker support related positively with work engagement but did not interact with each other to predict work engagement. Therefore, there was no support for a buffering effect of coworker support on the relationship between abusive supervision and work engagement.

Keywords: abusive supervision, co-worker support, work engagement, Malaysia

1. Introduction

Supervisory leadership is an important topic in the management literature as evidenced by the thousands of studies examining this phenomenon [1]. Of such research efforts is a stream of research focusing on abusive supervisory behaviors (see [1] for a review). Abusive supervision refers to subordinates' perceptions of their supervisor's nonphysical hostile behaviors toward them [2, p. 178] and is a form of hindrance stressor in the workplace. Although abusive supervision is a low-base rate phenomenon, when it does occur, its effects can be costly to both employees and employers [3].

Although prior research has shown abusive supervision to be related to various attitudinal and behavioral outcomes such as job satisfaction, organizational commitment, turnover intention, and counterproductive work behaviors (see [1] for a review), little is known about how abusive supervision relates to work engagement—a positive, fulfilling, affective-motivational state of work-related well being [4, p. 1]. Theoretical works, however, suggest that abusive supervision is likely to affect employees' engagement at work. In Tepper's [1] emergent model of abusive supervision, abusive supervision is linked to psychological distress (e.g., job strain, burnout). In the differentiated job demands-resources model [5], it is proposed that hindrance stressors trigger negative emotions and cognitions that result in reduced engagement. Therefore, this study seeks to narrow the research gap in the literature by examining the predictive effect of abusive supervision on work engagement. Given that employee engagement may be a key to competitive advantage [6] with research evidence indicating that employees with high job engagement outperformed those with low job engagement [7], more research on its antecedents is warranted.

In addition to examining the relationship between abusive supervision and work engagement, this study also sought to examine a job resource factor that has the potential to predict as well as buffer the detrimental effect of abusive supervision on work engagement. This is important not only for theory extension but for practical purposes because an understanding of this would form the basis for initiating appropriate managerial interventions. According to the differentiated job demands-resources model, job demands and job resources are joint predictors of work engagement. In this study the job resource examined is coworker support—beliefs about the extent to which one can rely on coworkers to provide social support. Coworker

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support was selected for study to heed the call for research that incorporates social support as a moderator of workplace harassment effects [8].

In sum, this study contributes to the extant literature by examining the joint effects of a previously unexamined job demand (i.e., abusive supervision) and a job resource (i.e., coworker support) on work engagement. In addition, as a minor contribution, this study conducted in the Malaysian context addresses Tepper's [1] call for more research to evaluate the generalizability of the findings of abusive supervision research undertaken with US samples.

2. Theory and Hypotheses

2.1. Effect of abusive supervision on work engagement

Work engagement is a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterized by vigor (e.g., having high energy and mental resilience while working), dedication (e.g., feeling a sense of significance, enthusiasm, and challenge at work), and absorption (e.g., being mentally engrossed) in one's work [9, p. 74]. Although several person (e.g., personality), job (e.g., job enrichment), and positive leadership (e.g., transformational leadership) factors have been found to play a role in determining employee's level of reported work engagement (see [5] and [10] for meta-analytic reviews), little is known about the effects of negative leadership behaviors such as abusive supervision on work engagement. Research has, however, shown abusive supervision to have detrimental effects on outcomes such as job satisfaction [2] and job performance [11].

Abusive supervision is said to occur when employees perceive their supervisor to treat them with nonphysical hostility repeatedly [1], [2]. Consistent with past researchers [8], [12], I view abusive supervision to be a workplace job demand or stressor. Job demands refer to physical, psychological, social, and organizational job aspects that require sustained effort, drain employees' energy, and are associated with certain psychological costs [13]. Job demands can be appraised as hindrances or challenges [5], and abusive supervision constitutes a hindrance stressor.

Hindrance stressors pose a threat to or constrain employees' perceived ability to achieve their work-related goals [14]. According to the differentiated job demands-resources model, hindrance stressors relate negatively to employee engagement because they deplete employees' energy, thwart personal growth and goal attainment, and trigger negative emotions that result in passive, emotion-focused coping styles (e.g., becoming detached). This stressor-engagement link has been demonstrated through meta-analytic research [5].

