



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

The Leadership Quarterly

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/leaqua

A moderated mediation model of the relationship between abusive supervision and knowledge sharing

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Knowledge sharing
Abusive supervision
Emotional exhaustion
Organizational justice
Conservation of resources theory

ABSTRACT

This study uses the conservation of resources theory to examine the influence of a leader's destructive behaviors by investigating how emotional exhaustion resulting from abusive supervision affects employees' knowledge-sharing behaviors. Using a moderated mediation framework, this study suggests that organizational justice moderates the positive relationship between abusive supervision and employees' emotional exhaustion and attenuates the negative indirect effect of abusive supervision on employees' knowledge-sharing behaviors. The results of this study, drawn from a sample of 202 dyads comprising full-time employees and their immediate supervisors, support most of its hypotheses. The implications and limitations of the study, as well as directions for future research, are discussed.

Introduction

Knowledge is a key factor of an organization's competitive advantage, and its management is critical to both organizational success and long-term sustainability (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995; Stewart, 1997). Thus, it is not surprising that numerous companies have invested in a variety of knowledge management systems to facilitate knowledge sharing among their employees (Cabrera, Collins, & Salgado, 2006). However, scholars are increasingly recognizing that the major obstacles to knowledge management processes reside in people rather than in systems or technologies (Cabrera et al., 2006; Earl, 2001).

Although knowledge sharing can be understood as one of the important discretionary behaviors such as organizational citizenship behavior (OCB), it would be worthwhile to examine the conditions under which employees may or may not share their knowledge in the current knowledge-based economy. This is because knowledge sharing demands higher costs or risks from employees than do other discretionary behaviors. Since knowledge sharing includes the sharing of specialized knowledge, unique skills, expertise, and information, individuals may need to spend more time and energy to engage in such behaviors. Moreover, individuals may decide not to share their valuable knowledge with others in order to retain their competitive advantages (Cabrera & Cabrera, 2005). Thus, promoting knowledge sharing can be particularly challenging unless individuals perceive that engaging in it will produce greater benefits (Kim, Lee, Park, & Yun, 2015). Thus, identifying the factors that may prevent knowledge sharing among organizational members is crucial (Cabrera et al., 2006; Lin, 2007; Wang & Noe, 2010).

A leader, viewed as an organizational agent, could be a significant factor in employees' willingness to share their knowledge (Connelly & Kelloway, 2003; Srivastava, Bartol, & Locke, 2006). Although most of the research on leadership has focused on its constructive or effective side, we focus on dysfunctional or deviant leader behaviors (Aryee, Chen, Sun, & Debrah, 2007; Tepper,

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2017.09.001>

Received 5 August 2015; Received in revised form 6 September 2017; Accepted 7 September 2017

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2000, 2007; Tierney & Tepper, 2007; Zellars, Tepper, & Duffy, 2002). Several researchers have examined abusive supervisory behaviors (Aryee et al., 2007; Ashforth, 1994; Tepper, 2000, 2007; Tepper, Duffy, & Shaw, 2001), recognizing the importance of leadership in the workplace and the inherent power imbalance between supervisors and subordinates. Abusive supervision refers to “subordinates’ perceptions of the extent to which supervisors engage in the sustained display of hostile verbal and nonverbal behaviors, excluding physical contact” (Tepper, 2000, p. 178). Although the detrimental impacts on subordinates of abusive supervision, such as job and life dissatisfaction, turnover intentions, and job performance (Harris, Kacmar, & Zivnuska, 2007; Tepper, 2000), have been studied, employees’ knowledge sharing is a consequential work outcome that remains under-investigated. As the continuous mistreatment and hostility of a supervisor (Aryee, Sun, Chen, & Debrah, 2008) can make subordinates perceive a loss (or the threat of a loss) of valuable resources, abused subordinates may try to reduce resource loss by withholding discretionary behaviors such as knowledge sharing. Thus, the conservation of resources (COR) theory (Hobfoll, 1989) may be a useful perspective from which to explain why employees do not share their knowledge when under abusive supervision. Drawing insights from the COR theory (Hobfoll, 1989), this study explores the impact of abusive supervision, a type of workplace stressor, on individuals’ knowledge-sharing behaviors. The study also examines the psychological mechanism through which abusive supervision affects employees’ knowledge-sharing behaviors. Subordinates under abusive supervision are likely to perceive resource loss and emotional demands that go beyond what they can afford during interpersonal interactions, resulting in emotional exhaustion. Because sharing their knowledge requires additional effort and resources (Cabrera & Cabrera, 2005), employees who become emotionally exhausted are likely to minimize the loss of their valued resources and gain control of the situation by curtailing their participation in knowledge sharing. Thus, based on the COR theory, this study examines the mediating role of emotional exhaustion as a key mechanism linking abusive supervision to employees’ knowledge sharing.

