



Managers Who Build and Managers Who Break: Abusive Supervision, Psychological Safety, and Team Learning–A Critical Review of the Evidence and Its Limits

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Abstract – In normal language, it's just one word that makes the difference between a **manager** and a **damager**, but the difference in behaviour between the two can be measured in the learning of the team, the health of the staff and the cost to the organisation. This article examines peer-reviewed journal evidence pertaining to supervisory behavior, including studies on abusive supervision, psychological safety, just culture in safety critical industries, and occupational health research that relates supervisors' ratings to reported illness. These can be found in occupational medicine cohort studies, regulatory text on error reporting and the use of data in the workplace, and in organisational behaviour journals and international standards on psychosocial risk. Three findings recur. First, teams which have leaders who ask **how** when things go wrong report more problems and make earlier corrections than teams with leaders who ask **who**. Second, hostile supervision is positively related to turnover intentions, decreased task performance and poorer health, with most designs being based on employee perception and there is limited ability to determine cause and effect. Third, the published figures of cost of damaging supervision are less convincing than the fact that they are frequently cited is sometimes thought to indicate. This article outlines the current measurement options, the legal parameters for their use, and practical options for employers, regulators, and employees. The evidence of causation and cross-country data are still relatively scarce.

Keywords: Abusive supervision, Psychological safety, Just culture, Blame attribution, Psychosocial risk, People analytics, Occupational health, Management development.

1. INTRODUCTION

The word **manager** and the word **damager** only differ by one letter, and a small bit of work commentary has been going around for years on that pun. It compares a manager who explains the work, corrects mistakes in private, shares undue demands with others, and does not leave people less confident upon leaving, than when they arrived with one who spreads confusion, points out mistakes in public, claims the team's output as his own, and leaves people less confident upon leaving than when they arrived. It's not a sentimental comparison. It is related to the differences that have been quantified since the 1970s by industrial organisational psychologists, occupational physicians, and safety regulators, and known by various names supportive leadership, petty tyranny, abusive supervision, blame culture and just culture.

Four reasons are given that date back to the present day for attending to the subject. International guidance has changed with the World Health Organization (WHO) publishing guidance on mental health at work in September 2022 which recommends manager training as a workplace intervention, and the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) publishing ISO 45003 in June 2021, the first international guidance document to focus on psychosocial risk in occupational health and safety management. Disclosure rules have been updated. In December 2022, the European Union's Corporate

Sustainability Reporting Directive was adopted, which introduces workforce conditions into the audited corporate reporting of companies in scope. Employers can now see supervisory behaviour at a much more frequent level with the measurement changed through survey platforms, text analysis of open comments and analysis of communication metadata. The European Union AI Act, which bans emotion detection of employees in the workplace, also came into effect on 2 February 2025.

