

The Mediating Effect of Service Providers' Emotions and Attitudes on the Relationship of Supervisor Behavior with Customer Behavior

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Abstract

Front line service providers are positioned at the organization's boundary, thus their role involves a function of mediation between the organization and the customer. It has been argued that the way service providers are treated by the organization affects their behavior toward customers due to a spillover effect (Bowen, Gilliland & Folger, 1999). This study explores a mediation model in which service providers' emotions, burnout and job satisfaction mediate the relationship of negative supervisor behavior with negative customer behavior. Questionnaires were administered to a sample of 263 employees in service roles, examining negative supervisor behavior, negative and positive emotions, burnout, job satisfaction and negative customer behavior. The results show that negative supervisor behavior is positively related to employee emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and negative emotions and negatively related to positive emotions and job satisfaction. The relationship between negative supervisor behavior and negative customer behavior is partially mediated by depersonalization.

Introduction

Service providers are the linking pin between the service organization and the customer, managing and sustaining relationships with the customer, offering the first and often the only impression of the service organization to the customer (Schneider & Bowen, 1985; Payne & Webber, 2006). It has been argued that in order to attain satisfied customers, service organizations must first ensure their employees are satisfied. In a customer service environment, employees who have positive appraisals of their work environment, have higher levels of job satisfaction, and are consequently more likely to engage in prosocial and helping behavior which lead to higher levels of customer satisfaction (Payne & Webber, 2006). The relationship between employee and customer attitudes is described as the "spillover effect" – employee attitudes are contagious, spilling over onto customers during service encounters (Bowen, Gilliland, & Folger, 1999).

While the literature focused on the effect of service providers' positive job experiences, it may be expected that service providers who are treated negatively by the organization will develop negative attitudes, which will spill over to customers and result in negative customer

behavior. The purpose of the present study is to examine the relationships between negative supervisor behavior, service providers' emotions and attitudes, and negative customer behavior.

Negative Supervisor Behavior

Tepper (2000) defines negative supervisor behavior reflected in abusive supervision as "subordinates' perception of the extent to which their supervisors engage in the sustained display of hostile verbal and nonverbal behaviors, excluding physical contact" (p. 178). Abusive supervision is reflected in behaviors such as ridiculing subordinates, invading their privacy, or giving them the "silent treatment." Unlike more explicit forms of aggression, abusive leadership may not be considered deviant if it conforms to an organization's policies or norms.

Negative supervisor behaviors (such as belittling subordinates, displaying little consideration, and using noncontingent punishment) were found to be associated with frustration, helplessness, and alienation from work (Ashforth, 1997). Employees who experienced more supervisory abuse were less satisfied with their jobs (Keashly, Trott & MacLean, 1994; Tepper, Duffy & Show, 2001) and experienced elevated levels of psychological distress (Richman et al., 1992; Sheehan et al., 1990; Tepper, 2000) and burnout (Yagil, 2006). Additionally, negative supervisor's behavior affected employees' work-related behaviors, such as resisting the supervisor's attempts to influence (Tepper et al., 2001), reduced organizational citizenship behavior (Tepper, Duffy, Hoobler, & Ensley, 2004), reduced organizational commitment and increased counterproductive behaviors (Duffy, Ganster & Pagon, 2002).

Hypothesis 1: Negative supervisor behavior will be positively related to employee emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and negative emotions and negatively related to a sense of accomplishment, positive emotions and job satisfaction.

The "spillover effect" in customer service

Significant relationships were found between service employee attitudes and customer attitudes (Dormann & Kaiser, 2002; Ostroff, 1992; Schlesinger & Zornitsky, 1991; Payne & Webber, 2006). This dynamic has been termed the "spillover effect" since employee attitudes seem to spill over onto customers in service encounters. Since employee attitudes strongly mirror employee reactions to organizational factors, it is suggested that in service organizations the supervisor's behavior affects employees, directly, and then customers, indirectly (Bowen, Gilliland, & Folger, 1999). The spillover effect is demonstrated in regard to emotion contagion (Pugh, 2001) – exposure to an individual expressing positive or negative emotions produces a corresponding change in the emotional state of the observer. Customers, when exposed to the emotional displays of employees, experience corresponding changes in their own affective states. Thus, customers "catch" the affect of employees through emotional contagion processes (Pugh, 2001). Although service providers are expected by the organization to display specific emotions and to "produce an emotional state in another person" (Hochschild, 1983, p. 147), felt emotions may exert an influence over displayed emotions because it is difficult to fake emotions that are not felt for long periods of time. The display of positive emotions by employees was found to be positively related to customers' positive affect following service encounters and to their evaluations of service quality (Pugh, 2001). Similarly, it may be expected that negative emotions generated by negative supervisor behavior, will also spillover to customers and stimulate negative behavior on their part.

