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Friendship at work and error disclosure

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Abstract   Organizations rely on contextual factors to promote employee disclosure of self-made errors, which induces a resource dilemma (i.e., disclosure entails costing one's own resources to bring others resources) and a friendship dilemma (i.e., disclosure is seemingly easier through friendship, yet the cost of friendship is embedded). This study proposes that friendship at work enhances error disclosure and uses conservation of resources theory as underlying explanation. A three-wave survey collected data from 274 full-time employees with a variety of occupational backgrounds. Empirical results indicated that friendship enhanced error disclosure partially through relational mechanisms of employees' attitudes toward coworkers (i.e., employee engagement) and of coworkers' attitudes toward employees (i.e., perceived social worth). Such effects hold when controlling for established predictors of error disclosure. This study expands extant perspectives on employee error and the theoretical lenses used to explain the influence of friendship at work. We propose that, while promoting error disclosure through both contextual and relational approaches, organizations should be vigilant about potential incongruence.
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Introduction

Every organization is confronted with employee errors (Dyck et al., 2005, p.1228). Indeed, human errors are unavoidable; in every organization, they are a challenge that can potentially harm performance (Hofmann and Frese, 2011). Thus, in addition to preventing errors, organizations develop systematic approaches to detecting them. Furthermore, because human errors per se will never be totally predictable, organizations rely on employees to voluntarily disclose errors, however employees often do not disclose their own errors (Dyck et al., 2005; Gold et al., 2014; Zhao and Olivera, 2006). This study focuses on the issue of employee disclosure of self-made errors (hereafter, simply ''error disclosure'', meaning that employees voluntarily speak out about self-made errors) and aims to understand whether error disclosure is enhanced by friendship at work.

Although essential to organizations, error disclosure is costly from a social and a personal perspective. The social cost of error disclosure is its harm to workplace image. Error disclosure damages employee images on job competence, attitudes or involvement (Dyck et al., 2005; Gronewold et al., 2013; Uribe et al., 2002). Since workplace image facilitates job continuance and development and is an important job resource (Cheng et al., 2014), error disclosure induces a loss of image resource. The personal cost of error disclosure is that error disclosure consumes both time and energy resources at work, both of which are required to report and explain errors (Dyck et al., 2005; Gronewold et al., 2013; Uribe et al., 2002). Based on Conservation of Resources (COR) theory, according to which people are motivated by resource protection and resource-loss avoidance (Hobfoll, 1989), employees are unwilling to disclose errors because they seek to avoid resource losses.

The error literature indicates that organizations expend efforts to create cultures/climates that decrease the social cost of error disclosure and to enact rules and procedures to decrease the personal cost of error disclosure. However, such efforts seem to have limited effects (Dyck et al., 2005; Gold et al., 2014; Uribe et al., 2002) because employees suspect that the ''error anti-aversion'' culture/climate is paid ''lip service'' to by the organization (Dyck, 1997, 2009; Dyck et al., 2005). For example, non-punishment of error occurrence is not provided, new errors are accepted, but repeated errors are likely to invoke some sanctions, and employees recognize fundamental attribution bias and hindsight bias to follow error disclosure (Dyck, 2009; Dyck et al., 2005; Gronewold et al., 2013). Thus, while organizational antecedents have been focused to encourage employees' disclosure of error, individual factors of employees merit attention as a complementary means of encouraging such disclosure. Notably, employees' concern for social cost of error disclosure is widely documented to result in their error non-disclosure (Zhao and Olivera, 2006). Since social cost at work relates to workplace social relationships and literature indicates that these relationships influence employee actions (Wrzesniewski and Dutton, 2001) and include work relationships (i.e., a work-role bond) and friendships (i.e., a personal bond) (e.g., Berman et al., 2002; Morrison and Wright, 2009; Sias and Cahill, 1998), the question arises whether the friendships employees develop at work (hereafter, simply ''friendships'') relate to error disclosure.

Friendship is a basic value of human nature (Wright, 1984) and the development of friendships at work is prevalent (e.g., Berman et al., 2002; Sias and Cahill, 1998). Although friendship influences the disclosure of information (Berman et al., 2002; Morrison and Wright, 2009; Sias and Cahill, 1998), it is impossible to determine friendship's effect on error disclosure because of the friendship dilemma at work (Bridge and Baxter, 1992), i.e., friendship leads employees to expect more mutual acceptance; yet, it also leads to conflict or critical evaluation because work roles generate competing interests (Bridge and Baxter, 1992; Sias and Cahill, 1998). Expectably, the mutual acceptance that is part of friendship mitigates the social cost (to one's image) of error disclosure, consequently making employees more willing to disclose errors. However, conflict with or critical evaluation from friendship may render that social cost vexatious and hence hinder error disclosure. Therefore, it is reasonable to expect that error disclosure is related to friendship, yet the nature of this relation is ambiguous, and this study has an aim of examining the effect of friendship on error disclosure. Moreover, literature indicates that although research has much examined the effects of workplace friendship, it falls short of the dynamics through which friendships produce those effects (Dotan, 2009; Methot et al., 2016). Thus, the secondary aim of this study is to highlight the intervening mechanisms of the effect studied.

Specifically, the few studies on the explanatory mediators for the effects of workplace friendship have focused on the mediating factors of individual or job attitudes and behaviors (e.g., affect/emotion, exhaustion, job involvement/satisfaction, organizational commitment and citizenship behavior; Dotan, 2009; Methot et al., 2016; Morrison, 2004), while research on workplace friendship has predominantly applied a social capital lens and has an emphasis on relational benefits (Methot et al., 2016). Thus, this study intends to highlight the explanatory mediators from relational mechanisms. Besides, friendship is part of social environment in the workplace. Literature on that social environment has called for more attention to the relational mechanisms for explaining the consequences of that environment (e.g., Grant, 2008) because relational mechanisms, which are processes that influence employees' connections to others in their organizations (Holmes, 2000), fulfill employees' basic motives of experiencing their actions as related and connected to their coworkers (Baumeister and Leary, 1995).

Friendships provide such a connection of relational mechanisms by affecting the attitudes of employees toward their coworkers and those of their coworkers toward them (e.g., Berman et al., 2002; Morrison and Wright, 2009; Sias and Cahill, 1998). These attitudes understandably affect whether employees go the extra mile to risk losing resources and to disclose errors, as noted earlier. This resource perspective elicits the notions that employees' attitudes toward their coworkers will relate to their resource investments at work (Berman et al., 2002; Methot et al., 2016; Sias and Cahill, 1998) (i.e., employee engagement; Kahn, 1990), and that how coworkers value their actions (i.e.,