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## **Impact of Abusive Supervision on Employee Behaviour: The Moderating Effect of Adversity Quotient**

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**Abstract:** This study adopts resource-preserved, social-exchange, and social-dominance theory to explore the impact of abusive supervision on the employees' emotional exhaustion and turnover tendency and the mediated moderating effect of adversity quotient. The survey, conducted by questionnaires, consists of 680 full-time employees. The results reveal as follows. First, when the adversity quotient (AQ) of employee is high, the positive relationship between abusive supervision and emotional exhaustion will be less strong. Conversely, when the AQ of employee is low, the positive relationship between abusive supervision and emotional exhaustion will be stronger. Second, the abusive supervision positively influences turnover tendency. Finally, the interaction between abusive supervision and AQ will affect turnover tendency through emotional exhaustion, that is, AQ plays the mediated moderating role.

**Keywords:** *abusive supervision, emotional exhaustion, turnover tendency, adversity quotient, mediated moderating role.*

### **Introduction**

In recent years, cases of workplace bullying have gained more and more media attention. Therefore, the influences of abusive supervision are worth further discussion. The phenomenon of abusive supervision indicates that power differences exists in the inter-reliable relationship between supervisors and employees, which is a kind of material and economic class dominance (Mackinnon, 1979). Social dominance theory declares that the society is divided into groups, which include superior/dominant groups on the top and subordinate groups on the bottom of the social class; accordingly, the social hierarchy is based on the volume of power and resources. Thus, abusive supervision is regarded as a type of maltreatment caused by hierarchical inequity (Tepper, 2007). However, what is the psychological transformation of the employees who are faced with abusive supervision under the system of workplace hierarchy? What kind of response will the misconduct provoke? Do employees of different personal characteristics react in a different way? The questions above trigger the motivation for the study.

When the employees are under abusive supervision, their psychological cost will accumulate in the wake of ever-increasing work load. The psychological discomfort will cause reactions such as emotional exhaustion, physical exhaustion, frustration, fatigue, and irascibility. The emotional depression will very likely lead to physical retreatment and retaliation, which will be embodied in high level of the employees' turnover intention (Tepper et al., 2009).

As previous studies reported, those who have resilient personalities and positive attitude toward exterior surroundings are more adaptive to negative feelings caused by abusive supervision (Lin, Wang and Chen, 2013); in other words, these people have higher ability to perform well under stress. Adversity quotient is one of personal traits, denoting an ability to deal with and triumph over adversity. Those who have higher adversity quotient are more optimistic and willing to take responsibility (Stoltz, 1997). Cognitive psychology also keeps the perspective that people with qualities such as optimism and controllability are more resistant to surrounding adversity.

To sum up the above-mentioned points, this paper will investigate the following topics, which are (a) the influence of abusive supervision on employees' emotional exhaustion; (b) the influence of abusive supervision on employees' turnover intentions; (c) whether employees' emotional exhaustion mediates the relationship between abusive supervision and turnover intentions; (d) the moderating role of adversity quotient on the relationship between abusive supervision and emotional exhaustion.

## **Literature Review**

### **Abusive Supervision and Emotional Exhaustion**

The most obvious act of negative leadership is the abusive supervision, which is exemplified by non-physical abuse such as relentless criticism, mockery, cynicism, eye assault, and unexpected outburst of temper (Tepper, 2000). Generally speaking, management applies carrot and stick strategy in daily practice; however, if the management crosses the line and abuses the employees just to let off emotional steam, emotional exhaustion of the employees becomes unavoidable, since it is a psychological response to work pressure. Initially, employees generate emotional exhaustion in order to deal with exceeding workload, which crosses the limitation their emotional resources can handle. As a result, those bullied will gradually keep distance from other fellow colleagues, hiding from true selves, demarcating the lines to alienate themselves from work, coming to realize a huge break between their current attitude toward and their previous ideals about job. Later, the employees will doubt their ability to finish their assignment, and consequently make assessment on themselves in a negative way, and finally lose the sense of achievement (Maslach & Jackson, 1981).

When employees are faced with emotional exhaustion, they are experiencing what the resource conservation theory calls the process of the inner energy loss. In order to keep themselves up to the mark their supervisors set, employees will have to put a lot of efforts into their job, which will also drain a lot of inner energy and consequently lead to emotional exhaustion. When they suffer abusive supervision, employees most probably will pretend to conform to workplace code or adjust their emotional expression to comply with professional conditions. However, in fact, the real inner feeling of being suppressed does not disappear only to drive the employees to feel deeper psychological discomfort

which later will cause emotional exhaustion, dropped personal sense of achievement, and exhaustion of inner resources (Hobfoll, 1989; Hobfoll & Shirom, 2001; Zapf, 2002).

***H1: Abusive supervision will positively influence emotional exhaustion.***

### **Abusive Supervision and Turnover Intention**

Social exchange theory asserts that people interact with each other to exchange valuable resources, that is, the exchange of invisible social costs and benefits (Blau, 1964). In workplace, the relationship between supervisors and employees resemble that of economic and social trade as the social exchange theory illustrates. Supervisor provide employees with resources to accomplish their job, with essential power to make trade decision; in contrast, the employees anticipates from their supervisor return of caring and trust as the payoff of their dedication to work.

