



# The effects of workplace bullying on team learning, innovation and project success as mediated through virtual and traditional team dynamics

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## Abstract

Workplace bullying has become a impediment to organizational functioning that leads to both individual, group, and legal outcomes. Likewise, given the prevalence of virtual collaboration, the study of virtual team dynamics has become crucial for increasing the effectiveness of key project teams. As a result, this study aims to address the effect of project manager bullying tactics on behavior and perceptions of team-level and team member dynamics in virtual versus traditional project teams. By examining team outcomes, such as perceptions of politics and helping behavior, as well as individual outcomes, such as affective commitment, organizational citizenship behavior, and work–family conflict, we hope to shed light on the negative impact of workplace bullying to project team functioning as well as critical non-work, stress-related outcomes. In addition, we plan to further study the differential effects of bullying in both virtual and traditional project teams.

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## 1. Introduction

Organizations and individuals have a vested interest in preventing negative acts such as workplace bullying given the individual, group, and legal ramifications. The use of virtual teams potentially complicates team dynamics and could impact the effect of workplace bullying on individual behavior and team functioning. As a result, this study aims to address the effect of bullying tactics on behavior and perceptions of team-level and team member dynamics in virtual versus collocated project teams. Utilizing Media Richness Theory (Daft and Lengel, 1984), we propose that workplace bullying will have a stronger effect on individual outcomes in virtual teams and team outcomes than in collocated teams. Below we build a conceptual model addressing the mediated impact of workplace

bullying on team learning, innovation, and project success.

Workplace bullying is defined as “... harassing, offending, socially excluding someone, or negatively affecting someone’s work tasks” (Einarsen et al., 2003, p. 15). In addition, these acts must occur repeatedly and constitute systematic negative social acts to be considered workplace bullying (Einarsen et al., 2003, in press). Stated differently, workplace bullying occurs when an individual is subject to repeated negative social acts that places the target in an inferior position. Past research in the area of workplace bullying has shown far-reaching effects on the target of bullying, such as workplace withdrawal (Laschinger and Fida, 2013), physical health (Nielsen et al., 2014), and suicidal ideation (Nielsen et al., 2015) as well as bystanders (Samnani and Singh, 2012). Work in this area is commonly classified into three subsections: prevalence, antecedents, and consequences. While many may consider workplace bullying to be a rare occurrence, empirical research has shown that approximately 50% of Americans have experienced workplace bullying (Lutgen-Sandvik et al., 2007). Given this

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prevalence, workplace bullying appears to be a critical area for research. While substantive research attention has addressed antecedents of workplace bullying, far fewer studies have addressed the consequences and mitigating factors with regards to workplace bullying (Samnani and Singh, 2012).

Given the previously outlined need to address consequences and mitigating factors addressing workplace bullying, we propose a posteriorially that team virtuality will substantively modify the relationship between workplace bullying and critical individual and team outcomes. Past research has shown that workplace bullying impacts important outcomes such as creativity (Chang, 2011), leadership (Kuruppuarachchi, 2009), and communication (Henderson, 2008) in project teams. These differences indicate that team dynamics vary with team virtuality with communication shifting from group interaction to dyadic exchange. This dyadic exchange serves to isolate the bullying and thereby prevent the spread of negative outcomes among team members. As a result, we propose that team virtuality may modify the relationship between workplace bullying and important outcomes in project teams.

From a theoretical perspective, we suggest that Media Richness Theory (Daft and Lengel, 1984) helps to explain the moderating effect of team virtuality. Daft and Lengel (1984) created a hierarchy of media richness to summarize the efficacy of different types of communication for increasing task performance and task satisfaction. In essence, the theoretical model along with substantive empirical evidence suggests that communication quality increases as communication moves from text to audio to video and finally to face-to-face media (Rice and Shook, 1990). For virtual teams, communication primarily occurs via text (email communication), audio (telephone calls), and video conferencing. As a result, this perspective suggests that the frequency with which individuals use lean communication channels is increased in virtual teams. Based on these foundational ideas, we build a theoretical model identifying the outcomes of workplace bullying in both virtual and collocated project teams.

## 2. Affective commitment

The origins of commitment extend back to work dealing with employee “cohesion” and “attachment”. Kanter (1968) described ‘cohesion commitment’ as “... the attachment of an individual’s fund of affectivity and emotion to the group” (p. 507). Likewise, Buchanan (1974) considered commitment as “... partisan, affective attachment to the goals and values of the organization, to one’s role in relation to the goals and values, and to the organization for its own sake, apart from its purely instrumental worth” (p. 533). Furthering the affective attachment inquiry and perhaps best representing the psychological state was work conducted by Porter and his colleagues (Mowday et al., 1979; Porter et al., 1976) who defined organizational commitment as “... the relative strength of an individual’s identification with and involvement in a particular organization” (Mowday et al., 1979).

Considering such, the nature of commitment was then categorized into two types: attitudinal and behavioral commitment

(Mowday et al., 1982; Reichers, 1985; Scholl, 1981; Salancik, 1977). Mowday et al. (1982, p. 26) offered the following categorical descriptions:

Attitudinal commitment focuses on the process by which people come to think about their relationship with the organization. In many ways it can be thought of as a mind set in which individuals consider the extent to which their own values and goals are congruent with those of the organization. Behavioral commitment, on the other hand, relates to the process by which individuals become locked into a certain organization and how they deal with a problem.

Organizational commitment was subsequently parceled into three distinct employee psychological components with all exhibiting an attitudinal disposition: a) continuance commitment – which signifies a *need* to remain dedicated; b) normative commitment – which signals an *obligation* to remain dedicated; and c) affective commitment – which indicates a *desire* to remain dedicated to an organization or sub-group therein (Allen and Meyer, 1990; Meyer and Allen, 1991). These three forms of commitment are not mutually exclusive but rather can be experienced in varying degrees.

Affective commitment then refers to “... the employee’s attachment to, identification with and involvement in the organization. Employees with a strong affective commitment continue employment with the organization because they want to do so” (Meyer and Allen, 1991, p. 67). To this point, it would seem logical that project managers would enjoy team members who have high, positive levels of affective commitment toward their organizations and its projects and therefore would be interested in cultivating this phenomenon.

Mowday et al. (1982) posited that affective commitment to the organization had four categorical antecedents which were job, structural and personal characteristics followed by work experiences. Meyer and Allen (1987) suggested that employee’s fulfilled psychological needs to feel comfortable and competent in their work boosted work experiences to the strongest antecedent of affective commitment. Other variables in the comfort category which have been found to positively correlate with affective commitment include: freedom of conflict and role clarity (Blau, 1988; DeCotiis and Summers, 1987); supervisor consideration (Glisson and Durick, 1988); opportunity for self-expression (Meyer and Allen, 1987, 1988) and participation in decision making (Rhodes and Steers, 1981). Based on these investigations and their perceived theoretical relationship to negative acts in the work place, we offer the following:

**Proposition 1.** *Workplace bullying reduces affective commitment within the organizational project team.*

## 3. Organizational citizenship behavior - individual (OCBI)

Behaviors exhibited by employees were divided into in-role behaviors, which were in accordance with formal job descriptions, and extra-role behaviors which settle beyond the formal role requirements (Katz and Kahn, 1978). The term “organizational

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