

# Role of Leaders in Managing Employees' Dysfunctional Behavior at Workplace

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**Abstract**—The objective of this theoretical study is to explore in depth the role of leaders in managing employees' dysfunctional behavior at workplace in an effort to recommend strategies and solutions for these destructive behaviors that affect employees' performance. The significance of the study lies in the fact that dysfunctional behavior has been widely spread in almost all organizations, public and private, with its very destructive manifestations. Dysfunctional behavior may be classified into thefts, sabotage, sexual harassment, jealousy, envy, revenge, vulgarity all of which affect employees' moral, self-esteem and satisfaction level drastically which will be reflected negatively on their performance and productivity. The main research question will focus on the role of leaders in managing employees' dysfunctional behavior effectively at the workplace through the different strategies and control measures. In this study, the data will be collected from different academic literature and through some primary data by conducting interviews with some public and private employees from different managerial levels and fields.

**Keywords**—Dysfunctional behavior, employees' deviant behavior, employees moral, leaders' role.

## I. WHAT IS DYSFUNCTIONAL BEHAVIOR?

EMPLOYEE'S dysfunctional behavior is the behavior that can harm the company and its members; it can be called negative deviant behavior, malicious employee behavior, or dysfunctional behavior. These behaviors occur mostly in the workplace, which is the place where different varieties of behavior with different consequences to the members of the organization happen [1]. Dysfunctional behavior at workplace can be described as a type of deviant or antisocial behavior that has its negative effect on employees, which will be reflected on customers, suppliers, and the organization at large [2]. In another study, dysfunctional behavior is defined as employees' bad conduct that violates the organizational regulations and code of ethics, which affects work relations and quality of work life negatively and has high financial and social costs on organizations [3].

One of the studies discussed deviant behaviors in the workplace as a problem that requires attention and proper management otherwise it will affect the organization negatively [4]. Another study mentioned that there are

different manifestations for deviant behaviors. Deviant behaviors in employees can be due to internal factors related to the company or some personality disorder in the employee himself/herself or due to external factors [5].

Managerial leaders should have a strong role in managing the negative effect of dysfunctional behavior in their organizations, otherwise it will be of high cost to them due to the repetitive lay off of deviant employees, the high turnover of dissatisfied ones, the hiring costs for new employees, or the cost of fixing any damages caused by the deviant employees [2].

This study is classified into five sections. The first section discusses what is dysfunctional behavior, its types, and causes. The second section discusses the negative effect of dysfunctional behavior on employees' physical and mental health, moral, performance, productivity, absenteeism, and turnover. The third section highlights the leaders' role in managing and controlling employees' dysfunctional behavior at the workplace. While the fourth and fifth section focuses on the analysis and discussion, conclusion and recommendations.

### A. Types of Dysfunctional Behavior

Some studies estimated that about one third or two thirds of the employees in almost all organization participated in some forms of deviant workplace behavior [6]. Some other studies mentioned that dysfunctional behavior in the workplace can be manifested in many forms and levels of harm [2], [5]. There are a lot of behavior, which can be categorized as extreme deviant behavior, among these are forms of fraud, sexual harassment, thefts, threats, or destroying the property of the company. It might also include other unethical behaviors that might be less extreme but harmful to the organization such as aggressive behavior, spreading rumors or gossips, envy, jealousy, withholding effort, lying, undermining employees' efforts, absence without a reason, talking loudly in offices, playing computer music, or stealing trivial office tools or stationery [1], [5]. Among the most common types of dysfunctional behavior in the workplace are envy, thefts, bullying and harassment.

#### 1. Envy and Jealousy

Reference [7] discussed envy and jealousy as employees' behavior or emotions towards each other in the workplace due to competition over a promotion, salary raise, benefits, or getting the attention of top management. These types of unfavorable behavior at the workplace are considered harmful to the employees and to the organization at large. Malicious envy is usually accompanied by unpleasant and painful feelings of employees towards one another due to unpleasant

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or unfavorable social comparisons. The behavioral consequences for such envy can be healthy or unhealthy, challenge or threat. It can be healthy and challenge when the employee challenge himself to raise his or her level to the envied person. On the other hand, it can be unhealthy or threat when the employee works hard to bring down the level of the envied person [7].

