



Leadership Style as a Determinant of Negative Workplace Relationships

RAVINDER JIT

Ravinder Jit is former Professor, Department of Management,
Maharaja Agrasen Institute of Technology, Rohini, Delhi.

Abstract

The attributes and value orientations of leaders have the potential to effect changes at individual and organizational level. The present paper explores the role and potential of negative leadership styles in creating and maintaining negative workplace relationships between the superior and the subordinate as well as between employees at different levels. Various empirical and qualitative research studies related to emergence and permeation of dysfunctional employee behavior have also been reviewed.

The paper discusses the role of 'modeling' and 'displacement' in facilitating the permeation of dysfunctional/negative behavior in the organization. It also proposes two additional mechanisms viz. 'leader's caucus –building endeavors' and 'self-serving employee behaviors' for facilitating the process of permeation of dysfunctional behavior in the whole organization

Keywords

Negative leadership; Destructive leadership; Supervisor injustice; Functional reactions; Dysfunctional reactions; Modeling; Displacement; Caucus-building; Impression -building.

I. Introduction

Leadership research has mostly focused on analyzing as to which traits, behaviours and styles of a leader are more effective or less effective regarding achievement of individual and organizational goals. Positive leadership styles are reported to facilitate the flourishing of positive cognitive, affective and behavioral aspects of employee attitudes, thus positively impacting the overall productivity, efficiency and effectiveness of the employees as well as the organization (Cenkci and Ozcelik, 2015; Fineman, 1996; Fredrickson, 1998; Raveendran and Gamage, 2018; Seligman, 2002; Staw, Sutton and Pellod, 1994; Yuke and Gardner, 2020). The negative leadership styles may also seem to achieve organizational goals and help the organization obtain a competitive advantage, viz-a-viz its competitors but it is not without negative repercussions for the individuals

and for the organizations in the long run. Most of these repercussions manifest themselves in the form of low esteem, high frustration, stress reactions and helplessness among employees which gradually lead to apathy, withdrawal, work alienation, decreased performance, low job satisfaction, low organizational commitment, and high employee turnover etc.

Leaders portraying a wide range of counter-productive behaviors may actively sabotage their followers' motivation, well being as well as organization's tasks, goals and effectiveness (Einarsen et al., 2002). Einarsen and his colleagues (2002) have described four negative leadership styles with different propensity for destructive behavior. The first leadership style discussed under their framework is 'laissez faire leadership style' with its low concern for tasks and people. This type of leadership is ineffective as well as nondestructive, but such leaders and managers could provoke group conflicts and peer bullying by turning a blind eye to conflicts or failing to intervene appropriately when approached.

Tyrannical leadership, on the other hand, is characterized by high level of task concern as well as high level of destructive behavior. To achieve his goals a tyrannical leader develops an authoritarian rule over his followers using every type of measure e.g. humiliating, ridiculing, commanding, abusing and lying to achieve obedience and submission. Even when there is no requirement of task accomplishment such leaders may adopt a destructive approach towards subordinates (Einarsen et al., 2002)

The third negative leadership style - the popular disloyal type - tries to gain popularity at the expense of fulfilling the task, hence harming organizational interests. The most destructive leadership, according to Einarsen et al., is the derailed leadership where the leader is disloyal to both the follower and the task. Such a leader either loses his or her job in short time or can save the job only by indulging in tactics like impression management.

Schilling (2009), in his qualitative study of negative leadership, identified eight categories of negative leaders. An 'insincere leader' tends to achieve personal goals at others' expense in a clandestine and deceitful manner. A 'despotic leader' believes in an authoritarian and status- oriented role demanding obedience and submissiveness, giving orders and acting dictatorially. An 'exploitative leader' uses a carrot and stick policy of pressure, force, threat, fear and extrinsic rewards to make his staff attain certain organizational goals. A leader with 'restrictive approach' tries to ensure that his/her followers work according to his/her convictions, rules and decisions. The subordinates are not involved in decision-making or strategy development and are not offered freedom for work. In addition to the above four categories of leadership, Schilling also talks about leadership types like 'failed leadership', 'avoiding leadership' and 'laissez faire leadership'. Among the above-mentioned negative leadership styles, the restrictive, despotic, exploitative and tyrannical leadership styles are more authoritative, status-oriented, confrontational and destructive thus having a higher propensity for leading to negative work relationships and deviant behavior in the organization.