When facing potential or actual resource loss in a situation involving supervisory abuse, employees become motivated to evaluate whether their depleted resources can be adequately replenished by their organization (Janssen, Lam, & Huang, 2010). Among various organizational factors, this study selects organizational justice (i.e., distributive justice and procedural justice) because it acutely affects employees’ attitudes and behaviors (Colquitt, Conlon, Wesson, Porter, & Ng, 2001). Employees suffering under abusive supervisors may yet decide to maintain their level of knowledge sharing because they anticipate that they will receive the necessary support from their organization when the level of organizational justice is high. Several recent studies suggest that organizational justice can be considered as an important factor in understanding individuals’ experiences under stressful situations because it can affect employees’ actions and reactions to organizational stressors such as abusive supervision (Cole, Bernerth, Walter, & Holt, 2010). According to multifoci theory, individuals have well-defined perceptions about the key constituents within their workplace and act differently depending on how they perceive each constituent (Lavelle, Rupp, & Brockner, 2007). A multifoci approach might help explain why individuals may perceive organizational justice as mitigating the negative effects on knowledge sharing of emotional exhaustion resulting from abusive supervision, since employees are likely to have different justice perceptions concerning their supervisors and organization (Liao & Rupp, 2005). Moreover, the cross-domain buffering approach suggests how the negative effect of one source (i.e., abusive supervision) may be attenuated when another source (i.e., organizational justice) provides positive resources (Duffy, Ganster, & Pagon, 2002). Therefore, this study suggests that organizational justice may serve as a buffer for employees under abusive supervision where they receive unfair or hostile treatment from their supervisors. Organizational justice may mitigate the negative effects of abusive supervision on both psychological and behavioral outcomes.

Using a moderated mediation framework, we argue that the mediating effect of emotional exhaustion between abusive supervision and knowledge sharing differs depending on organizational justice. Because organizational justice is known to provide support through fair procedures and outcomes (Howard & Cordes, 2010), the negative effect of abusive supervision is likely to be attenuated when the level of organizational justice is high. Accordingly, this study examines how organizational justice buffers the harmful effects of abusive supervision on emotional exhaustion and weakens the negative indirect relationship between abusive supervision and knowledge sharing.

Therefore, this study applies the COR theory to accomplish three major research objectives. First, the study examines the negative effects of abusive supervision on knowledge sharing. Second, the study investigates the mechanism of emotional exhaustion and examines how individuals under highly abusive supervision reduce their knowledge sharing because of emotional exhaustion. Finally, the study proposes organizational justice as a buffer that could reduce emotional exhaustion amid abusive supervision by applying a moderated mediation framework. By addressing these important issues, this study not only supplements the existing research but also generates new insights that organizations can employ to alleviate the harmful impacts of abusive supervision.

Theoretical background and hypothesis development

Knowledge sharing and abusive supervision

Several scholars have explored the predictors of knowledge sharing in today’s knowledge-based economy (Cabrera et al., 2006). Wang and Noe (2010) reviewed studies on knowledge sharing and classified its antecedents into organizational and cultural characteristics, interpersonal and team characteristics, individual characteristics, and motivational factors. Scholars have noted the importance of organizational climate, finding that climates promoting trust and learning facilitate knowledge sharing, whereas a competitive climate is negatively related to knowledge sharing (Schepers & Van den Berg, 2007; Willem & Scarbrough, 2006).

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