## 2. Theft

Theft can take different forms and can be at different levels of harms like writing false production reports to the top management, taking some office stuff home, taking the credit of others, reporting false overtime hours that are not worked and many more. Some studies reported that organizations may lose up to US 50 billion annually from the different forms of thefts in the workplace [1], [5].

## 3. Bullying

Reference [8] defined workplace bullying as a situation in which one or more persons become victims of a controlling person at the workplace who have been treated badly over a long period of time either deliberately or unconsciously affecting them negatively through their feeling of humiliation, anger or distress. The victims usually revenge by unexpected ways which affects the work relations negatively and drastically. Some of the examples of workplace bullying may range from verbal or physical abuse, psychological abuse by reminding the victims of their failures to destabilize them, preventing access of important information needed for the flow of their work, sabotaging the victims' property like his or her car, house or it can be a blend of more than one category. According to some governmental employees the most wicked types of bullying that may occur at the workplace can be done by some jealous employees who intentionally spread rumors or sarcastic jokes towards their clever colleague for the purpose of humiliation or to pressurize him or her to quit the job [9]. It was also mentioned that the most common type of bullying occurs when a supervisor abuses his power and intentionally insults his subordinate in front of his/her colleagues pretending that that he is coaching them [10].

## 4. Violence

Violence or threat of violence against workers was discussed by the occupational safety and health administration (OSHA) as an unethical act towards employees in the workplace or outside the workplace that can range from threats, verbal abuse, or physical assault to its extreme case of murder. There are several definitions for violence in the workplace, the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) defines workplace violence as any physical assault threatening behavior, or verbal abuse occurring in the work environment [11].

It was said that violence in the workplace not only affects the direct victims negatively but it also affects those surrounding him, it also causes drainage of employees' energy as it affects their emotional and physical health. Violence was also defined as "Incidents that have abused employees, threatened, or assaulted in circumstances relating to their

work, including the transition to and from work, involving an explicit or implicit challenge to their safety, well-being or health."

## 5. Harassment

According to [12], harassment can be explained as any kind of annoying, alarming, or abusing act from a person to another. The most common types of harassment in the workplace is the female sexual harassment that managers use, abusing their status or power inside their organization by harassing their female coworkers by various forms of actions ranging from looks, text messages, words, or tone of voice to physical abuse. The most common types of female sexual harassment in the workplace in some countries usually occur when an employee of higher managerial level abuse his power over a lower level female employee of a poor social class in return for an appealing promotion or a benefit given to her, which usually results in the female quitting her jobs to avoid any societal rumors or scandals.

### *B. Causes of Employee Dysfunctional Behavior*

Dysfunctional behavior is encouraged inside organizations who permit or encourage the appearance of such behaviors due to lack of fair and transparent system or the employees feeling of inequality and humiliation. Among the causes of dysfunctional behavior at work place is internal corruption like favoritism and nepotism, management failures to take corrective action towards deviant behavior in the absence of clear code of ethics and work values [13].

A review of the literature revealed some of the causes for dysfunctional behavior in the workplace. Some studies differentiated between Negative Deviant Behavior and Positive Deviant Behavior.

Negative deviant behavior: According to [14], some organizations may support employees' deviant behavior and dishonest acts in order to be successful. Reference [15] termed such organizations to be toxic and usually suffer poor performance, poor decision making, employees dissatisfaction, and high stress [16]. Employees in these types of toxic organizations usually serve their own interest and not the interest of the organizations. Deviant role models or aggressive groups in the workplace are among the strongest motivators of employees' negative deviance. Ineffective managers in such organizations are destructive to employees' norms [16].

Lack of moral leadership in the organization may also be a major factor for employees' unethical behavior.

Reference [16] discussed in their study the workplace environment rather than individual personality that triggers workplace violence and deviant behavior. Some recent studies mentioned that social theorists believe that there is a strong interaction between the person-based and situation-based types of deviance [17].