The focus of the present paper is to develop an understanding of the impact that task-oriented negative leadership may have on the emergence of 'deviance' in workplace behavior of the employees

2. Workplace Deviant Behaviors

Workplace deviant behaviours refer to such voluntary behaviours by the employees that violate significant organizational rules, policies and norms. These deviant behaviours might threaten the well-being of the organization and/ or its members or both (Robinson and Bennet, 1995).

Workplace deviant behaviours could range from mild to strong, ambiguous to obvious, passive to active and non-spiraling to spiraling and cascading. Some of the deviant behaviours in the organization can be listed as 'mobbing' (Leymann, 1990,) 'bullying' (Einarsen et al. 2003), 'emotional abuse' (Keashly, 1998) 'mistreatment' (Price Spratlen, 1995) and incivility (Peasron, Andersson and Porath, 2005). These deviant/negative behaviours may start at the top management levels and percolate down to middle level and lower-level managers. Employees' perception of managers' negative behavior may determine their reactions and behavior in the organization. In this section we will try to understand as to how the subordinates perceive the negative behavior of the leader/supervisor and how this perception determines their reactions to the perceived unjust behavior of the leader.

3. Subordinates' Perception of Leader's Negative Behavior

Folger's Fairness theory (Folger & Cropanzano, 1998, 2001) explains that subordinates consider the abusive and destructive behavior of the leader/supervisor as 'unjust' and tend to make cognitive comparisons in situations that arouse the sense of injustice (Bies and Tripp, 2002). These comparisons consist of three dimensions -would, could, should- and determine the intensity of the perceived injustice. First dimension refers to subordinates' perception that another leader, with whom they had earlier experience, would have behaved in a different way. Second dimension points to subordinates' perception that the present leader 'could' have acted differently and avoided the creation of an unfavorable situation. The more the subordinates blame the leader/supervisor for the unfavorable situation the more intense is the perception of supervisor injustice (Bradford and Aquino, 1999). Third dimension refers to the conflict of the leader's behavior with the moral code and ethical principles creating a perception in the employees that an alternative outcome 'should' have occurred (Folger and Cropanzano, 2001). As suggested by Aquino and Reed (2002) the stronger the perceived violation of moral standards and the more important these standards are for the subordinates, the more intense the perception of supervisor injustice will be. However, here it should be kept in mind that the intensity of injustice perception is also affected by some other factors including subordinates' emotions (Barsky et al., 2011), hostile attribution style (Martinko et al., 2011); Tepper et al., 2006) and supervisor's fairness reputation (Jones and Skarlicki 2005).

4. Subordinates' Reactions to Supervisor's/Leader's Negative Behavior

Tripp et al. (2007) argued that once faced with supervisor's/leader's injustice, victims seek to restore justice and choose their response behavior depending upon their individual power, personality traits, and organizational justice climate. These responses, according to them, can be functional (reconciliation and forgiveness) or dysfunctional (revenge and avoidance). Tepper et al (2001) and Olson–Buchanan and Boswell (2008) suggest that 'functional' responses intend to resolve injustice, whereas 'dysfunctional' responses intend to reciprocate.

Klaussner (2013) has added another dimension of responses to supervisor injustice. According to him, functional and dysfunctional responses could be active or passive. He has suggested four different types of follower reactions/responses to leaders' injustice – functional passive and functional active responses; dysfunctional passive and dysfunctional active responses.

5. Functional Passive Responses

Aquino et al (2001, 2006) define functional passive responses as those reactions through which the individual intends to reconcile without addressing the perception of supervisor injustice interpersonally. Functional passive responses occur mostly in reaction to minor perceptions of supervisor injustice (Aquino et al. 2006) and can manifest in the form of forgiveness (John and Gross, 2004) and expressive writing (Barclay and Skarlicki, 2009) etc. Forgiveness, defined as 'the internal act of relinquishing anger and resentment toward the offender (Tripp et al., 2007), allows the victim to overcome negative emotions of resentment. Expressive writing, as a reaction to injustice, allows the subordinate to channelize and thereby come to terms with the perception of mistreatment.

