

Looking at workplace aggression through a new lens

By Vivien Lim

FROM intimidating put-downs to being deliberately excluded from important conversations, workplace aggression comes in many forms and can make life miserable for even the most resilient employees.

Unfortunately, workplace aggression is far more common than many of us would like to imagine. Left unrestrained, aggression in the workplace can destroy employee morale and lead to people quitting their jobs when they otherwise enjoy their work. The problem is that many companies find it hard to identify workplace aggression and even more difficult to intervene and break a cycle of behaviour that is sabotaging the work environment.

Research around assessing workplace aggression has grown considerably in recent years. However, while previous studies have cast light on the various forms of workplace aggression – the incivility, exclusion, belittling, and more – the emotions related with and consequences of different types of workplace aggression have been largely neglected.

Now recent research has revealed the varying ways people respond to different forms of workplace aggression. In a study with colleagues from The Pennsylvania State University, Jinan University and Hong Kong Baptist University, we found that different forms of aggression in the workplace trigger both different types of emotions as well as different types of counterproductive workplace behaviour – in other words, actions that harm others or the company itself.

Creating a positive work environment requires a deep understanding of workplace aggression and its consequences, so that appropriate action can be taken to tackle it. To gain this

understanding, we explored the emotions and behaviour resulting from three types of workplace aggression: abusive supervision, supervisor undermining and ostracising employees.

HOW WORKPLACE AGGRESSION INFLUENCES BEHAVIOUR

We asked 495 employees from five companies in a broad range of industries located in Fujian and Guangzhou, China to participate in our first study, and 500 employees from six different companies in Guangzhou to take part in our second study.

Both studies consistently found that when a supervisor is abusive, such as telling employees they are incompetent, invading their privacy or being rude – employees became angry. Similarly if a supervisor undermined employees, ridiculing or belittling them or spreading rumours about them, this also triggered anger among employees.

This abusive supervision led to counterproductive workplace behaviour among employees such as mocking, cursing or insulting their supervisor. This is known as an “approach” behaviour, meaning they move towards the aggression and take their frustration out on their boss, creating a cycle of workplace aggression.

However, while our study revealed that abusive supervision leads to approach behaviour, this arises only partly from anger – it may also be driven by other factors such as the need to retaliate against the injustice of abuse.

When a boss ostracised employees – such as failing to invite them to meetings they should go to or giving them the silent treatment – employees developed a sense of ambiguity, wondering why it happened and whether it

happened at all. This resulted in employees feeling anxious and led to an “avoidance” response such as keeping their distance from their boss, refusing to talk to their boss or avoiding their boss altogether.

Interestingly, we discovered that this response was a result of the feelings of anxiety, rather than directly from the ostracism itself. This highlights the importance of companies looking out for signs that employees are suffering from anxiety, to prevent avoidance behaviour.

Our research has particular relevance for companies that do not have measures in place to tackle workplace aggression. By using an “approach-avoidance” lens to assess workplace aggression, companies can see how different types of aggression – abusing, undermining or ostracising employees – will ultimately have a negative impact on behaviour in the workplace, through the emotions they generate.

CONFRONTING WORKPLACE AGGRESSION

Workplace aggression is commonplace, with some companies defending or excusing it as simply tough management needed to get the job done. However, companies need to pay attention to workplace aggression for several reasons. The emotional consequences of workplace aggression can cost employees their mental health and even their livelihoods. Workplace aggression can also lead to low morale, frequent absenteeism and high turnover of staff. If it manifests across the company, it can impact the company’s reputation and its ability to hire strong talent.

If companies are to attract and keep talented workers and create a positive work environ-

ment, the company’s senior leadership needs to identify and combat aggression before it becomes the norm.

By understanding how different forms of workplace aggression can result in specific counterproductive workplace behaviour, companies can now develop more targeted interventions to address those situations.

For example, companies experiencing a rash of verbal harassment, taunting or other forms of hostile counterproductive behaviour, may consider implementing measures to break the cycle of aggression. This could range from policies that articulate the company’s commitment to respect at work to responding promptly to reports of aggression and rigorous training for managers.

If employees seem to be avoiding people or are disengaged from their work, the company could focus on reducing anxiety in the workplace. For example, they could introduce wellness schemes, social activities and flexible working, as well as ensure managers are connecting with their teams through regular feedback and support to make sure staff feel valued.

Company leaders ignore workplace aggression at their peril. While many have not known where to start to prevent or confront workplace aggression, our findings show how they can tune into how people feel through approach or avoidance emotions and behaviour, laying the foundation for a positive environment where employees are motivated and happy.

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