Kahn's [15] model of engagement provides another lens for suggesting a link between abusive supervision and work engagement. In this model, Kahn posits that in order for employees to be work engaged, they need to feel (a) worthwhile, valued, and able to contribute to and receive from their role performances (i.e., psychological meaningfulness); (b) safe to show and employ themselves without fear of negative consequences (i.e., psychological safety); and (c) a sense of having the physical, emotional, and psychological resources needed to engage themselves in their role performances (i.e., psychological availability). It is difficult to envisage that employees would experience these psychological conditions and thus be work engaged if they perceive their supervisor to be constantly hostile towards them.

Although there is no direct evidence that abusive supervision predicts work engagement, studies have shown abusive supervision to be related to emotional exhaustion [16], [17] and psychological distress [12]. It is unlikely that employees who are emotionally exhausted and psychologically distressed (e.g., fearful, depressed) will approach their work with vigor, dedication, and absorption. Finally, a study of the effects of petty tyranny has found tyrannical supervisory behavior to be positively associated with work alienation [18], a concept that is quite similar to work disengagement. Following the above lines of reasoning and indirect evidence from related studies, I forward the following hypothesis: Abusive supervision is negatively related to work engagement.

2.2. Effects of coworker support on work engagement

Social support is a useful resource for enhancing employees' proper functioning in organizations [19]. In the workplace, supervisor support and coworker support are the most relevant form of social support for employees. If the supervisor is abusive, then coworker support becomes a more salient and important source of social support. Coworker support refers to employees' beliefs about the extent to which coworkers provide desirable resources in the form of emotional support (e.g., showing concern) and instrumental assistance (e.g., helping with work tasks) to them [19], [20]. In the work engagement literature, coworker support is considered a job resource. Job resources refer to job aspects that are functional in the achievement of work goals, fostering of personal development, and reduction of job demands and their associated costs [13]. According to various models of work engagement (e.g., differentiated job demands-resources model, [5]; modified job demands-resources model of work engagement, [21]) job resources activate a motivational process that leads to work engagement.

There is also meta-analytic research evidence that social support from coworkers relates positively to engagement [22]. A recent study also found coworker support to predict work engagement among hotel employees [23]. Therefore, by way of replication, I propose the following hypothesis: Coworker support is positively related to work engagement.

In addition to the direct effects of social support, researchers have examined also the moderating effects of social support, guided by the buffering hypothesis. According to the buffering model of social support [24], social support protects people from the unhealthy influence of stressful events. Also, according to Lazarus and Folkman's [25] theory of stress, social support prevents stress by making threatening experiences appear less consequential or provide valuable resources for coping when stress occurs. Within the work engagement context, the differentiated job demands-resources model can be applied to support the buffering hypothesis. According to this model, hindrance stressors deplete energy and build up strain, whereas job resources protect people from strains related to resource depletion [5]. Insofar as abusive supervision constitutes a hindrance stressor and coworker support a job resource, coworker support should buffer the effects of abusive supervision.

Although several researchers have relied on the buffering hypothesis to pose coworker support as a moderator in their studies, these studies have yielded inconsistent findings. For example, researchers in some studies have found coworker support to moderate the effects of (a) supervisor undermining on somatic complaints such as headaches [26], (b) psychological aggression on emotional well-being, job-related affect, and somatic health [27], and (c) perceived justice on psychological distress [28]. Researchers in other studies, however, found no evidence that coworker support moderated the effects of job stressors on psychological strains and job performance [29] or job neglect [27].

In view of the fact that the empirical literature is still equivocal about the generality of a buffering effect of coworker support, and given that no study has examined the buffering effect of coworker support when abusive supervision is the stressor and work engagement the outcome, I pose the following research question: Will coworker support moderate the relationship between abusive supervision and work engagement?

