



Umbrella Summary

Abusive Supervision

A Summary of Workforce Research Evidence Relevant to the Child Welfare Field

What is abusive supervision?

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). Abusive supervision is most commonly measured using 15 items that describe abusive behaviors, and subordinates rate the frequency with which the supervisor engages in each behavior. Examples include “Ridicules me,” “Puts me down in front of others,” “Blames me to save himself/herself embarrassment,” and “Breaks promises he/she makes” (Tepper, 2000). Thus, subordinates do not judge whether they feel abused or consider their supervisors’ behavior abusive; they merely report how often their supervisor exhibits certain behaviors that are already deemed abusive. There is nonetheless some room for subjectivity, such that some of the behaviors are less objective than others and are likely to be interpreted differently by different people (e.g., “Is rude to me”). Though it is likely underreported, estimates are that approximately 10% of employees experience abusive supervision (Tepper et al., 2017).

Why is abusive supervision important?

Abusive interpersonal treatment is important in any setting, but in the context of the workplace, abusive supervision is important because it is associated with an array of subordinate job attitudes, stress indicators, and behaviors. Specifically, abusive supervision is moderately associated with lower job satisfaction, lower organizational commitment, higher emotional exhaustion, and higher intent to leave among subordinates (Mackey et al., 2017; Zhang & Liao, 2015). In addition, it is moderately associated with fewer organizational citizenship behaviors (Mackey et al., 2017), which are discretionary extra-role behaviors, such as volunteering and helping others, which benefit the group and organization. Finally, it is strongly connected to counterproductive workplace behaviors and workplace deviance among employees who experience it (Mackey et al., 2017). The connection between abusive supervision and employee turnover is unknown.

What contributes to abusive supervision?

Meta-analytic research on abusive supervision has thus far focused on assessing factors that are merely associated with abusive supervision, not on causal relationships. However, there are many factors associated with abusive supervision that are seen as potential influences. These factors fall into 3 categories: supervisor, subordinate, and organization. Supervisors are more

likely to exhibit abusive behaviors when they have their own negative experiences, stress, poor treatment, or sense of injustice (Zhang & Bednall, 2016). Abusive behaviors are also more likely with supervisors who have authoritarian or unethical leadership styles, are low in emotional intelligence, or have a tendency to be anxious or upset (i.e., are high in negative affectivity; Zhang & Bednall, 2016).

Many employee characteristics have been examined in conjunction with abusive supervision, and the strongest connections are with negative affectivity and narcissism (Zhang & Bednall, 2016). Though it is likely that these employees' tendencies color their interpretation of their supervisors' behaviors, it is also possible that these tendencies elicit different behaviors from supervisors.

Though organizational culture and conditions can generally exert a strong influence on behavior, the role of contextual factors in abusive supervision has been studied the least. When organizations have norms that involve aggressive interpersonal interactions, the likelihood of abusive supervision is higher (Zhang & Bednall, 2016). And though more studies are needed, preliminary findings are that when an organization has strict rules and imposes sanctions around abusive behavior, it is less likely to occur (Zhang & Bednall, 2016).

How can abusive supervision be addressed?

At this time, there is very little in the way of research to guide organizations in how to address or prevent abusive supervision. Nonetheless, there are some practical suggestions that may be valuable. To get an estimate of the extent to which abusive supervision occurs, organizations could administer the 15-item measure (Tepper, 2000) to employees, though it would probably be best as part of a larger organizational survey. Honest answers would also be more likely if it were conducted by a third party, such as a university partner. Another strategy is to provide a way for employees to anonymously report mistreatment (that they have observed or experienced). This should be paired with processes for following up in a manner that supports and protects employees. Clear, strict, and enforced policies around abusive behaviors are also recommended, and all employees should be well informed about these policies (Namie & Namie, 2011).

QIC-WD Takeaways

- ▶ Abusive supervision is moderately associated with lower job satisfaction, lower organizational commitment, higher emotional exhaustion, and higher intent to leave among subordinates.
- ▶ Abusive supervision is moderately associated with fewer organizational citizenship behaviors and strongly connected to more counterproductive workplace behaviors and workplace deviance among employees who experience it.
- ▶ The connection between abusive supervision and employee turnover is unknown.
- ▶ Supervisors are more likely to engage in abusive behaviors when they 1) have their own negative experiences, stress, poor treatment, or sense of injustice; 2) have

- authoritarian or unethical leadership styles, 3) are low in emotional intelligence, or 4) have a tendency to be anxious or upset (i.e., are high in negative affectivity).
- ▶ Subordinates are more likely to experience abusive supervision when they are high in negative affectivity and narcissism.
 - ▶ Abusive supervision is more likely in organizations that have norms that involve aggressive interpersonal interactions, and there is preliminary evidence that when an organization has strict rules and imposes sanctions around abusive behavior, it is less likely to occur.
 - ▶ Practitioners or researchers that would like to assess abusive supervision should consider the measure developed by [Tepper \(2000\)](#).

References

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