The mediating relationship of self-awareness on supervisor burnout and workgroup Civility & Psychological Safety: A multilevel path analysis[☆]

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to examine whether managerial self-awareness (defined as degree of agreement between self and subordinate ratings of leaders' behaviors) mediates the relationship between supervisor burnout and supervised workgroup climate. Using an HLM approach, supervisor emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and personal accomplishment exhibited significant indirect relationships with workplace Civility and Psychological Safety, via managerial self-awareness. No direct relationships between supervisor burnout and workgroup climate were found, suggesting that self-awareness may be an important mediator for individual characteristics of leaders previously thought to be non-significant. Additional post hoc comparisons indicated that workgroups with supervisors who over-rated their own performance behaviors reported the lowest levels of Civility and Psychological Safety compared to workgroups with supervisors who accurately rated or under-rated their own performance behaviors. However, supervisors that under-rated their own performance reported the highest levels of burnout, highlighting the importance of self-awareness (accurately rating oneself) in relation to individual and group outcomes. The relationships between supervisor burnout, managerial self-awareness, and workgroup perceptions of Civility and Psychological Safety differed when considering the directionality of self-other rating agreement, with the negative impact of burnout at the supervisor level having a more direct impact on the workgroup level perceptions of Civility and Psychological Safety when the workgroup is managed by an under-rater, as opposed to an accurate- or over-rater. Practically, organizations should consider the role of managerial self-awareness in influencing subordinate performance and creating desirable work climates. Also, this study suggests the effects of burnout extend beyond the individual and have significant implications for the performance of those in the supervision of the burned out manager.

1. Introduction

Self-awareness is essential to effective leadership. Past research has started exploring the numerous ways in which "knowing-thyself" can lead to effectively managing others in the workplace and leading successful teams in dynamic environments. Self-awareness is conceptualized as having two components—understanding oneself and understanding how oneself is viewed by others (Taylor, 2010) and is related to, but distinct from, mindfulness and emotional intelligence (Brown & Ryan, 2003; Richards, Campenni, & Muse-Burkse, 2010). Traditional theory defines self-awareness as consisting of both inner and outward (social) components, and describes it as an individual, relatively stable trait; as well as an understanding of one's personal resources, a prerequisite to self-regulation.

Burnout, on the other hand, results from the mismatch between resources and job demands, and dwindling personal resources (Bakker, Demerouti, & Euwema, 2005). Burnout manifests as increased emotional exhaustion and depersonalization, and a decreased sense of personal accomplishment (Maslach, 1981). In the current study, we show that self-awareness mediates the relationship between supervisor burnout and workgroup perceptions. Self-awareness allows supervisors with higher burnout levels to maintain workgroups with better climate than supervisors with the

same burnout levels but with lower self-awareness. We examined the relationship of burnout at the individual level, as experienced by the supervisor, and civility and psychological safety at the workgroup level, as experienced by subordinates, while evaluating the role of the supervisor's self-awareness. While insufficiently understood, the relationship between these variables is important, because:

1. Burnout has strong effects on individual behavior (Hätinen et al., 2009; Leiter et al., 2013; Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001); therefore burnout in supervisors should affect their workplace behaviors, including behaviors displayed toward subordinates.
2. Supervisors' individual behavior defines workplace climate in influential ways (Edmondson, 2003; Hult, Hurley, Guinipero, & Nichols, 2000; Green, Albanese, Cafri, & Aarons, 2013), therefore any potential effects of burnout on supervisors' behaviors are expected to affect workplace climate in supervised workgroups.
3. Civility and psychological safety are important aspects of workplace climate, given their established relationship to valuable organizational outcomes.
4. Finally, self-awareness impacts individuals' (e.g. supervisors') ability to monitor and adjust their own behavior, such as to keep it aligned with organizational goals and support organizational outcomes (Eid, Mearns, Larsson, Laberg, & Johnsen, 2012; Fleenor, Smither, Atwater, Braddy, & Sturm, 2010; Taylor, Wang, & Zhan, 2012; Tiuraniemi, 2008). Therefore, supervisors with higher self-awareness, even when facing individually challenging circumstances (e.g. burnout), would be expected to recognize and mitigate the potential negative impact on subordinates. For example, supervisors with greater self-awareness may prevent their personal experience of burnout from negatively impacting civility and psychological safety climate in supervised workgroups.

We will now review the main findings from prior research which collectively suggested these conclusions, and led us to examine the relationship of supervisors' burnout to the subordinates' experience of civility and psychological safety while accounting for the supervisors' self-awareness levels.