According to [18], there are some organizational factors that triggers the employee's deviant behavior like unfair treatment, organizational culture and climate, as well as supervisory behavior. Among the organizational factors that

causes employee deviance include “job stressors, employee’s frustration, lack of control over the work environment, downsizing employees, no clear cut rules for organizational violations [17].

Reference [19] mentioned in their studies that empowered employees usually are involved in positive deviant behaviors. Empowerment usually helps with employees’ developed behavior to participate in decision-making, transcend the stagnant work style, take risks not within the usual norms of the organization in a way that is beneficial to the organization.

## II. NEGATIVE CONSEQUENCES OF DYSFUNCTIONAL BEHAVIOR

As mentioned before, dysfunctional behavior in the workplace has many negative effects on the company and the employees and can be highly costly for a company. Organizations in which dysfunctional behavior exists affect employees’ personal and professional life as well [20]. In this following part, the negative outcomes which result from the different forms of dysfunctional behavior in the workplace will be discussed and explored in detail [2].

### A. Physical and Mental Consequences

Studies showed that several types of dysfunctional behavior can cause high level of stress and anxiety. Harassment for example is said to be one of the strongest causes of stress. Employees who get stressed because of harassment will experience tension, nervousness, fear, and anger [12]. Bullying is considered one of the behaviors that affects the mental health as well. Employees who feel that they are gossiped at or are socially excluded by other members in the organization tend to be very anxious and have a decreased wellbeing. Furthermore, they are more likely to experience psychotropic drug use [21].

Other mental problems like feelings of shame, lower self-esteem, depression, and emotional exhaustion are associated with bullying. Not only that, but it could get worse by having thoughts of committing suicide or crime acts. Apart from that, bullying can also cause muscular pain and fatigue [22].

Regarding violence which could be very harmful in organizations, employees not only use verbal violence which causes mental disturbance, but it could also get to an extent of using physical violence which causes injuries and harms employees physically [22].

### B. Employees’ Productivity

According to [4], dysfunctional behavior does affect employees’ productivity negatively. It is stated that this kind of behavior limits and prevents employees from giving their full capacity at work. Additionally, as bullying in the workplace affects employees negatively, this will consequently affect employees’ productivity and performance. Employees will be less motivated to work and which will lead to bad performance in the workplace and a higher turnover rate [23]. On the other hand, an organization with envied parties is poisoned with negative feelings and emotions which creates overall uncomfortable environment for the employees.

Employees who always feel that they are treated unfairly, will never be able to improve their performance but on the contrary, performance will keep deteriorating [7]. It has been also confirmed in another study that employees can only improve their productivity in a positive working environment, which will not be present in case there is bullying, theft, a sense of envy, or any other type of dysfunctional workplace behavior.

### C. Job Satisfaction, Absenteeism, and Turnover Rate

According to a study, when dysfunctional behavior exists in the workplace, this highly affects employees’ absenteeism and turnover rate. Employees will not be encouraged to fulfill the job duties and will not be encouraged to take part in any activity in the company which will lead to a higher absenteeism rate and a greater turnover rate as employees will be less loyal to the organization they are working for [24]. Reference [4] also confirmed this by stating that deviant workplace behavior like bullying leads to a higher dissatisfaction rate of employees which results in a higher turnover and absenteeism rate.

An organization with high levels of bullying, harassment, or violence will have to deal with high costs resulting from a higher turnover rate as well as a high absenteeism rate especially women who experience harassment in the workplace will tend to avoid coming to work [12]. The company’s reputation will also be affected negatively due to the deviant workplace environment. Employees will also be stressed out or will develop low organizational citizenship behavior from this negative environment and fail to do their jobs properly all of which will increase the organization’s costs excessively [25].