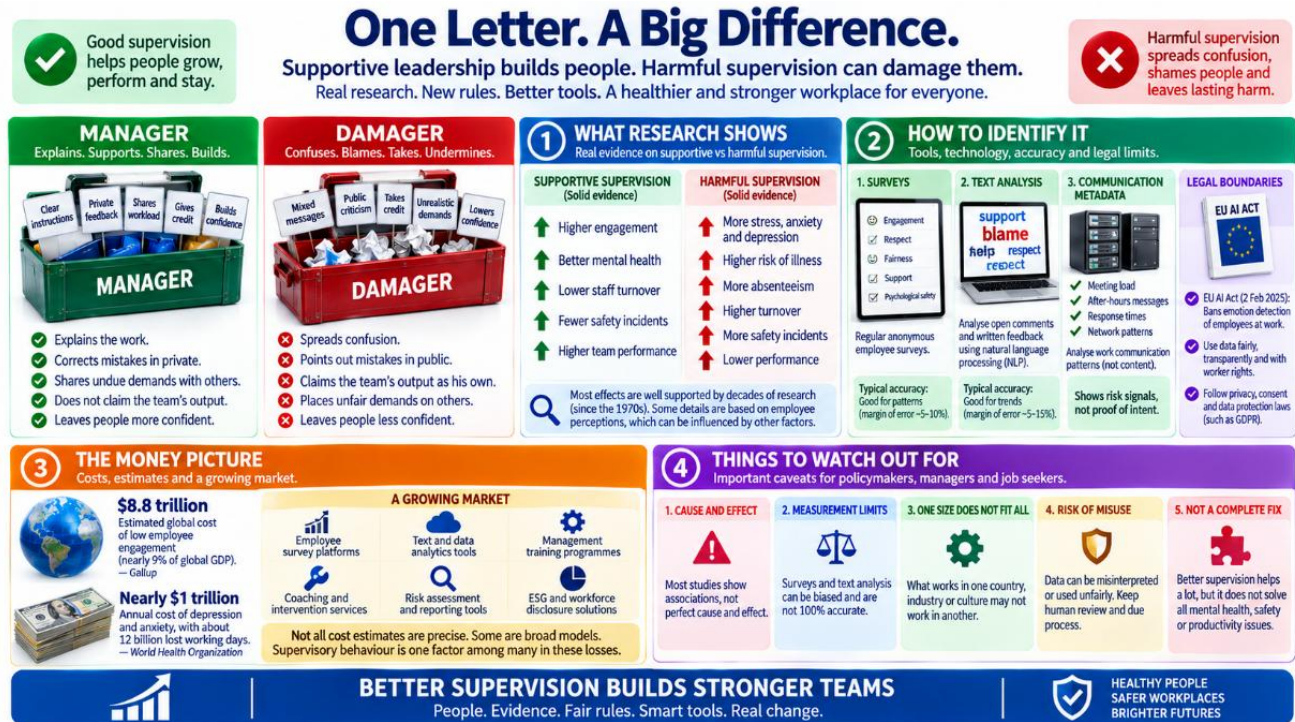


Fig -1: One Letter A Big Difference

The descriptive picture is not encouraging, while the meantime. In recent years, Gallup's global survey programme has found that one in five employees is engaged at work, and in its latest report, it estimated that low engagement is costing the world economy some 8.8 trillion US dollars in lost productivity, or nearly 9 percent of global gross domestic product. Depression and anxiety are estimated by the World Health Organization to cost almost one trillion US dollars annually, causing about 12 billion lost working days. Both are not solely due to supervision. Both are terms that refer to the pool of loss that supervisory behaviour flows into.

What follows will have four things for the readers.

1. The first is simply a summary of what research has found about hostile and supportive supervision where the evidence is solid, and where it is based on employee perception alone.
2. The second one is an explanation of the techniques and technologies to identify harmful supervision and their limits of error and legality.
3. The third is an honest treatment of money which cost estimates hold up, which don't and how a market has developed to measure and repair management behaviour.
4. The fourth is a collection of holes that any policy designer, company manager or job seeker ought to be aware of before taking any claims with a grain of salt.



2. OBJECTIVE

In this article, I would like to accomplish four things. It is based on published research to transform a common saying in the workplace into a description that can be tested to determine supervisory behaviour. It seeks to detail the methods currently employed to monitor and change manager behaviour such as survey instruments, upward feedback, incident reporting systems, network analysis of communication records and text analysis, as well as the privacy law that regulates them. It seeks to summarize the available knowledge on consequences for individuals, teams, companies, and national economies, distinguishing between those based on longitudinal medical data and those based on one single self-report questionnaire. Lastly, it attempts to identify without padding the areas where existing knowledge is lacking, so that employers and regulators don't invest in interventions whose benefits have not been tried and tested.