Turnover intention refers to the total performance of dissatisfaction with jobs, thoughts to quit jobs, and intention to look for other jobs (Mobley et al., 1978). If employees are treated with abusive supervision, they will regard their dedication as unreturned; accordingly, the trust relationship with their supervisors will turn sour. When the personal interaction deteriorates, the employees will foster the turnover intentions as to balance the gap caused by the unreturned dedication (Blau, 1964).

***H2: Abusive supervision will positively influence turnover intention.***

### **Moderated Mediating Effect of Adversity Quotient**

The theory on adversity quotient combines cognitive psychology, psychoneuroimmunology (PNI), and psychophysiology as its stepping stone. Adversity quotient is an index developed to measure whether individuals can persist on overcoming difficulties and maximizing their potentials, or to predict whether individuals possess the abilities to stay resilient to adversity (Stoltz, 1997). The perspective of cognitive psychology contends that individuals with traits like controllability and optimism are more likely to triumph over adversity. Employees with higher adversity quotients have greater ability to control adversity and see adversity as a separate event without further influencing other aspects of their lives. This type of employees are more likely to keep their frustration under control and confront difficulties and challenges in their daily lives. For this type of individuals, duration of adversity confrontation is also likely to be contemporary (Stoltz, 2000).

In workplace, abusive supervision is regarded as an example of adversity. When confronting abusive supervision, employees with high adversity quotient are able to neutralize the positive influence of abusive supervision on emotional exhaustion; while, in contrast, those with low adversity quotient will reinforce the positive influence of abusive supervision on emotional exhaustion. Therefore, the interaction effect between abusive supervision and adversity quotient will have impacts on emotional exhaustion. In addition, when confronting abusive supervision, employees with high adversity quotient are able to play down the positive influence of abusive supervision on turnover intention; while, in contrast, those with low adversity quotient will strengthen the positive influence of abusive supervision on turnover intention. To sum up, if the employees are equipped with higher adversity quotient, they are more likely to reduce the happening of emotional exhaustion and the generation of turnover intention. In contrast, the employees equipped with lower adversity quotient are more likely to amplify the happening of emotional exhaustion and the generation of turnover intention.

## **Conclusion and Suggestions**

### **Conclusion**

Owing to hierarchical inequity, material and economic inequity exists between supervisors and employees (MacKinnon, 1979). This study found that if supervisors adopt abusive supervision, employees will generate emotional exhaustion due to depletion of psychological resources. Employees consider the return to their dedication unfair, and later lose their faith in the supervisors, and finally have the idea to quit their jobs as to compensate for the psychological gap. Result of this study are compatible with those of the previous studies (Tepper et al, 2006; Vaze et al., 2004) in the perspectives concerning the direct relationship between abusive supervision of emotional exhaustion and that between abusive supervision on turnover intention. Besides, this study found that AQ plays the mediated moderating role.

However, compared with lower adversity quotient employees, those with higher adversity quotient are more likely to lessen emotional exhaustion caused by abusive supervision, and consequently reduce turnover intentions. In the groups of (high, low AQ) and (medium, low AQ), higher AQ have significant moderating effect; while, in groups of (high, medium AQ), higher AQ do not have significant moderating effect. This study, therefore, draws the inference that the result is influenced by the ability to control adversity quotient. As Miller (1980) pointed out, those who can escape adversity situation are more like to get away from pressure. To escape adversity situations refers to the ability to control adversity. For example, employees make options like switching their mood, changing jobs, or looking for another solution to confront adversity. Furthermore, the score difference of controllability in group (high, medium AQ) is only 0.11, implying that the controllability between the participants are very similar; thus, the moderating effect is not significant between groups of high AQ and medium AQ.

### **Managerial Implications**

In managerial practices, supervisor often adopts abusive supervision without being aware of that; even worse, they sometimes let off steam by abusive supervision. The study suggests that supervisors participate in or summon inner-organization meetings to exchange ideas with employees, whose conditions can be understood by close-up observation. As for employees, they can elevate their AQ by participating in in-job activities and training. For the organization, the study suggests that it design scale to measure abusive supervision, an instrument which can be used as a reference for management-candidate election or promotion. In addition, the organization can also conduct periodic AQ evaluation on their employees for a comprehensive knowledge of employee AQ; the result can be used as reference for further in-job training to elevate employee AQ. Moreover, this study also suggests that human resource department of businesses work with academies to develop AQ scales exclusively for ethnic Chinese. The scale can be used to recruit new employees and to promote cooperation between industries and academies.

### **Suggestions for Future Research**

The AQ scale adopted for this research has been used in European and American area for more than 20 years; however, owing to the differences between Eastern-Western cultures and languages, some question items of the scale may not be appropriate for participants

from Eastern culture, who may misunderstand the scale or have no idea how to answer the scale; thus, the study also suggests that researchers for future studies can work on present AQ theories and summon experts to create AQ scales suitable for eastern culture.

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