



Negative Work Behaviors (NWBs)

Negative work behaviors are voluntary behaviors that violate significant organizational norms and threaten the well-being of the organization or its members. Some examples are;

- Theft, fraud
- sabotage
- sharing an organization confidential information
- absenteeism, poor attendance
- withholding effort
- workplace aggression
- sexual harassment
- workplace bullying

The target of the negative behaviors can be the organization, other individuals or even the self.

Negative work behaviors have been found to have significant relationships with abusive supervision, unethical and negative leadership, stress, low self-esteem and negative emotions in the workplace. Negative emotions are one of the strongest links with negative work behaviors.

As might be expected there is a significant negative effect on organizational effectiveness.

Much of the early research investigated negative work behaviors in terms of personality, finding links with some high level personality factors. This suggests that selection procedures can be used to reduce the likelihood of negative work behaviors. However personality measures are not reliable indicators of future behavior. Personality is by definition an enduring preference for certain patterns of behavior, so once a person is on board, very hard to change.

Recent research has focused on factors that are more amenable to change.

1. Dysfunctional Leadership
2. Negative Feedback
3. Performance Management Systems

1. Dysfunctional Leadership (DL)

What it is

Abusive leadership is defined as the perception by staff that managers engage in sustained hostile verbal and non-verbal behavior (excluding physical contact). Dysfunctional leadership includes:

Example DL behaviors include

- close supervision
- frequent reprimands
- unfair and public criticism
- coldness, suspicion
- with-holding information
- inflexibility
- arbitrary decisions without consultation,
- blaming staff for failures
- taking personal credit for successful work of others



Dysfunctional leadership can have profound personal psychological effects on staff. These include stress, the undermining of self esteem and self efficacy which adversely impact job performance. DL is associated with a loss of commitment to the organization, negative work behaviors, and intention to leave.

The prevalence of perceived abusive leadership behavior has been estimated to affect 13% or more of the workforce based on survey data. Other aspects of dysfunctional leadership are likely to affect many more.

DL appears more prevalent in centralized hierarchical organizations, less prevalent in flatter more decentralized organizational structures. However staff in hierarchical organizations are less sensitive to it. There is also less sensitivity when the cause of the negative leadership behavior is perceived to be individual or unit performance rather than personality based.

What are the causes?

We don't have cause and effect data. But a number of links have been established from correlational research.

Manager personality is associated. Tendencies to anger, irritability, and blaming others. Lower emotional intelligence and Machiavellian tendencies. Machiavellian means a strong focus on self interest and willingness to manipulate, deceive, and exploit others to achieve own ends. Managers are likely to be more hostile to those perceived as very dissimilar to themselves, even more so if they are perceived to be poor performers.

Managers with high levels of stress, and in organizational cultures that are hostile are more likely to display dysfunctional leadership behaviors. The military and healthcare as industries are particularly prone to abusive leaders. It is thought this is likely due to their high pressure, high risk environments where the cost of failure is high.

Managers who experience abusive management themselves are more likely to adopt this style, as are those who observe it, even if they are not the target of it. So an abusive management culture can spread through an organization.

The characteristics of staff influence their perceptions of their supervisor. Those with higher emotional intelligence and a tendency to accept personal accountability are less likely to perceive or be affected by dysfunctional leadership behaviors. Those with rare skills, influence and access to senior managers are in a stronger position and less affected.

Individuals with particularly high moral standards and expectations of fairness in leadership behavior will be more affected. The effect of dysfunctional leadership is greater if perceived to have malicious intent than if it is perceived to be due to situational causes and poor performance.

Recent research shows that staff who are poor performing and engaging in negative work behaviors are a likely trigger. Supervisors may react out of frustration, especially when other issues in their work or home lives cause stress and impact their ability to exercise self control. Staff who are high performing and deviant cause a maximum level of frustration and stress and may be singled out. This effect is compounded when managers are held to account for producing results creating a high pressure work environment. While a bottom line focus may be good for organizational success it may damage interpersonal relationships.

'Organizational constraints' are also closely associated. These are barriers to job performance such as lack of equipment, information, time, supplies, budget, training, services from others, and also interference from others, unclear expectations and unsuitable physical work environments. These barriers cause frustration, stress, and negative emotions.