3. METHODOLOGY

The content has been compiled in a systematic manner based on the literature available in five categories. The first category comprised peer-reviewed studies on organisational behaviour, such as Tepper's 2000 groundbreaking work on abusive supervision, follow up studies on that work and Edmondson's 1999 study in which he introduced team psychological safety as a measurable construct. The second was occupational and environmental medicine, especially prospective cohort studies that relate to the workers assessments of their managers or job situation to subsequent measurements of disease, such as the Swedish WOLF cohort study of managerial leadership and ischaemic heart disease, published in 2009, and pooled analyses of job strain and coronary disease.

The third category were published standards and regulations containing verifiable and dated text ISO 45003 psychosocial risk, ISO 30414 human capital reporting, the European Union Regulation 376/2014 occurrence reporting in civil aviation, the International Civil Aviation Organization's Annex 19 safety management, and the Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive. The fourth was official statistics and large survey programmes, such as the series of workplace surveys carried out globally each year that led to the engagement and cost estimates, and joint estimates between the World Health Organization and the International Labour Organization. The fifth were practitioner literature on just culture only when it was possible to identify the source of such claims.

Three rules followed Verification. Only numbers that can be traced to a study, standard or official estimate are included here. If there is a disagreement about the figure, this is stated, as with the often cited figure of 23.8 billion US dollars in losses to American companies annually due to abusive supervision, which is also accompanied by a review of the figure in 2013 that challenged the sourcing of the figure. If the research design does not allow for a causal statement, then the text states this. None of the primary data were collected, nor interviews conducted, nor any company, product or brand mentioned anywhere in this article. Where the source of a figure cannot be found, it has not been rounded but omitted, and thus several figures have been omitted that are often used in management writing, but which could not be traced to a primary source.

4. TWO SUPERVISORY SCRIPTS, AND WHY THE DIFFERENCE SHOWS UP IN DATA

Remove the verbiage from the trite phrase and it's a pair of scripts for the same scenario. Some fault or error is found in the work. One supervisor asks, What in the process allowed it, was it instructions, was there something missing at the time of the decision, what would be different and prevent it from

happening again. The other asks **who** and says it in front of others and writes the name down for the next evaluation.

Both scripts give out information, but of different type and amount. The first one generates a description of the work system. The second is silent, for he that seeth a fault and can see it coming, hath learned that to cover his fault is more profitable than to make it known. W. Edwards Deming has been advocating for decades that the great majority of problems are in the system, not the person, and that this may be as high as 94 percent to 6 percent. That ratio was an assumption based on experience and should be interpreted as such, but it's the operational idea behind it that has been a constant in safety research most accidents in structured work are the result of multiple weak controls, not one reckless individual.

Two Supervisory Scripts, and Why the Difference Shows Up in Data

Same situation. Two different behaviours. Two very different outcomes.

