

Defensive Communication and Burnout in the Workplace: The Mediating
Role of Leader-Member Exchange

Jennifer A. H. Becker - University of Missouri

Jonathon R. B. Halbesleben – University of Missouri

H. Dan O’Hair – University of Oklahoma

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Jennifer A. H. Becker

Jonathon R. B. Halbesleben

University of Missouri

H. Dan O'Hair

University of Oklahoma

Author Note: Jennifer A. H. Becker (Ph.D., University of Oklahoma) is Assistant Professor in the Department of Communication at the University of Missouri. Jonathon R. B. Halbesleben (Ph.D., University of Oklahoma) is Research Assistant Professor in the Department of Health Management and Informatics at the University of Missouri. H. Dan O'Hair (Ph.D., University of Oklahoma) is Professor in the Department of Communication at the University of Oklahoma. A previous version of this manuscript was presented to the Organizational Communication Division at the annual meeting of the National Communication Association, Miami Beach, FL, November 20-23, 2003. Special thanks to Sandra Ragan for her suggestions, as well as the employees and managers who participated in this research. Please direct correspondence to the first author at 115 Switzler Hall, Columbia, MO 65211-2310, 573-882-4431 (office), 573-884-5672 (fax), jabecker99@hotmail.com.

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Abstract

This paper investigates the relationship between defensive communication in performance appraisal settings by considering the mediating effect of leader-member exchange relationships.

In a study of employees of a United States federal fire department, defensive communication was associated with lower quality leader-member exchange relationships, which in turn was related to burnout. We discuss the implications of these findings, particularly as they apply to organizations and their employees, as well as limitations and directions for future research.

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Employee burnout is a serious problem for many organizations resulting in a number of negative work-related characteristics such as emotional exhaustion, low job satisfaction, and diminished personal health (Wright & Bonett, 1997). There is a wealth of data to suggest that burnout can be reduced by improving the quality and quantity of social support in organizations (cf., Ray, 1987). However, comparatively less is known about the impact of unsupportive communication in organizational settings. In this study, we argue that defensive communication is an unfortunate component in lower quality relationships between employee and supervisor, and therefore will contribute to heightened burnout. Although past research has explored these phenomena independently, the present study investigates linkages between these three variables and explains the resultant theoretical and practical implications.

Defensive Communication

According to a model by Stamp, Vangelisti, and Daly (1992), defensive communication involves a self-perceived flaw that an individual refuses to admit to another person, a sensitivity to that flaw, and an attack by another person that focuses on the flaw. This model, which incorporates features of traditional psychodynamic theory and Gibb's (1961) defensive climate conceptualization, accounts for both the internal traits and external states from which defensive communication may spring. The Stamp et al. (1992) model is intended to capture the interactive, multifaceted nature of defensive communication.

Research has demonstrated that *supportive* communication is linked to and has far-reaching implications for stress and burnout (Ray, 1987). However, little research has focused on the connections between burnout and types of *unsupportive* communication, such as defensive

communication. We venture that defensive communication yields negative effects on the quality of the relationship between the employee and supervisor as well as individual employee burnout.

Burnout

Burnout is “a reaction to constant, emotional, communicative contact with individuals in need of help” (Miller, Stiff, & Ellis, 1998, p. 250; see also Miller, Ellis, Zook, & Lyles, 1990). Although scholars have generated tremendous research on burnout, there is surprisingly little research that examines the seemingly relevant relationship between conflict-laden communication and burnout and no research has specifically examined defensive communication and burnout. Based on the past literature concerning communication and burnout, as well as the potential for defensive communication to lead to additional relational demands, we predict that high levels of defensive communication are associated with higher levels of burnout.

Hypothesis 1: Higher levels of self-reported defensive communication are associated with higher levels of burnout.

Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) Theory

Leader-member exchange (LMX) theory addresses the dyadic relationship between leaders (i.e., supervisors) and their subordinates (i.e., members; Schriesheim, Castro, & Cogliser, 1999). The theory suggests that leaders develop different relationships with each member of the organization, with the perceived quality of each relationship varying. Dansereau, Graen, and Haga (1975) suggested that in developing different relationships with members, leaders form a group of members with high-quality exchanges that are laden with social support, what is termed the in-group. Out-group members are those employees who experience low-quality leader-member exchanges with insufficient social support.

LMX fundamentally is achieved through communication processes. Lee (1997) found

that cooperative communication was associated with higher quality LMX, demonstrating the opposite effect of what would be expected with defensive communication. The impact of LMX on the relationship between defensive communication and burnout has important implications for the present study. The quality of the relationship between members and leaders should be related to the nature of their communication, especially in potentially sensitive settings such as the performance appraisal. Moreover, the relationship between members and leaders can reduce or aggravate burnout (Ray, 1987). Taken together, we propose that defensive communication in a performance appraisal setting has negative effects on the quality of LMX, which in turn leads to burnout.