3. Method

Participants comprised 140 full-time employees from different organizations who were enrolled in an MBA program in a large public university in Malaysia. Participants completed the questionnaires anonymously and returned them to the course instructors who distributed the questionnaires. Although participation was voluntary, almost all students enrolled in the classes involved in the study participated because the survey was administered in-class and took only about 15 minutes of the class time.

Participants had worked in their organization an average of 5.38 years ($SD = 6.08$) with total work experience averaging 7.86 years ($SD = 6.48$). Their ages ranged from 23 to 49 ($M = 31.08$, $SD = 6.79$). About 49% were male, 45% were married, and all held an undergraduate or a more advanced degree.

Abusive supervision was measured with Tepper's [2] 15-item abusive supervision scale ($\alpha = .93$). A sample item is "My boss puts me down in front of others." Coworker support was measured by adapting the 4-item scale Bacharach and Bamberger [30] developed to measure supervisory support climate by replacing the term company officers with coworker ($\alpha = .78$). A sample item is "How often can you rely on your

coworkers to assist you with practical matters or minor emergencies off-duty?” Finally, work engagement was measured with the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale–9 [31] comprising nine items ($\alpha = .88$). A sample item is “At my work, I feel bursting with energy.” Respondents responded to all of the above items using a 5-point Likert-type scale anchored from *never* (1) to *always* (5).

4. Results and Discussion

Moderated multiple regression analysis results are reported in Table 1. As shown, the relationships between abusive supervision and work engagement and between coworker support and work engagement were statistically significant and in the predicted direction. Therefore, the hypotheses stating that (a) abusive supervision would relate negatively to work engagement and (b) coworker support would relate positively to work engagement were supported. The answer for the research question of whether or not coworker support would moderate the relationship between abusive supervision and work engagement in this study has to be no as indicated by the non-significant two-way interaction result shown in Table 1 (under Model 2).

Table 1: Results of hierarchical regression analysis for predicting work engagement

Variable	Model 1		Model 2	
	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>
Abusive supervision	-0.19*	0.05	-0.19*	0.05
Coworker support	0.19*	0.05	0.20*	0.05
Abusive supervision × Coworker support			0.04	0.05

Note. Unstandardized coefficients are reported. $R^2 = .21$ for both models. $*p < .001$ (two-tailed).

This study contributes to the extant literature by being what, to my knowledge, is the first study to examine the joint effects of abusive supervision and coworker support on work engagement. In line with the theoretical frameworks offered in the abusive supervision and work engagement literatures, abusive supervision as a job demand (specifically as a hindrance stressor) and coworker support as a job resource predicted work engagement additively but not interactively.

An obvious managerial implication of this study is that employers should ensure that their supervisors are not abusive to employees. This would entail taking a zero-tolerance stance toward abusive supervisory behaviors and disciplining supervisors who engage in such behaviors [32]. It is, however, practically impossible to wipe out abusive supervision entirely. Therefore, employers need to identify factors that can buffer its detrimental effects. In this study, although coworker support was not found to play such a buffering role, it did predict work engagement directly. Therefore, steps should be taken to foster coworker support such as encouraging and rewarding teamwork [28].

Regarding the lack of evidence to suggest that coworker support would moderate the effects of abusive supervision on work engagement, a possible reason is that the two-way interaction between abusive supervision and coworker support is being obscured by higher order interactions (e.g., a three-way interaction). Such a possibility should be investigated in future research.

This study has a number of limitations that needs to be addressed in future research. First, because all data were collected from employees of one organization, any generalization of the findings to other organizations needs to be done with caution. Second, because data were cross sectional, any conclusions drawn from the findings are merely suggestive of the causal ordering implied in the study. Finally, although abusive supervision and coworker support are said to link to work engagement through various mediating mechanisms, these potential mediators were not measured. In view of the above limitations, future researchers are urged to (a) replicate this study in other settings, (b) use study designs that would allow more conclusive causal inferences to be made, and (c) model and test psychological variables (e.g., psychological meaningfulness) as mediators in the prediction of work engagement. Finally, research examining other counterproductive workplace behaviors (e.g., social undermining and workplace incivility) would add to the knowledge base of work engagement.

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6. References

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