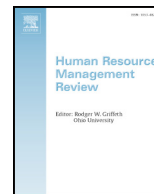


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Compassion momentum model in supervisory relationships☆

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ABSTRACT

Although compassion is an important social resource exchanged in supervisory relationships, I highlight the negative influence of power difference on supervisors noticing their subordinates' hardships. I posit that the negative effect of power on supervisors' compassion can be mitigated through two feedback loops: the emotional feedback loop and the social exchange feedback loop. I conclude with the discussion of how compassion is a social resource and momentum can build that resource in supervisory relationships.

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1. Introduction

It is with certainty that—at some point in their careers—supervisors must address subordinates who are experiencing hardship. Although many difficulties arise in the lives of subordinates, the literature defines hardships that elicit supervisors' compassion to include subordinates' suffering originating from four domains (Dutton, Workman, and Hardin, 2014; Frost, 2003; Frost et al., 2006; Lilius et al., 2008): subordinates' personal life (e.g., death or illness of a loved one, divorce), work itself (e.g., pay dissatisfaction, daily hassles), work relationships (e.g., abusive supervisors and coworkers, toxic organizational politics), or organizational actions (e.g., being downsized or surviving the downsize). If not properly addressed, employees' suffering can lead to financial losses for organizations as a result of decreased job performance, increased absenteeism and turnover, and increased insurance and legal costs (Rosch, 2001).

Supervisors are in a unique position wherein they can most effectively deliver compassion to alleviate the suffering that subordinates are experiencing from their hardship. The extent to which supervisors demonstrate compassion to subordinates during their times of hardship communicates to subordinates that the organization cares for them (Dutton, Worline, Forst, & Lilius, 2006). For instance, upon hearing of students who lost all of their belongings to a fire, university leaders demonstrated compassion to these students by rallying community assistance and by providing financial support; the stories of these actions disseminated throughout the organization via networks of relationships (Dutton, Worline, Frost, and Lilius, 2006). On the other hand, when supervisors fail to demonstrate compassion to subordinates in their times of hardship, not only do the subordinates suffer, but also the organization suffers. Subordinates who do not experience compassion in their times of need are less committed to the organization and are less motivated to stay with the organization (Lilius et al., 2008). On the contrary, supervisors who demonstrate compassion to their subordinates help not only subordinates in hardship but also the organization by motivating subordinates to remain loyal to the organization and maintain expected levels of job performance (Frost, 2003). Thus, understanding how supervisor compassion alleviates subordinates' hardship is important for organizations in maintaining long-term commitment and performance of their employees.

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Compassion in supervisory relationships is “an interpersonal process that involves noticing, feeling, sensemaking, and acting that alleviates the suffering of another person.” (Dutton et al., 2014, p. 277). Compassion is also a valuable social resource exchanged in supervisory relationships as it includes not only emotional support or comfort, but also actions to help alleviate the suffering that particular subordinates are facing (see Foa and Foa, 1980, for definition of particularistic social resources). As such, supervisory compassion includes providing both instrumental and emotional resources; it entails supervisors giving emotional support, time or flexibility, or material goods to subordinates who are experiencing hardships (Lilius et al., 2008). Given the breadth of resources that supervisors can provide, subordinates look to their supervisors for compassion and guidance in alleviating the effects of their hardship (Dutton et al., 2006; Frost, 2003). For instance, when subordinates experience life-threatening illness, they return to normalcy by closely communicating with their supervisors while supervisors rally other coworkers to provide emotional or financial support for these subordinates (Frost, 2003). Therefore, supervisors’ emotional recognition and empathy—parts of the compassion process—are essential for effective leadership (Goody, Connelly, Griffith, and Gupta, 2010). Over time, the exchange of social resources such as compassion in supervisory relationships improves the quality of the relationship (Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005). Supervisors first signal through their demonstration of compassion that they desire a closer relationship. If subordinates’ response to supervisors’ compassion is favorable in the form of better emotional state and better performance, supervisors are further motivated to act in a similar manner in the future. Cropanzano and Mitchell (2005) explain this process of social exchanges as “climbing the ladder” wherein each reciprocated social exchange allows for a wider array of social as well as emotional resource exchanges to take place in the future. Accordingly, Graen and Uhl-Bien (1995) note that through these signal-response incidents or testing patterns, high quality social exchange relationships develop in supervisory relationships.