How to reduce it

1. Establish norms for leadership behaviors that are expected, and those that will not be tolerated, as part of manager performance expectations and review.
2. Train managers in positive leadership behaviors including the communication of clear expectations, constructive feedback, identification and minimization of constraints to performance
3. Training in communication and provision of feedback (see below)
4. Training in emotional intelligence and interpersonal relations
5. Training in coping strategies
6. Implementing flexible performance targets to allow for change in circumstances
7. Having a mechanism for staff to provide feedback safely on leadership behaviors

2. Negative Feedback

What it is



Negative feedback is feedback that indicates that employee performance does not meet organizational expectations. Drawing attention to performance gaps with the aim of closing them is a key part of performance management.

Many managers avoid giving negative feedback, seeing this as one of the most unpleasant aspects of a management role. This means that performance gaps are often not addressed. Sometimes the feedback is made so vague or watered down that it is useless. Sometimes poor performance is allowed to build to a point where frustration causes the feedback to be given in a dysfunctional manner. When managers do not address poor performance, good performers may become demoralized and/or exit the organization

The scarce research on comments in performance appraisals show they tend to be ineffective because they are too general and too short – where they exist. One study found 44% of staff reviews had less than 5 sentences for a whole year's work on average. There was very little negative feedback, only 14% contained any suggestion for improvement, with only 2% of those primarily negative feedback.

Reactions to Negative Feedback

Negative feedback always prompts an uncomfortable emotional response – anger, frustration, discouragement, unhappiness. On the other hand positive feedback makes people feel good.

The discomfort distracts people from the message in the feedback and puts them in defensive mode. They may perceive the feedback as meaning they are incompetent. In many cases negative feedback becomes demotivating, prompting denial rather than an effort to close the gaps.

Receptivity to feedback does vary with personality. People who are low on some of the Big Five personality factors – agreeableness, emotional stability, conscientiousness and openness to experience are more likely to respond poorly to negative feedback.

Overcoming the negatives

Research shows that the commonly given prescriptions of making feedback timely, specific and task focused are not enough to prevent bad feelings.

What is needed is a focus by managers on communicating the positives as well as the negatives. It is vital to protect and nurture the staff member's feelings of self-efficacy which are closely linked to job performance.

Recent research points to the following as being effective;

- Limiting distractions when providing feedback and focusing solely on the staff member.
- Showing empathy - conveying interest, acceptance and reassurance with warmth and concern.
- Asking questions that prompt the staff member to think about the ideal situation and solution, the best possible outcomes, new ideas for getting there
- Asking staff to visualize the positive – what success would look like, how will people receive this success.
- Asking staff to think about personal development goals – prompting a focus on developing competency a positive , rather than avoiding poor performance a negative.

An experimental study examined the effect of the sequence of positive and corrective statements when giving feedback. Corrective statements were given at the beginning middle or end of a sequence containing 2 positive statements. The statements were task specific and contained both quantitative and qualitative feedback. While the sequence made no difference to subsequent task performance, most **participants preferred to hear the corrective (negative) statement first followed by positive statements.**

3. Performance Management Systems (PMS)

Effect on NWBs

A performance management system has the central purpose of influencing employee work behaviors in pursuit of organizational outcomes.

An enabling PMS is one which is flexible and which allows employees to determine how best to achieve a set of goals. A coercive system is one where employees are given goals – told how to achieve them and have no flexibility to change this.

Generally employees with an enabling system feel more empowered and committed and have more job satisfaction. Employees want freedom and meaning in their work, thus the use of an enabling PMS decreases NWB.



This is the case at the individual level, even where an individual may put their own interests before that of the team or organization. This because they have the freedom to choose a range of work behaviors that benefit themselves but that are not negative work behaviors that will adversely impact the opinions others have of them.

However in the case where the entire team has intense self-interest, and is highly cohesive, they are likely to engage in group think and NWBs that promote their self interest. This is because there is no constraint of the opinions of others.

Alleviating adverse impact

1. The PMS must show for each individual how their goals contribute to their team and the organization as a whole.
2. It must be clear how each team and department in the organization contributes and supports the others.
3. Teams need to be trained in group dynamics so group think and group bias can be avoided.
4. The PMS should include clear standards for ethical behavior and citizenship behaviors as core competencies.

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