Hypothesis 2: The relationship between defensive communication and burnout is mediated by the member's perception of the quality of leader-member exchange.

Method

Participants and Procedure

Surveys were distributed to 91 professional staff members at a federal fire department (i.e., firefighters and managers) in group sessions. Of these, 81 usable surveys were returned directly to the researchers. To focus the context of the study, we asked participants to recall their last performance appraisal interview, in which all participants had participated within two weeks of completing the survey. The performance appraisal is a useful setting for studying defensive communication because many performance appraisals deal, to some extent, with negative aspects of an employee's performance that the employee and supervisor may perceive as flaws (Smith, Harrington, & Houghton, 2000). This is particularly true when performance appraisals are utilized for administrative decisions such as pay and promotions (Stephen & Dorfman, 1989), which was consistent with the participating organization's practices.

Measures

Defensive communication. The 27-item instrument developed by Stamp et al. (1992) was employed to measure defensive communication, including general defensiveness as well as each of the four predictors of defensive communication (self-perceived flaw, sensitivity, attack, and other-perceived flaw). Participants were asked to complete the defensive communication scale while considering their last performance appraisal.

Burnout. Burnout was measured utilizing the 16-item Maslach Burnout Inventory-General Services Scale (MBI-GS; Schaufeli, Leiter, Maslach, & Jackson, 1996), which measures burnout on three dimensions—emotional exhaustion, cynicism, and personal accomplishment. For the purposes of this study, we analyzed only the exhaustion and cynicism subscales; this is consistent with emerging burnout literature that suggests that exhaustion and cynicism represent the core of the burnout experience (Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner, & Schaufeli, 2001).

Leader-member exchange. The 12-item multidimensional LMX scale (LMX-MDM; Liden & Maslyn, 1998) was used to assess employees' perceptions of the quality of their relationship with their supervisor. The LMX-MDM purports to measure four dimensions of the quality of supervisor support: contribution, loyalty, affect, and professional respect.

Results

Descriptive statistics for study instruments are presented in Table 1. Mediated multiple regression was used to test hypotheses 1 and 2. Mediated multiple regression involves three regression equations (Baron & Kenny, 1986). The first equation regresses the mediator on the independent variable. The second equation regresses the dependent variable on the independent variable. The third equation regresses the dependent variable on both the independent variable and the mediator. Mediation is established when the following conditions hold: (1) the

independent variable affects the mediator in the first equation; (2) the independent variable affects the dependent variable in the second equation; and (3) the effects of the independent variable on the dependent variable is less in the third equation than the second one. Table 2 displays the mediated regression results.

Considering the relationship between LMX and the emotional exhaustion component of burnout, the results presented in the first step (see Table 2) indicate that defensive communication was negatively related to LMX ($\beta = -.47, p < .0001$). The results from the second step indicate that defensive communication was positively associated with emotional exhaustion ($\beta = .57, p < .05$), providing support for hypothesis 1. The results from the third step show that when LMX is accounted for in the regression, defensive communication was not significantly associated with emotional exhaustion ($\beta = .34, ns$); however, LMX remained significantly negatively related to emotional exhaustion ($\beta = -.52, p < .0001$). The large increase in the variance accounted for by including both LMX and defensive communication as regression variables (the multiple R^2) lends further credence to the findings. These findings suggest that the relationship between defensive communication and emotional exhaustion is fully mediated by LMX, providing support for hypothesis 2.

In terms of the relationship between LMX and the cynicism component of burnout, the results presented in the first step (see Table 2) indicate that defensive communication was negatively related to LMX ($\beta = -.47, p < .0001$). The results from the second step indicate that defensive communication was positively associated with cynicism ($\beta = .55, p < .05$), providing support for hypothesis 1. The results from the third step show that when LMX is accounted for in the regression, defensive communication was not significantly associated with cynicism ($\beta = .30, ns$); however, LMX remained significantly negatively related to cynicism ($\beta = -.54, p < .0001$).

The large increase in the variance accounted for by including both LMX and defensive communication as regression variables (the multiple R^2) lends further credence to the findings. These findings suggest that the relationship between defensive communication and cynicism is fully mediated by LMX, offering support for hypothesis 2.

Discussion

Taken together, these findings suggest support for hypothesis 2, which posited that the relationship between defensive communication and burnout is mediated by perceived quality of leader-member exchange. In essence, the relationship between defensive communication in the performance appraisal and the core components of burnout was mediated by LMX, with highly defensive communication associated with a lower quality relationship with supervisor, which was then associated with increased burnout.