1.1. Burnout and its influence on individual behavior

Maslach et al. (p. 399, 2001) describe burnout as a "psychological syndrome in response to chronic interpersonal stressors on the job." Maslach (1981) conceptualized burnout as a combination of three factors: feelings of Emotional Exhaustion (EE), increasingly depersonalized (DP) interactions with work and recipients, and a decreased sense of Personal Accomplishment (PA). Organizations most commonly measure burnout using the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI). Burnout has been found to be associated with such outcomes as absenteeism, turnover intention, actual turnover, reduced levels of job satisfaction, of organizational commitment, and work-life balance (Boles, Dean, Ricks, Short, & Wang, 2000; Maslach et al., 2001).

Individual reactions to working conditions that mismatch what the employee considers optimal lead to burnout in the workplace (Maslach & Leiter, 2008). According to the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model (Bakker et al., 2005), burnout commonly occurs when job demands exceed job resources. Xanthopoulou, Bakker, Demerouti, and Schaufeli (2007) expanded on the JD-R model by adding personal resources, defined as "aspects of the self that are generally linked to resiliency and refer to an individual's sense of their ability to control and impact upon their environment successfully" (p. 123, Xanthopoulou et al., 2007).

Xanthopoulou et al. (2007) found that the personal resources of self-efficacy, organizationally-based self-esteem, and optimism mediated the relationship between job resources and engagement/exhaustion, and influenced the perception of job resources. Managers whose personal and job resources are too few to deal with high job demands face several options. They can shift resources from one job area to another to increase efficiency; shift resources to nonwork-related activities; or invest less overall, withdrawing from interpersonal relationships and work tasks in an effort to conserve resources (Ericson-Lidman & Strandberg, 2007; Lapointe, Vandenberghe, & Panaccio, 2011; Siegall & McDonald, 2004). For example, professors experiencing burnout have shifted time away from teaching and professional development, with burnout being a full mediator of the relationship between time spent in these activities and person-organization fit (Siegall & McDonald, 2004). Since withdrawing from work results in a further reduced sense of personal accomplishment as the person becomes less productive, this creates a potentially vicious circle for the burned out individual. Thus, burnout has strong effects on individual behavior. If this person is a manager and thereby in the role of structuring, supporting and supervising the work of others, then the withdrawal from interpersonal relationships can also cause a profound impact on the burned out manager's workgroup—particularly on the supervised employees perceptions of interpersonal climate aspects, such as psychological safety and civility.

Generally, the negative impact of individual burnout can spread throughout an organization, as the cycle of exhaustion, withdrawal, and reduced performance in one employee repeats in others who depend on the burned-out supervisor or coworker (Bakker et al., 2005; Maslach et al., 2001). For supervisors, we suggest that this impact may strengthen given the organizationally prominent role played by the burned out individual. For example, a supervisor who experiences a mismatch between job demands and resources might respond by depersonalizing; his or her subordinates will then have supervisory support partly withdrawn, and in turn can experience increased burnout. Vassos and Nankervis (2012) found that reduced supervisory support was one significant predictor of burnout in disability support workers, through effects on both emotional exhaustion and depersonalization. Because burnout spreads within shared job environments and because burnout often involves weakening interpersonal connections and a growing cynicism (Bakker et al., 2005; Maslach et al., 2001), burnout in managers can negatively affect the supervised employees' perceptions of psychological safety and civility levels at work.

1.2. Supervisors' behavior and workgroup climate

Distinct from culture, established norms, and expectations within an environment, climate is the aggregated attitudes and perceptions of a work environment (James & Sells, 1981). Leaders, including supervisors, have strong impacts on overall workgroup climate, which often acts as a mediator between supervisor behavior and workgroup outcomes (Carmeli, Sheaffer, Binyamin, Reiter-Palmon, & Shimoni, 2014; De Poel, Stoker, & van der Zee, 2012; Isaksen & Akkermans, 2011). Dysvik and Kuvaas (2012) found that perceived supervisor support related to perceived investment in employee development, and these in turn related to overall business unit performance. Carmeli et al. (2014) found that leadership behavior affects psychological safety, one component of workgroup climate, which in turn affects creative problem-solving capacity. Abusive supervisor behavior, including dishonesty, intimidation, and threats, is associated with lower organizational citizenship behaviors in workgroups (Gregory, Osmonbekov, Gregory, Albritton, & Carr, 2013). Intimidating and avoiding behaviors, as occur when supervisors depersonalize and withdraw from relationships, are associated with lower employee engagement, decreased job satisfaction, and subordinate burnout (Leary et al., 2013).