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Costly comparisons:
Managing envy in the workplace

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"She doesn't even have an advanced degree, and when she talks to customers she sounds like a high school girl. All I know is that she spends so much time traveling with the boss, I think that there is something else going on there. I just don't understand how she was placed in charge of this team and I wasn't!" — Employee in a consulting organization

"I don't understand if envy really even exists in the workplace. Only employees with very poor abilities would worry about their coworkers' success. Take me for example — one of my colleagues was just given his own lab with a lot of funding. I'm not feeling envy — I'm going to have the exact same thing soon." — Research scientist at a plant science lab

INTRODUCTION

The two anecdotes above highlight the complex and sometimes contradictory nature of envy in the workplace. Both instances involve a social comparison, comparing one's own level of success or accomplishment with that of a coworker. The individual's relative inferiority is highlighted through this "upward" comparison — in both cases, the employee doesn't quite measure up. Yet one is struck by the vastly different emotional and behavioral reactions each employee had. The first employee reacted in a destructive manner, experiencing feelings of resentment and hostility that resulted in damaging negative gossip aimed at harming the envied employee. When we typically think about envy, this is what is usually called to mind — a negative, destructive emotion that costs the organization dearly, leading to high turnover rates, workplace incivility, and outright sabotage. Recent research, however, suggests that there may be another side to this much-maligned emotion, a motivational side that can result in positive outcomes. The second employee exemplifies this view; he expresses admiration for the successful coworker, which reinforces a strong motivation to succeed in a similar fashion. Understanding workplace envy in order to promote a motivational response and minimize a destructive response is important if managers want to encourage a collaborative and engaging work environment. Ironically, most of us rarely acknowledge actively comparing ourselves to others; nor do we often admit, even to ourselves, that our behavior may be motivated by feelings of envy or inferiority. Yet the very nature of organizational life, which includes competing for both limited spots in the formal hierarchy as well as informal status among groups of friends and colleagues, makes these comparisons and the related experience of envy a relatively common occurrence.

Envy is a more complex emotion than we have previously understood, and several organizational characteristics can influence how envy is experienced, creating the context that transforms the experience of envy from being malicious and destructive to being a benign force that motivates people to strive to improve.

This article will focus on providing a brief synthesis of contemporary research on envy in the workplace. By integrating research from the fields of social psychology and organizational behavior, our aim is to provide managers a better understanding of both the productive and counterproductive consequences of envy. We argue for an approach that recognizes envy subtypes, which include two distinct experiences of envy, namely malicious and benign. These envy sub-types entail different sets of motivations, feelings, and behaviors. We also argue that characteristics of the individual, relationships, and the organizational environment fundamentally shape the experience of envy, largely determining the subtypes of envy. Because comparisons and envy are often an unavoidable aspect of organizational life, it is

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unlikely that workplace envy can be wholly eliminated. We will, however, offer suggestions based on a recent research on workplace envy that will provide managers with actions that can shape the organizational environment to be one that favors a benign experience of envy over a malicious one.

DEFINING ENVY

Envy at its most basic level is the pain felt at another's good fortune. This pain is experienced when individuals desire what another has achieved or accomplished. The superior accomplishment of another serves to highlight one's own relative deficiency or shortcoming. Envy is often experienced when a coworker is rewarded, recognized or promoted, as illustrated by the following statement. ''*I can't believe that Julio was just promoted to senior account executive. I have been vying for that promotion for several months. Why couldn't that have been me?*'' Envy begins as a feeling of pain that one social psychologist has compared with feeling a punch to the gut. Implicit in this is the process of social comparison, which helps people understand how well they ''measure up'' compared to their peers. These comparisons help employees understand their own place within the social environment of the organization, influencing their feelings of self-worth, and helping them to construct social identities within the workplace. Social identities form how employees see themselves and their roles in the organization, for example do they believe they are viewed as competent up and comers, part of the inner circle — or not. Although employees may make these comparisons on the basis of several different domains, including relative popularity among peers and the quality of their relationships with supervisors, the domain of performance achievement and reward is a particularly important aspect of comparison in organizations. This makes sense, as many people strive to be considered competent, high-performing employees worthy of being promoted higher in the formal hierarchy, as well as being granted greater access to resources, promising career opportunities, and more desirable rewards and recognition. Whether employees are willing to admit it or not, these are all strong motivations for them to compare their own performance achievement to that of their peers.

The initial focus of organizational researchers was on understanding the malicious and destructive consequences envy wreaked on organizations. Employees experiencing high levels of envy were more likely to turnover and more likely to engage in counterproductive behavior, including undermining coworkers, spreading negative gossip, acting with aggression, and withdrawing from the workplace. These researchers viewed envy mainly as a negative emotion that would diminish self-esteem and cause stress. People would then act in ways to alleviate this stress through avoiding the person they compare themselves against or retaliating against them. One organizational researcher relayed the following story, which highlights the potentially destructive outcomes associated with envy, based on his experiences working with a consumer goods company that had undergone a corporate merger with a former competitor in the industry.

Each separate organization had its own vice president (VP) of marketing. After the merger, these two executives began to intensely engage in comparison with one another — how much autonomy did they possess, how many assignments were being thrown their way, how many resources were flowing their way, how many new projects were they given access to. This intense focus on the other fueled competition between the two executives. One of the executives who perceived himself to be at a disadvantage began to spread gossip about the other VP and encourage his employees not to talk to employees on the other side. This accelerated conflict on both sides, which spread down to their employees. When the organization suggested marketing should be consolidated, having a single chief marketing officer (CMO), both executives increased their counterproductive behaviors aimed at one another. Senior managers kept asking the two to collaborate more closely, but they did the exact opposite. Within a year and a half of the merger, both VPs were removed and a new outside CMO was brought in to heal the rift within the organizations.

As a result of this primarily negative view of the consequences of workplace envy, the best advice available to managers was to focus on minimizing any type of within-organization comparisons in a bid to eliminate envy. One often-suggested method was to separate the envious employees from the target of their envy. However, this advice may be easier to prescribe than to follow, given that the need for comparison is a fundamental drive in organizational life and given the fact that those employees that most frequently interact with one another are also most likely the ones engaging in comparison and experiencing envy. There may be another reason to rethink our approach to handling workplace envy, as more recent research has revealed a potentially softer side to this emotion. More recent studies have demonstrated that in certain contexts experiencing envy can lead to productive consequences. One study demonstrated that employees who experienced envy after being passed over for a desired promotion actually increased their subsequent performance, and this performance increase was still evident months after being denied promotion. Other studies have shown that experiencing envy causes some individuals to cultivate a relationship with the envied other in order to learn from them and emulate their success. Could it be that envy can also be inspirational and motivate achievement? If so, how does this research on the benign side of envy integrate with the traditional findings on the destructive antisocial consequences associated with envy in the workplace?

Two Faces of Envy

Researchers in the fields of organizational behavior and social psychology have recently been trying to explain how envy can result in both productive and destructive behaviors in organizations. One perspective suggests that the organizational context, characteristics that shape the culture and environment of the organization, determines whether or not experiencing envy results in positive or negative outcomes. While we can all agree that envy is a strong negative emotion that elicits feelings of inferiority, people make sense of this painful feeling in one of two ways: either attributing that painful feeling to a threat or to a challenge. When people evaluate envy as a threat, they shift their focus from desired outcomes, such as a promotion, to the envied person. The focus is then not on achievement but on threat elimination,