Negative Customer Behavior

Negative customer behavior toward service providers is often expressed in verbal aggression (e.g., yelling, insults, and cursing) (Grandey, Dicker & Sin, 2004). The intent of negative behavior may be intimidation, defiance, and other forms of abuse. Customers vent frustration and anger at the service provider (Fullerton & Punj, 2004). Given the human discomfort with being the target of anger, and the fact that this behavior communicates that the goal of satisfying customers is not being met, negative customer behavior can be highly stressful for service providers (Grandey, Dicker & sin, 2004). While negative behavior may be generated by various factors that are unrelated to the service providers (e.g., customer's personality), it may also reflect a reaction to negative emotions and attitudes expressed by the service providers themselves. Accordingly, the following hypotheses are posited:

Hypothesis 2: Service providers' emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and negative emotions will be positively related to negative customer behavior. Service providers' sense of accomplishment, positive emotions and job satisfaction will be negatively related to negative customer behavior.

Hypothesis 3: Service providers' burnout dimensions, emotions, and job satisfaction will mediate the relationship of negative supervisor behavior with negative customer behavior.

Method

Sample and procedure

The sample included 263 participants who were employed as service providers (57.8% women) in various organizations. Their mean age was 29.05 (SD=8.27). They had an average of 14.18 (SD=2.17) years of education. Most were born in Israel (82.1%). They worked in their organization for an average of 48.38 months (SD=71.88).

Teams of students visited various work organizations and approached service providers, requesting them to participate in a university study on work-related attitudes. Consenting volunteers were assured of response confidentiality and the use of the questionnaire for research purposes only. The questionnaires were completed in the presence of the student who administered it. Completion took 15-20 minutes. The respondent was requested to put the completed questionnaire in an envelope that contained other questionnaires, to ensure anonymity.

Instruments

Negative supervisor behavior was measured by a question referring to behaviors such as insults, complaints, criticism, belittling, and expressing disrespect. The behavior was rated on a 1-7 frequency scale (1=never, 7= very often).

Burnout was measured by an abbreviated version of the Maslach and Jackson (1981) burnout scale devised by Iverson, Olekalns and Erwin (1998). The scale examines emotional exhaustion (e.g., "I feel emotionally drained from my work"), depersonalization (e.g., "I worry that this job is hardening me emotionally") and a sense of personal accomplishment ("I feel that my work has a positive influence on other people's lives"). The scale contains nine items, rated on a 1-7 scale (1=no agreement, 7= total agreement). The internal reliabilities of emotional

exhaustion, depersonalization and sense of accomplishment were .82, .70, and .71, respectively.

Emotions were measured with the Positive and Negative Affect Scale (PANAS; Watson, Clark & Tellegen, 1988). The scale contains 20 adjectives depicting various mood and affective states (e.g., enthusiastic, hostile), with 10 positive items and 10 negative items. All items are rated on a 1-7 scale, (1=not at all, 7=a lot). The two subscales, namely, positive affect and negative affect, showed high internal reliabilities (.87 for both scales).

Job satisfaction was measured by asking respondents to rank their agreement with the following sentence: "Considering all aspects of my job, I am very satisfied with my job". The question was rated on a 1-7 scale (1= no agreement, 7=total agreement).

Negative customer behavior was measured by a question referring to behaviors such as shouting, behaving rudely, complaining and expressing distrust. The behavior was rated on a 1-7 frequency scale (1=never, 7= very often).

Results

Table 1 presents means, standard deviations and Pearson correlations among the variables. To examine the first hypothesis, partial correlations were conducted between negative supervisor behavior and service providers' emotions and attitudes, controlling for gender, age and education. The results of these correlations show that negative supervisor behavior is positively related to emotional exhaustion ($r=.37$, $p<.01$), depersonalization ($r=.34$, $p<.01$) and negative emotions ($r=.45$, $p<.01$), and negatively related to positive emotions ($r=-.17$, $p<.01$) and job satisfaction ($r=-.29$, $p<.01$). These results support most relationships predicted in the first hypothesis.

Table 2 presents the hierarchical regressions for negative customer behavior. The first step of the hierarchical regressions included service providers' gender, age, and education to control for their effects on negative customer behavior. As can be seen in the table, the demographic variables contributed minimally to negative customer behavior. The variables entered on the second step added a substantial contribution. However, only depersonalization and negative supervisor behavior were significantly related to negative customer behavior. Thus, hypothesis 2 was partially supported.

To test the mediation effects in Hypothesis 3 (see Table 3) negative customer behavior was regressed on negative supervisor behavior, with $\beta=.35$ ($p<.01$), and depersonalization (the mediator) was regressed on negative supervisor behavior, with $\beta=.32$ ($p<.0001$). Next, negative customer behavior was regressed on both negative supervisor behavior and depersonalization with the effect for negative supervisor behavior reduced from $\beta=.35$ to $.28$ ($p<.01$). These results indicate that the effect of negative supervisor behavior on negative customer behavior is mediated partially by depersonalization (Sobel test $Z=2.85$, $p<.0001$).