6. Functional Active Responses

Through functional active responses the subordinate tries to make a conscious attempt to induce reconciliation (Andiappan and Trevino, 2011). These attempts can be manifested in the form of remedial voices (Harlos, 2010) or as constructive resistance (Tepper et al., 2001). Remedial voices can be raised in various forms. The victim may initiate an informal and unmediated dialogue with the perpetrator (Peirce et al, 1993), informally or formally seeking support from third parties like an ombudsman (Hirschman, 1970) or some internal or external mediator (Wall et al., 2001). If these attempts are unsuccessful the victim may tend to use formalized grievance mechanism (Harlos, 2010).

7. Dysfunctional Passive Responses

When the supervisor injustice is perceived to be intense it may arouse strong emotional and cognitive reactions in the subordinates and negatively influence their attitude towards the organization (Frone, 2000) as well as towards the supervisor (Tepper et al., 2007). An intense perception of injustice may lead to decreased organizational commitment and job satisfaction (Aryee et al., 2007) and an increased psychological distress (Zapf, 2002). The victim may start avoiding the supervisor (Tepper et al., 2007) by socially withdrawing from the offender to reduce unpleasantness (Tripp et al., 2007).

8. Dysfunctional Active Responses

Dysfunctional active responses have been defined by Aquino et al., (2001) as actions in response to some perceived harm or wrongdoing by another party that is intended to inflict damage, injury discomfort or punishment. While resorting to these responses the victims directly express pain, anger and rage, often referred to as retaliation or revenge. These behaviors could be directed impulsively against the supervisor (Tepper et al., 2009) or colleagues (Mitchell & Abrose, 2007) or the organization (El Akremi et al., 2007). The victim may try to harm the organization through theft (Greenberg and Barling, 1996) and sabotage (Skarlicki and Folger, 1997). As reported by Aquino et al. (2001) and Tepper et al., (2009) subordinates/victim might even engage in systematic upward bullying in their attempt to seek revenge and restore justice.

Klaussner (2013) suggests that along with intensity of injustice perception (as suggested by earlier researchers), intensity of supervisor injustice and the subordinates perceived power inferiority towards the supervisor also act as moderating factors in the choice of functional and dysfunctional reactions to injustice.

Recent research studies by Barsky et al (2011) and Guo et al. (2011) support Klaussner in his assertion that accumulated intensity of supervisor injustice acts as a moderating influence in the choice of functional or dysfunctional responses. These researchers reported the role of temporal aspects and memory in judgment of organizational justice, i.e. the perceptions of supervisor injustice tend to accumulate over recurring trigger events when they remain unresolved. According to Klaussner (2013) when the accumulated intensity of supervisor injustice becomes high the victim /subordinate may exhibit dysfunctional response behaviours like retaliation and revenge. Low levels of accumulated intensity of supervisor injustice, in turn, make it easier for the subordinate to either address the unpleasant situation in functional active ways or to overcome in functional passive ways (Aquino et al. 2001; Kim et al., 1998).

Studying the impact of subordinates' perception of power inferiority toward the supervisor on their choice of reactions to injustice, Morrison and Milliken (2000) suggested that when employees perceive high power distance from the supervisor and fear negative consequences and conflict escalation, they hesitate to address

interactional injustice with functional active behaviours. In such cases subordinates prefer to remain silent and respond passively. Aquino et al. (2001, 2006) and Kim et al (1998) also argued that subordinates/employees hesitate to engage in active response behavior when they perceive high 'power' and 'hierarchy' difference between themselves and their perpetrators. In this case 'the risk of voice outweighs its benefits' (Harlos, 2010)

Hofstede (1980) suggested a cultural dimension of power distance between the superior and the subordinate. People in low power distance culture may desire equality in power distribution, and so are more likely to respond actively to perception of supervisor injustice (James, 1993), while people from high power distance cultures may show less negative behavior as a response to supervisor injustice (Shao et al, 2013)

