



Problematic Relationships IN THE Workplace

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Introduction

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Susan checks on her employees constantly. In fact, she over monitors, constantly evaluates, and delegates few tasks. Instead of feeling respected, her employees feel on edge. They call Susan “controlling” and “demeaning” and report her behavior invites a level of anxiety which inhibits effective performance.

Bill is an employee whose life sounds like a soap opera. He obligates co-workers to listen to the ups and downs of his marriage, discipline challenges he faces with his drinking adolescent children, and his mother’s recent bout with cancer. His colleagues think of him as the “drama king.”

Pat throws sand in the gears of those working on projects, often failing to provide important information in a timely manner and sidetracking them with unnecessary projects. Pat’s employees find it frustrating to work toward deadlines.

Having collected data from well over a thousand individuals to date, our data indicates these examples are not unique or even rare. Virtually all of the participants in our studies have been able to identify a problematic relationship within their work groups (e.g., Omdahl & Fritz, Fritz & Omdahl, this volume). While the scenarios and behaviors vary, it is apparent that there are numerous personal relationships creating pressures for workers. Undoubtedly, employees ranging from line workers to administrators feel the challenges.

Some challenges have become high profile media reports. Terms like “going postal,” “school shootings,” and “courthouse violence” have become common references to types of violence occurring in workplaces. The eruption of violence in the workplace elicits fears for both managers and employees on how to manage anger and rage. The on-air and on-line discussions of nationally renowned crimes have often focused on the extent to which the perpetrator felt alienated, bullied, dismissed, or powerless in situations with colleagues or supervisors. These discussions have raised concerns about the impact of relationships on thoughts, behaviors, and

feelings. While this volume devotes attention to more common forms of problematic interactions and relationships, the growing concern with incivility and bullying spawned by high profile criminal cases has undoubtedly contributed to interest in and awareness of this topic.

Until about a decade ago, there was a virtual dearth of scholarly research on problematic relationships in the workplace (but cf. Hochschild, 1983; Rafaeli & Sutton, 1989). Work on “the dark side” of interpersonal communication and relationships (Spitzberg & Cupach, 1994) was emerging, and many researchers studied conflict and organization management, but few scholars had looked at the emergence of, fallout from, and remedies for working with difficult others. In the last decade, scholars and students in organizational communication, management studies, interpersonal communication, small group communication, conflict, and organizational ethics have become increasingly interested in how people navigate relationships with people they dislike or find problematic in the workplace.

Early research relevant to negative work relationships includes Holt’s (1989) work on students’ images of enemies and Davis & Schmidt’s (1977) work on obnoxiousness. Other work emerged addressing the climate or nature of work relationships as a variable for predicting stress or work satisfaction (e.g., Chapman, 1993; Cooper & Cartwright, 1994; Repetti, 1993). Though these studies were related to rather general measures of peer or work relationship quality, they pointed to the importance of further theorizing and work exploring a topic increasing in salience and importance.

Within the last decade and a half, more specific focus on types of problematic others and problematic relationships received attention. Problematic supervisor and peer relationships and/or interactions (Karasek & Theorell, 1990; Leiter & Maslach, 1988), problematic subordinates (Monroe, Borzi, & DiSalvo, 1992), petty tyranny of bosses (Ashforth, 1994), and dysfunctional workgroups (Stohl & Schell, 1991) brought attention to specific behaviors of problematic role inhabitants in the workplace. Studies of features of problematic others from a constructivist perspective (e.g., Sypher & Zorn, 1988) identified the scope of behaviors, features, and attributes of problematic persons. Types of troublesome others at work were identified (Fritz, 2002 and this volume) on the basis of clusters of

perceptions. The work of Omdahl and Fritz (this volume) moved to examine the relative effects of different relative power levels on outcomes, a focus they identified as lacking in previous research.

Another area of research advancing our knowledge has focused on the communicative accomplishment of work relationship deterioration, particularly Sias's work (see Sias, this volume, for a review of that research), highlighting processes pointing to the etiology of problematic others. Responses to hypothetical problematic others (Fritz, 1997) and responses to disliked others (Hess, 2000) provided groundwork for understanding how problematic relationships are managed.

Some research relevant to problematic work relationships does not address the topic directly, but focuses on communicative or other behavioral microprocesses that may contribute to them and offers insight into research on problematic relationships and broader organizational contexts that shape opportunities for encounters leading to problematic relational forms. Incivility, abuse, and bullying (see Metts, Cupach, & Lippert, this volume), workplace aggression (Baron & Neuman, 1998), employee emotional abuse (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2003), cynicism (Dean, Brandes, & Dharwadkar, 1998), social undermining (Gant et al., 1993), employee deviance (Robinson & Bennett, 1995), and employee misbehavior in the workplace (Vardi & Weitz, 2004) appear to be factors contributing to perceptions of unpleasant work relationships or to environments that may spawn them. This research holds promise for embedding the study of problematic relationships in larger organizational contexts, an important focus for theorizing about problematic relationships. Such work would move the focus away from "the other" and onto more general processes that shape our understanding and reaction to behavior in the workplace that could be considered problematic (e.g., Duck, Kirkpatrick & Foley, this volume).

By examining theory, research, and application, this book seeks to inform scholars and students with interests in this field as well as providing information which may be used by managers who are reading a larger array of professionally-focused books on the subject (e.g., Cava, 2004; Crowe, 1999; Gill, 1999; Jakes, 2005; Lubit, 2003; Solomon, 2002).