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Supervisor Role Overload and Frustration as Antecedents of Abusive Supervision: The Moderating Role of Supervisor Personality

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Our understanding of the antecedents of abusive supervision in the workplace is particularly important given the recent proliferation of unethical organizational leaders in the popular press. Consequently, this study investigates potential sources of abusive supervision in the workplace. Organizations should pay particular attention to the work load given to supervisors. Supervisor work overload may lead to supervisor frustration, which may provoke the engagement in such abusive behaviors. However, acknowledging the role that supervisor personality traits play in determining such behaviors is critically important. This study documents such relationships and provides general support to the proposed relationships.

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Research Article

Supervisor role overload and frustration as antecedents of abusive supervision: The moderating role of supervisor personality

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Summary The current research explores supervisor-level antecedents of abusive supervision in the workplace. Specifically, this study introduces affective events theory to the abusive supervision literature to suggest that supervisor role overload, a work-related event, leads to supervisor frustration. As an intense negative emotional reaction, frustration, in turn, triggers supervisors to exhibit abusive behaviors in the workplace. Supervisor personality traits—namely, neuroticism, conscientiousness, and agreeableness—are also posited to moderate these hypothesized relationships. Specifically, neuroticism is expected to moderate the relationship between role overload and frustration while conscientiousness and agreeableness are expected to moderate the relationship between frustration and abusive supervision. Ultimately, we propose and examine a moderated-mediation model. Multisource field data demonstrate general support for the hypothesized relationships. We conclude with theoretical and practical implications as well as future research avenues. Copyright © 2016 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

Keywords: abusive supervision; frustration; role overload; personality; Big Five

A large number of organizational scholars have recently been intrigued by the question of what happens to employees who work for abusive leaders. Indeed, the vast majority of research on abusive supervision has been devoted to identifying employees' reactions to such abuse (Tepper, 2007). Abusive supervision is defined as "subordinates' perceptions of the extent to which supervisors engage in the sustained display of hostile verbal and nonverbal behaviors, excluding physical content" (Tepper, 2000, p. 178). Such abusive behaviors may include, but are not limited to, ridiculing employees, lying to them, making negative comments about them to others, and expressing anger at them (Tepper, 2000, 2007). Overall, research shows that abusive supervision is associated with numerous unfavorable work outcomes such as workplace deviance (Thau, Bennett, Mitchell, & Marrs, 2009), employee psychological withdrawal (Mawritz, Dust, & Resick, 2014), reduced job satisfaction (Tepper, Duffy, Hoobler, & Ensley, 2004), and reduced job performance (Harris, Kacmar, & Zivnuska, 2007).

At this point, however, research has largely ignored what makes organizational leaders exhibit abusive behaviors in the first place. That is, only a limited number of studies have examined antecedents of abusive supervision (Martinko, Harvey, Brees, & Mackey, 2013; Mawritz, Folger, & Latham, 2014; Tepper, 2007). This limited research has generally focused on contextual factors such as supervisors' exceedingly difficult goals (Mawritz, Folger and Latham, 2014), organizational aggressive norms (Restubog, Scott, & Zagenczyk, 2011), organizational injustice (Aryee, Chen, Sun, & Debrah, 2007), and psychological contract violation (Hoobler & Brass, 2006) as well as subordinate characteristics and behaviors (e.g., core self-evaluations, hostile attribution style, and performance) (Martinko, Harvey, Sikora, & Douglas, 2011; Tepper, Moss, & Duffy, 2011; Walter, Lam, van der Vegt, Huang, & Miao, 2015; Wu & Hu, 2009). Despite some progress, research examining supervisor-level antecedents is vital to a thorough understanding of what initially provokes organizational leaders to become abusive. Specifically, while employees

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