## III. LEADERS’ ROLE IN CONTROLLING EMPLOYEES’ DYSFUNCTIONAL BEHAVIOR

Although tackling and addressing deviant workplace behavior is not an easy job, however, ignoring it may cause the company lots of losses due to its negative results on the employees as well as the organization. Thus, addressing dysfunctional behaviors and getting strategies and ways to get rid of them is important [23]. It was also confirmed by another study that addressing this kind of behavior helps the company in keeping its good skillful people and would help prevent further losses [26].

### A. Displaying Ethical Attitude

Bullying is one form of dysfunctional behavior that can be prevented by leaders through displaying ethical leadership style [27]. Ethical leaders provide a good example for employees to behave ethically, namely, treat others the way they are treated. In order to avoid deviant workplace behaviors like envy, violence, or bullying, leaders should be honest, trustworthy, and fair. Another study also confirmed and stressed on the importance that managers should be fair so that employees will not envy each other. Managers do play a very critical role by fostering a positive and a healthy environment and are responsible for a decreased core self-evaluation [7].

### *B. Internal Communication and HRM*

Internal communication within an organization plays a big role in maintaining a healthy positive environment for employees. Leaders who consistently communicate within their employees their organization's core values and that such unethical behaviors like bullying, violence, harassment, or envy would not be accepted or punished are said to have better control over their employees' deviant behavior [26]. Furthermore, regulations and policies within the organizations should be communicated clearly [28]. On the other hand, some studies stressed on the importance of having an effective Human Resource Management (HRM) practices in organizations to help eliminate unwanted behavior in the workplace. A proper HR system must function with effective policies and regulations otherwise it will not help. That is why excessive attention should be given by leaders to observe what could allow a company to implement its HR policies properly while prevent another company from doing that. It has been proven that leaders who lack strong communication and interpersonal skills find it hard to communicate with their employees, which increases the likelihood of the presence of bullying or violence. Another reason which hinders leaders from implementing proper HR policies and controlling employees' deviant behavior is mixing priorities. Most managers are caught up in their work and forget that creating a healthy environment should be their top priority. That is why some studies suggest that communicating HR policies from the top management and being firm about its implementation plays a big role in maintaining a healthy work environment [29].

### *C. Employee Engagement and Participation*

Another factor, which plays a big role in eliminating dysfunctional behavior is employees' participation and engagement. Employees' participation is about easing the communication with peers, supervisors, and managers and enabling them to speak up and play a vital role in the decision making. Studies found that employees who are not allowed to participate in the decision processes of their organizations are more likely to feel left out from their companies, which will lower their self-esteem and makes them more susceptible to be exposed to deviant behaviors [30]. This was further confirmed by highlighting the fact that employees who can voice their opinions and express their opinions out loud will have the chance to discuss openly any problems arising in the workplace whether it is about bullying, harassment, theft, or any other type of dysfunctional behavior. Such a positive, open environment will increase employees' trust in the upper management, which will result in less vulnerability in employees' personalities knowing that whenever any deviant workplace occurs, the managers will intervene to solve and prevent any discrimination to occur [31].

### *D. Appropriate Work Design*

Designing the job is indeed highly related to preventing deviant workplace behaviors. There are two aspects of the job design, which should be considered. The first one is the

quantitative aspect, which has to do with the work load itself and how heavy the content of the job design is. The more acceptable the workload is; the more confident employees would feel while performing their job. The second aspect is related to the qualitative component of the job, in other words how challenging the work is. Research suggests that ethical leaders would create work that is doable and do their best to design positive quantitative and qualitative work [27].

### *E. Redistribution of Wealth and Encapsulation*

One thing that some organizations do in order to prevent envy or reduce it, is namely the "redistribution" of wealth. It is basically taking away extra money or wealth from shareholders and distribute it equally among employees. This way leaders will make sure that employees feel that they belong to this company, thus deserve a stake in it as well which will consequently result in less envy directed towards managers or towards other employees. Encapsulation is another suggested strategy to create envy-free working environment, which is basically creating different social units. In each social unit there are members who are socially equal and would have the access to the same level of needs (like for example clothes, transportation mean, etc.) Also, study confirms that appraisal systems and performance-based pay would encourage employees to work and feel equal and fair treatment by their managers [29].