The present study yields findings that point to new ways of understanding defensive communication in performance appraisals, LMX, and burnout. Foremost, defensive communication clearly is linked to burnout with surprising strength. Although people commonly explain away, and in effect, minimize the importance of defensive communication in everyday conversations (e.g., “Oh, he was *just* being defensive”), defensive communication in performance appraisals does indeed point to a negative outcome for employees and organizations—burnout. However, the relationship between these variables should not be considered without accounting for leader-member exchanges.¹

Since LMX is the variable that is directly linked to burnout, organizations that attempt to reduce burnout should focus on managing defensive communication *and* improving the quality of relationships between leaders and members. Since some level of defensive communication is difficult to avoid in the performance appraisal setting, given its typical emphasis on flaws in an

employee's work performance, perceived supervisor support must be increased (through the leader-member relationship) if organizations hope to reduce burnout. Thus, a practical implication for organizations is to train supervisors to engage in supportive communication, particularly when giving feedback, as constructively developed and delivered feedback may facilitate relational development (Cusella, 1987). Furthermore, given results from recent research revealing that frequency of interaction itself is not a direct contribution to low LMX (Kacmar, Witt, Zivnuska, & Gully, 2003), and that leaders can enhance perceptions of positive LMX relationships through coordination and participation activities with the subordinate (Yrle, Hartman, & Galle, 2003), it stands to reason that timely, positive, supportive, and participatory interactions would contribute strongly to enhanced work relationships.

As such, we recommend that supervisors be trained to provide developmental feedback that is honest yet constructive, and feedback that does not exclusively highlight flaws and intensify the perception that the supervisor is attacking the employee because of the flaw. This is particularly challenging in performance appraisals; however, it provides a concrete situation wherein supervisors can induce defensive communication. Defensive communication can be minimized in such situations to the extent that supervisors focus on enhancing the strengths and future directions of the employee, for example by developing goal-setting strategies with the employee, rather than dwelling on past problematic behavior. Such strategies are not only more effective as they work to improve long term performance, they also provide an atmosphere of greater support that will develop LMX and, as our findings suggest, reduce burnout.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Any study employing a cross-sectional design must account for the inherent limitations in making inferences. While the present study did ask participants to retrospectively report a past

instance of defensive communication and report current burnout, since a longitudinal design was not employed, causal inferences are tenuous.

This study accounted for the role of LMX. Supervisors yield tremendous influence over employees' job status, workload, and compensation and other tangible rewards, among other aspects. Supervisor support is particularly critical in large, bureaucratic organizations that do not permit much employee autonomy and control over one's work (Pines, 1982; this was characteristic of the participating organization in the present study). While supervisors serve as an important source of social support in an organization, LMX theory does not account for coworker support (Pines, 1982). Thus, future research should examine the role of perceived coworker support in the relationship between defensive communication and burnout.

Future research is also needed to investigate the potential reciprocal nature of defensive communication, LMX, and burnout. While it appears that defensive communication leads to lower quality LMX, which in turn leads to burnout, one might expect that burnout can then contribute to defensive communication, repeating the process. Moreover, research has suggested that while communication patterns influence the development of LMX, LMX can also influence communication patterns (Fairhurst, 2001). As such, those with a lower quality LMX may engage in more defensive communication, thus maintaining the lower quality LMX.

This study is a first step in substantiating the links between defensive communication, leader-member exchange, and burnout in the context of the performance appraisal. Future research should further examine how defensive communication and other forms of problematic communication impact the quality of the supervisor-employee relationship and employee burnout in other types of communicative interactions.

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Note

¹ We recognize that one potentially could argue for alternative ordering of the variables in this study. Based on our review of the literature, we believe that the ordering of defensive communication, then leader-member exchange, then burnout is most likely and best reflects actual processes. To test ordering of the variables, we conducted supplemental mediated regression analyses using alternative orders of the variables. Only the proposed ordering was supported by those statistical tests. For the sake of brevity, the results of the supplemental data analyses for alternative models are not included. They are available by contacting the first author.

Table 1

Means, Standard Deviations, Cronbach's Alphas, and Correlations for Study Instruments

Instrument	Mean	SD	α	EX	CY	DEF	LMX-MDM
EX	3.11	1.16	.92	---	.60	.21	-.48
CY	3.12	1.06	.87		---	.56	-.55
DEF	2.66	0.66	.93			---	-.32
LMX-MDM	3.32	0.96	.95				---

Note. EX = MBI-GS Emotional Exhaustion; CY = MBI-GS Cynicism; DEF = Defensive Communication; LMX-MDM = Leader-Member Exchange Multidimensional Instrument.

Table 2

Mediated Regression Results

	EX	CY
Step 1: Criterion: LMX-MDM		
Defensive Communication	-.47**	-.47**
Multiple R^2	.021	.021
Step 2: Criterion: Burnout Subscale		
Defensive Communication	.57*	.55*
Multiple R^2	.030	.018
Step 3: Criterion: Burnout subscale		
Defensive Communication	.34	.30
LMX-MDM	-.52**	-.54**
Multiple R^2	.24	.31

Note. Entries are standardized betas. EX = MBI-GS Emotional Exhaustion; CY = MBI-GS

Cynicism; LMX-MDM = Leader-Member Exchange Multidimensional Instrument;

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .0001$.