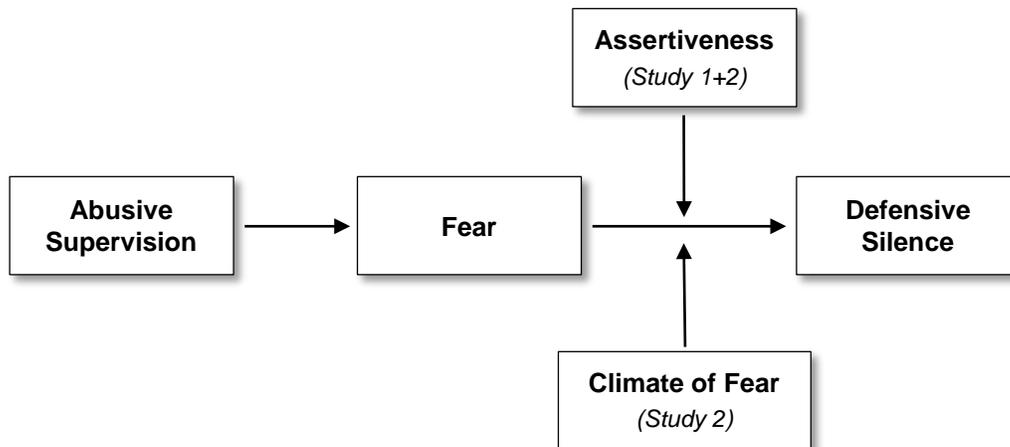


When Abused Employees remain Silent: Effects of Assertiveness and Fear

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We live in the so-called 'information age', yet many employees do not share work-related ideas, insights or knowledge with others in their organization, opting to remain silent instead. Among the reasons that underlie employee silence, two factors are repeatedly mentioned by academics and professionals alike: abusive superiors and a work climate where employees fear speaking up. Sadly, such circumstances are often instrumental in creating work environments where only the brave still dare to voice their thoughts, ideas and concerns, albeit at great risk. Although seminal and contemporary management thinking considers unadulterated employee input as crucial for realizing optimal organizational functioning and superior performance, little research exists on the matter, not to mention empirical studies on the factors resulting in employee silence.

Against this backdrop, I will showcase in my presentation a research study that examines whether exposure to an abusive supervisor leads employees to experience fear, which in turn results in employees remaining silent. In addition, the study also investigates whether personality factors (i.e., how assertive someone is) and/or organizational factors (i.e., working in a climate where people are afraid) play either an amplifying or weakening role. The following figure illustrates the variables that were measured in the study:



During the presentation, I will briefly introduce research on the phenomenon of abusive supervision (i.e., subordinates' perceptions of the extent to which supervisors engage in the sustained display of hostile verbal and nonverbal behaviors, excluding physical contact); including remarks about the detrimental outcomes resulting from abusive supervision research conducted so far. I will also speak to the under-researched topic of employee silence. Notably, silence behavior is not passive but an active behavior. That is, the key feature that differentiates employee silence from employee voice is not the presence or absence of speaking up, but the actor's motivation to withhold – versus express – ideas, information, and opinions about work-related improvements. My presentation will conclude with remarks about a) what to do with abusive supervisors and b) why organizations of any kind (whether for- or non-profit) and thus society at large cannot afford employees who are afraid to speak up given the serious costs of silence in organizations (e.g., Bhopal, Challenger launch disasters, medical malpractice).