Despite the critical role that supervisors’ compassion plays in how subordinates handle hardships and how high quality relationships develop, the literature is relatively silent on when and how supervisor compassion is developed in supervisor-subordinate dyads given that compassion is embedded, or sometimes ensnared, in power relations. Power difference between supervisors and subordinates occurs because of the different places they occupy in the organizational hierarchy and information flow network, and because of the different degree to which they control valuable material and social resources (Astley and Sachdeva, 1984). Such power differences create barriers to supervisors and prevent supervisors from noticing subordinates’ hardships. These barriers are cognitive in nature; elevated power activates approach tendencies, which leads to supervisors using automatic, heuristics-based social cognition (Keltner, Gruenfeld, and Anderson, 2003). This makes it more difficult for supervisors to notice subordinates’ hardships, which prevents them from further feeling, sensemaking, and acting to alleviate subordinates in their times of hardship.

As such, without a discussion on levels of power that supervisor holds, it is difficult to untangle the mixed empirical results with regards to supervisor compassion. For instance, Lilius et al. (2008) found that of all forms and sources of compassion that employees received at work, instances of supervisor compassion were less than instances of coworker compassion with only 7% of instances describing receiving compassion from their supervisors. In contrast, Dutton et al. (2006) found that supervisors organized public awareness and financial support for subordinates experiencing hardship. These divergent results indicate unanswered questions with regards to supervisor compassion: (1) why are supervisors less likely to demonstrate compassion to their subordinates, (2) when are supervisors more likely to demonstrate compassion, and (3) how does supervisor compassion build social resources over compassion episodes and reduce the effects of power on supervisors?

Thus, the central goal in his paper is to present a model that explains when and how supervisors engage in more compassionate behavior despite the power dynamics at play. The overall model is described in Fig. 1, marked with the emotional and social exchange feedback loops that build compassion momentum: a process wherein the emotional and social exchange benefits that supervisors reap from the current compassion episode increase the likelihood that supervisors demonstrate compassion when the next compassion episode occurs. Starting on the left, supervisors have organizational power which may make them less attentive toward their subordinates’ hardship. Moving left to right, when supervisors demonstrate compassion toward their subordinates, their subordinates may experience both an increase in positive emotions and a decrease in negative emotions. From this point, there are two feedback loops that ultimately increase the likelihood that supervisors demonstrate compassion in subsequent compassion episodes. The first loop is through emotional contagion. Subordinates’ positive emotions may transfer over to supervisors’ experience of positive emotions, and these heightened positive emotions may help supervisors to relationally identify with their subordinates. Once supervisors relationally identify with their subordinates, they may be more likely to notice the hardship of their subordinates in the future. The second loop is through social exchange. Once subordinates experience increased positive emotions and decreased negative emotions, they may feel a stronger sense of commitment to the organization as supervisors’ demonstration of compassion represents the organization’s attitude toward them. Subordinates who are committed to the organization may demonstrate stronger job performance. Once supervisors see their demonstration of compassion reciprocated to them in the form of subordinates’ improved performance, they may be more likely to notice subsequent hardships of their subordinates. Thus, the model specifies two key feedback processes that describe and delimit when and how supervisors will demonstrate compassion to their subordinates.

2. Compassion in a supervisor-subordinate dyad

2.1. Construct similarities and differences

In understanding the role that compassion plays in a dyadic context, we must establish how compassion is theoretically different from existing constructs. First of all, compassion is different from empathy. Empathy is a vicarious experience of another’s emotions (Lazarus, 1991)—it is an emotional response to the other’s suffering, a response that is consistent with the other’s emotional state (Eisenberg, 1991). Second, compassion is different from sympathy. Sympathy is an individual’s feeling of other-oriented, altruistic

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