9. Permeation Of Dysfunctional/Negative Behavior In the Organization

As we have seen in the earlier sections there can be various situations where the deviant behavior and uncivil exchanges can continue in the organization without escalation, spiral and cascade. Under other situations a chain reaction of retaliation may be witnessed, escalating into more aggressive, coercive behaviors (Pearson, Andersson and Porath, 2000)

Studying the spiraling and cascading effects of incivility in organizations, Pearson, Andersson and Porath (2000) suggested that the original incivility spiral can cascade, spawning secondary incivility spirals, which can spread the ill effects throughout the organization

Uncivil exchanges may also be indirectly displaced through modeling, thus creating a new uncivil interaction with a new target (Pearson, Andersson and Porath, 2000). They referred to the possibility of secondary spirals where the victim displaces the desire to reciprocate on someone of lesser status or lesser power thus setting a chain reaction of displacement of incivility. The cascading pattern of incivility proposed by the above authors may be extended to other types of deviant behaviors in the organization.

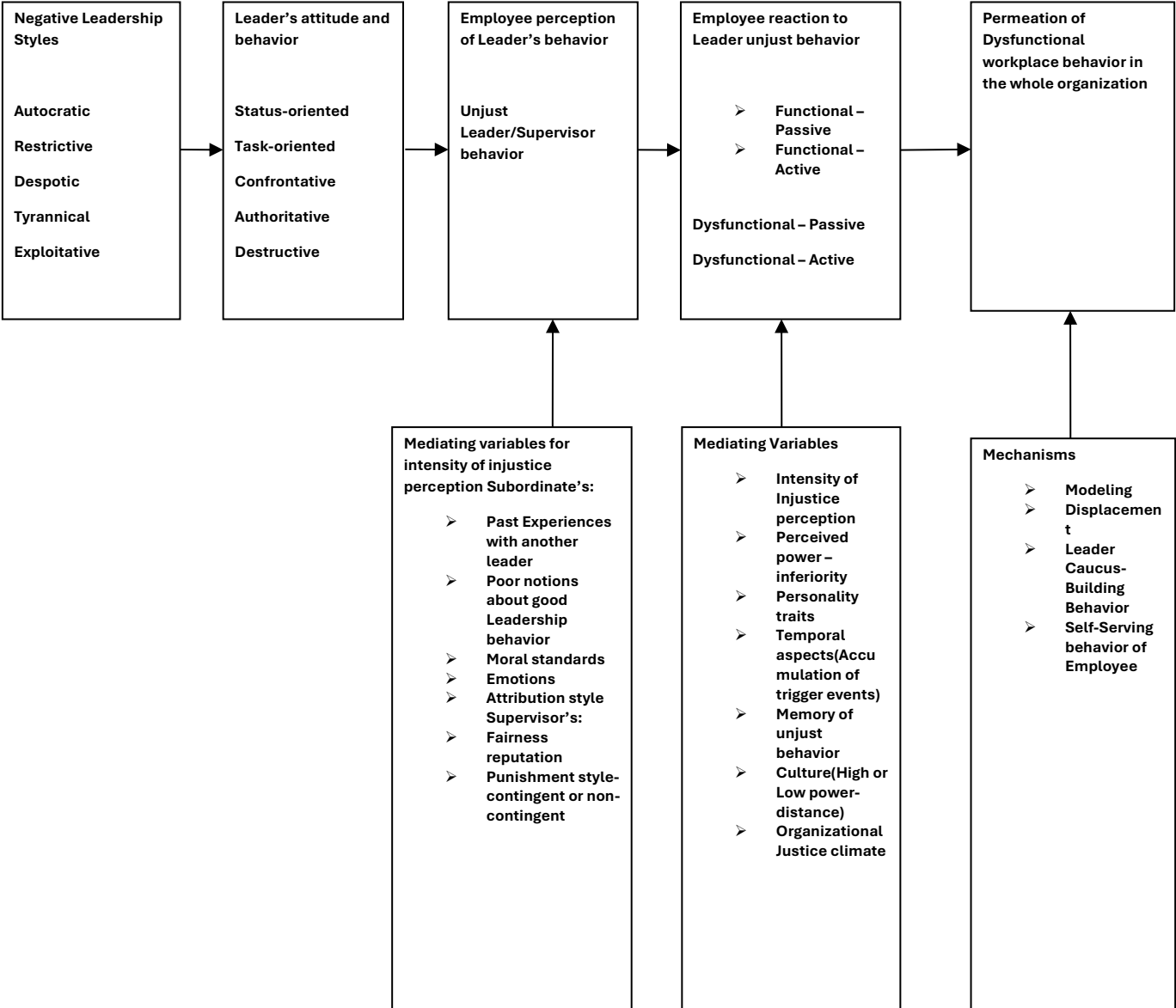
Different deviant behaviors may turn into secondary spirals and spread their ill effects in the whole organization. As already suggested, the role of 'modeling' in imbibing deviant behavior may be crucial. Robinson and O'Leary Kelly (1996) reported that the presence of aggressive workplace models is associated with a greater degree of individual aggressive behavior. A top-level manager/leader having a notion that 'aggression pays may inspire aggressive behavior in lower-level managers (e.g., through modeling). The leader thus influences the organization's culture regarding the appropriateness of aggression as managerial behavior. Bandura (1973) suggested that modeling induces the individual not only 'to exhibit' negative behavior but also 'to acquire' such behavior.