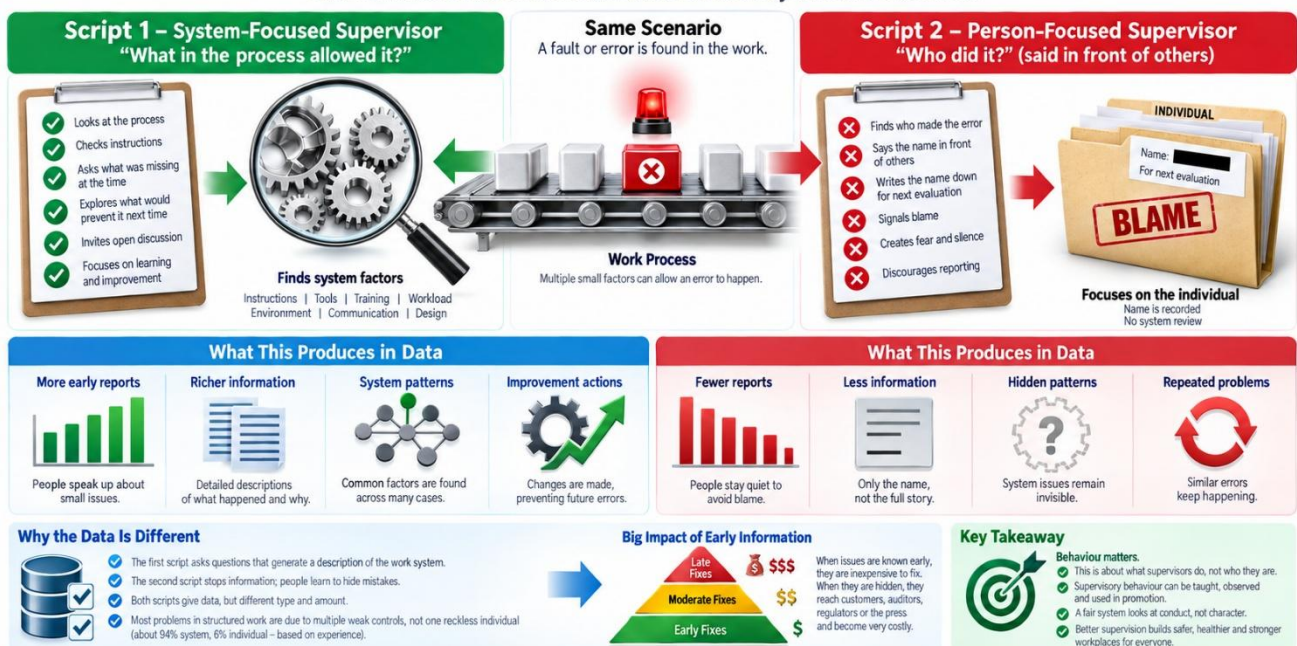


Fig –2: Comparative Analysis of Two Supervisory Scripts and Their Impact on Data Outcomes

There are also differences in the scripts in terms of how they affect the supervisor's own information provision. If a manager is informed of minor issues early on, then they can act while it is inexpensive. A manager is terrified by the team, and hears about issues from customers, auditors, regulators, or the press. In her early days in hospital this was evident that nursing units with higher rated leadership had more not fewer medication errors. The faults were in both types of unit. But it was just the reporting that was different. The difference between the two scripts is behavioural, not one is a personality, the other isn't. This has implications for practice because behaviour can be taught, seen and be a requirement for promotion, whereas character can't. It is also important from the point of view of fairness. It is popularly said that calling a supervisor a damager invites a judgement of the person. Focusing on the deliberate measurement of conduct, Tepper's research includes items related to ridicule in front of others, silent treatment, taking credit and blaming others to avoid embarrassment. A supervisor can rate high on those items when under stress and low when there is a change in workload, span of control or training. There have been several studies that indicate that supervisors who experience hostility from their own supervisors tend to be hostile downward, referred to as a trickle-down effect. The harm is very real and is

typically not invented but inherited.

5. WHAT RESEARCH CALLS ABUSIVE SUPERVISION, AND HOW IT IS MEASURED

The damaging pattern has been dubbed abusive supervision in a 2000 paper by Bennett Tepper in the Academy of Management Journal. It is deliberately a narrow definition when an employee feels that a supervisor is persistently engaging in hostile verbal and non-verbal behaviour, but not physical behaviour. The 15-item scale that accompanies the questionnaire asks staff members how often their supervisor ridicules them, tells them their thoughts or feelings are stupid, gives them the "silent treatment," breaks promises, invades their privacy, blames them so as not to embarrass him or her, or reminds them of past failures. Many of the subsequent studies, with hundreds of variants of that size, often shortened to five items, were done.