### *F. Reinforcing Punishment and Counseling Programs*

Leaders' role does not lay solely in rewarding employees for their achievements and for displaying excellence in their job tasks, but it is also important to impose penalties and punishment to those who engage in unacceptable workplace behavior. Leaders and managers should be very clear about articulating the penalties imposed in case of any misconduct of the code of ethics of the organization and they should indeed implement and follow the rules [28].

In addition to that, some leaders in organizations create counseling programs to help employees cope with any existing deviant workplace behavior. Those programs are primarily designed to deal and treat any employees' deviant behavior such as jealousy, aggression, or others in order not to affect their own performance negatively and affect also the performance of their colleagues which will definitely have its negative effect on over all organizational performance [32].

## IV. DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

This study tackles the role of leaders in managing and controlling dysfunctional behavior at the workplace. A study of the different academic literature reveals that the forms and causes of dysfunctional behavior are common in almost all organizations, public and private. Yet, there was no discussion in this literature to the root causes and intensity of dysfunctional behavior with regards to the different types of organizations whether it is public, private, multinational, or even non-governmental organizations. According to the author's twenty-eight years of work experience with almost all sorts of organizations, it is obvious that the causes of

dysfunctional behavior differ from one organization to the other. Accordingly, the management and controlling approach by leaders should also vary. Employee's dysfunctional behavior depends to a large extent on how competitive the organization is, how attractive the resources are, the transparency of the organization administrative system, the degree of employees' empowerment and the organization internal politics involved. The discussion of literature in various studies about the causes of employees' dysfunctional behavior were found to be quite generic with no differentiation to the type of organization or what triggers dysfunctional behavior in each. It is obvious nowadays, that the more competitive and attractive the resources in the organization like in multinationals or some private organizations, the more aggressive the envy, jealousy, and violent behavior between employees. Its extreme cases may result in female sexual harassment by their managers in return for some job privileges acquired. On the other hand, the case might be different in almost all non-governmental organizations that are non-profitable and are serving the community as most employees are working voluntarily for some money or for experience or other reasons. It was found that employees work relations in such nongovernmental organizations are better as there is not much competition involved. Whereas, in public organizations, thefts might be a common obvious dysfunctional behavior in some countries due to corruption and lack of transparency. Also, the causes of dysfunctional behavior in some public organizations might be due to some administrative corruption related to promotions or benefits or internal politics not revealed to employees. On the other hand, the literature discusses also the role of leaders in managing employees' dysfunctional behavior in a generic way. Therefore, the authors believe that there should be more academic studies conducted on the root causes of dysfunctional behavior in different types of organizations like public, private, multinationals, and nongovernmental. Accordingly, once the root cause will be diagnosed and known, the management and controlling means for these dysfunctional behaviors by leaders should be more tailored to these causes.

#### V. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

To sum up, dysfunctional behavior has also been known to be a voluntary unethical behavior that violates significantly the norms of the organization and threatens its growth and development. Dysfunctional behavior has been discussed in many studies as it has been growing increasingly in many organizations affecting negatively employees' moral and performance. Research suggests that deviant behavior is a common problem in many organizations, with harmful consequences that could threaten the entire organization. It is said to affect negatively the individual moral, cause dissatisfaction, stress and exhaustion, which will also affect organizational performance.

This paper has investigated some of the strategies leaders can follow in order to make sure that the organizations are supporting employees and are ready to adopt any strategy to prevent dysfunctional workplace behavior from occurring in

the first place. Therefore, it is recommended that leaders must take a strong role in managing and controlling dysfunctional behavior through various means by;

1. Acting like a role model for an ethical leader,
2. Spreading awareness among employees about the core ethical values of the organization through an ongoing communication process with their employees;
3. Creating a positive and healthy internal work environment through equal distribution of workload, challenging jobs, employee participation and engagement in decision making, reward and punishment, and proper implantation of HR policies.

To finalize, although managing dysfunctional behavior may be hard, however, there are several ways through which leaders can tackle such behaviors through a transparent and friendly working environment that will help create successful and growing organizations.

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