Many a time it has been found that managers/leaders who fail to manage their pressures and stress revert to or fall into an autocratic or even tyrannical style of leadership, particularly in stressful circumstances (Hoel and Salin, 2003). The authors hypothesize

that continuous stressful circumstances as found in today's competitive business environment may motivate such leaders to gather a group of employees around them who will help them establish and retain their superiority and supremacy over other employees. This group could indulge in negative workplace behavior not only to help the leader retain control but also to establish its own supremacy as a confident group of the leader. The leader, being dependent on this group to continue in power and get the work done, may turn a blind eye to its offences or intervene inappropriately when approached. This could become a potential contributor to the permeation of negative behavior in the organization.

Another mechanism that could be working for the primary and secondary spiraling of negative workplace behavior is the self-serving behavior of the employees. There is always a struggle for survival under autocratic or negative task-oriented leadership. To manage their impression in the eyes of the supervisor, some employees could adopt various tactics to show other employees down. Mutual animosity, jealousy, competition for scarce resources, complaints regarding others' dereliction of duty, taking credit for others' efforts etc. are some of the behaviors that may prevail in the organization and induce a chain of action and reaction. Escalation of these reactions can lead to dysfunctional active responses like aggression, bullying, mistreatment, etc. leading to a negative workplace environment. A direct or indirect role of negative leadership in the creation of such an environment can be discerned in many of the reported instances of negative work behavior.

The hypothetical process model proposed by the author below depicts as to how the dysfunctional organizational behavior aroused by a negative leadership style gets percolated to lower levels and engulfs the whole organization:



10. Conclusion

The leadership orientation of top managers paves the way for the emergence and maintenance of a specific organizational culture. The negative leadership orientation found among autocratic, despotic, restrictive and tyrannical leaders' facilitates the emergence of negative/dysfunctional workplace culture. Such a culture encourages uncivil, aggressive, and violent interpersonal relations between the leader and the followers as well as between employees at different levels. Immersed in negative workplace experiences such employees may direct most of their energy in fighting their emotional distress, in restoring justice or in taking revenge from the perpetrator. These employees may exhibit symptoms of work-alienation, withdrawal, apathy, low job satisfaction, low organizational commitment, decreased performance and high turnover etc. The net result is extremely reduced individual and organizational productivity, efficiency and effectiveness.

The positive leadership styles like servant and relational leadership, compassionate and benevolent leadership, etc. facilitate the emergence of life-giving, positive organizations. They foster employee engagement, employee commitment and employee development thereby paving the way for higher individual and organizational performance. The need of the day is to make a shift from negative leadership to positive leadership. Only this shift could ensure a lasting competitive advantage for the business organizations.

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