Table 1: Means, Standard Deviations and Correlations among Research Variables

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Negative supervisor behavior	--	.34*	.32**	-.11	-.17**	.44**	-.30**	.35**
2. Emotional exhaustion		--	.38**	-.15*	-.14*	.46**	-.43**	.26**
3. Depersonalization			--	.21**	.30**	.36**	.28**	.29**
4. Sense of accomplishment				--	.64**	-.00	.45**	.17*
5. Positive emotions					--	-.05	.53**	-.12
6. Negative emotions						--	-.25**	.30**
7. Job satisfaction							--	-.22**
8. Negative customer behavior								--
Mean	2.67	3.98	2.85	4.57	4.90	2.56	4.99	4.00
SD	1.59	1.59	1.44	1.43	1.13	1.03	1.38	1.64

*p<.05; **p<.01

Table 2: Hierarchical Regressions of Negative Customer Behavior on Demographics, Burnout Measures, Emotions, Job Satisfaction and Negative Supervisor Behavior

Variable	Beta
<u>Step 1</u>	
Gender	.06
Age	-.18**
Education	.08
R ²	.05**
<u>Step 2</u>	
Negative supervisor behavior	.25**
Emotional Exhaustion	.12
Depersonalization	.14**
Sense of accomplishment	-.11
Positive emotions	.02
Negative emotions	.10
Job satisfaction	-.05
R ² (R ² change)	.24 (.19**)

*p<.05; **p<.01

Table 3: Mediation Tests: Depersonalization Mediating the Effect of Negative Supervisor Behavior on Negative Customer Behavior

Variable	Negative customer behavior (outcome)	Depersonalization (mediator)
<u>Step 1</u>		
Negative supervisor behavior	.35**	.32**
R ²	.12**	
<u>Step 2</u>		
Negative supervisor behavior	.28**	
Depersonalization	.20**	
R ²	.16**	

*p<.05; **p<.01

Discussion

The results show that negative supervisor behavior is related to negative emotions and attitudes of service providers. Of these, the depersonalization component of burnout was found to partially mediate the relationship of negative supervisor behavior with negative customer behavior. Depersonalization reflects a mechanical attitude towards customers, a denial of their identity and distinct needs. The mediating effect of depersonalization suggests that supervisor behavior may be related to customer behavior by a process of social exchange. Central to social exchange theory is the norm of reciprocity, which obligates individuals to respond positively to favorable treatment received and negatively to a negative treatment (Blau, 1964). Thus, employees who experience negative supervisor behavior may be inclined to treat customers in a manner that contradicts the supervisor's interests. Subordinates were found to resist the influence attempts of abusive supervisors (Tepper et al., 2001). However, since service providers are not permitted to treat customers negatively, depersonalization of customers may be a subtle outlet of their negative attitudes. Service providers may thus reciprocate the supervisor's negative behavior toward them by their negative treatment of customers. Social exchange may also underlie service providers' relationship with the customers who reciprocate the unpleasant behavior of depersonalization with negative behaviors of their own.

An additional explanation is related to the concept of emotional regulation, namely "the process of regulating both feelings and expressions for the organizational goals" (Grandey, 2000, p. 98). The more employees need to invest effort in expressing and suppressing emotional responses at work, the more they may choose to depersonalize customers. This may be a way of distancing themselves from the stress of the emotional expenditure; if they are detached when interacting with customers their potentially emotion-producing reactions will matter less (Grandey, 2000). According to this explanation, negative supervisor behavior increases the need for emotional regulation, which leads to depersonalization of customers.

Surprisingly, negative supervisor behavior was found to be directly related to negative customer behavior. A possible explanation is that such negative behavior toward service providers on the part of the supervisor creates a climate which places service providers in an inferior position and encourages customers to also treat them negatively. This explanation is supported by the notion that customer aggression is the result of the development of customer-focus policy and the notion of the customer as "king" which leads to customers behaving as dictators (Grandey, Dickter & Sin, 2004; Reynolds & Harris, 2006). The customer's superior position is used as a rationalization for customers' misbehavior or leads to a situation in which organizations ignore their misbehaviors towards the service providers (Fullerton & Punj, 2004).

The Major limitation of this study is the common source bias. The measurement of perceptions rather than actual behavior does not present a problem in regard to the supervisor's behavior, since it is the perception of behavior that is expected to affect service providers' attitudes and emotions. However, since service providers reported both supervisor and customer negative behavior, the results may reflect the service providers' general tendency to perceive negative behavior in their social interactions, rather than the actual negative customer behavior they experience. To explore customer-related outcomes, it is desirable in future studies to measure negative behavior with observations rather than self-reported measures.

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