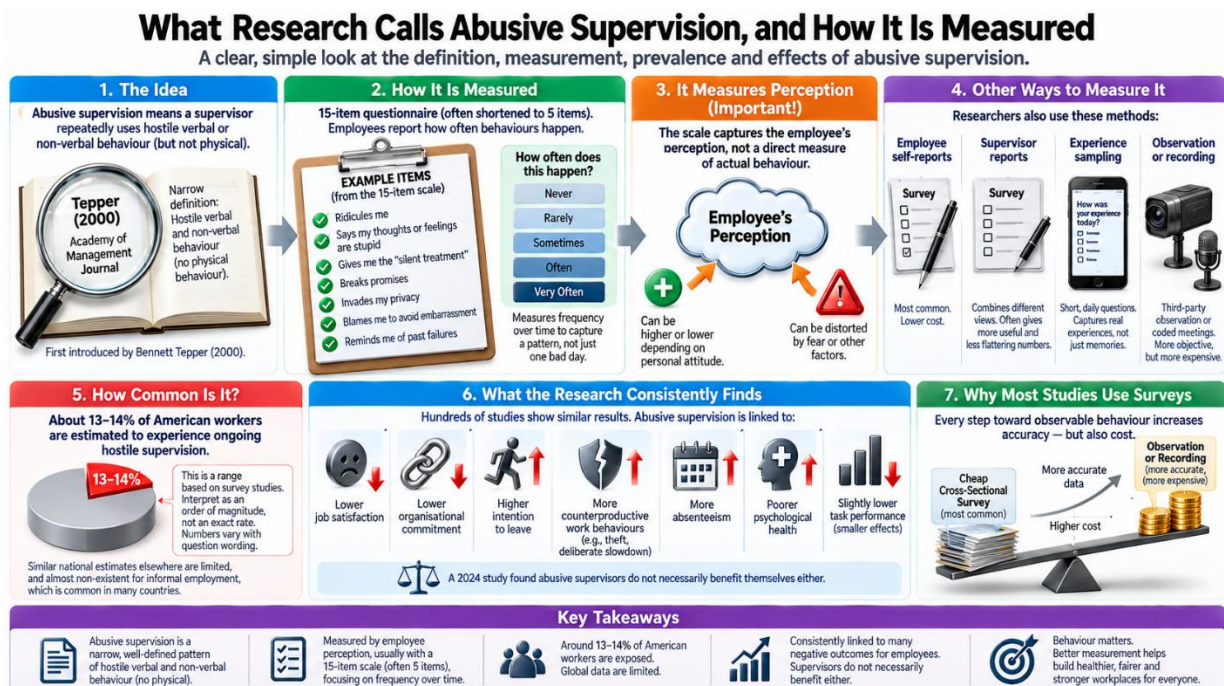


Fig -3: Root Cause Evaluation Distinguishing Between Individual Failure and System Failure

There are two aspects of the instrument that have determined everything that has been built on it. One, it is a measure of perception, not actual behaviour. Tepper and colleagues have made this clear and a 2013 review in the Journal of Organizational Behavior lambasted authors who move from supervisors were perceived to be more abusive to supervisors were more abusive. The bias can be positive or negative, depending on the employee's attitude and can be distorted by fear. Second, the scale inquiries about frequency over time, distinguishing a hostile pattern from just one bad afternoon. There are several estimates of prevalence that are commonly cited, and they estimate that approximately 13-14% of American workers are exposed to ongoing hostile supervision. That is a range based on survey work and should be interpreted as an order of magnitude, not a rate as the wording of the question varies the number considerably. Similar national estimates elsewhere in the world are limited, and virtually non-existent for informal employment, which dominates employment in many countries.

The results of literature is quite unusual in its uniformity of direction. Hundreds of samples have been

reviewed and the relationship between hostile supervision and low job satisfaction, low organisational commitment, increased intention to leave, increased counterproductive work behaviours e.g., theft, deliberate slowdown, increased absenteeism, and poor psychological health have been reported. The same associations are found when it comes to task performance, although the effect sizes are smaller. A 2024 study in Business and Society was conducted to determine if hostile supervisors are at least benefiting themselves, and the findings indicated that they don't necessarily do that. The measurement has also transcended the one questionnaire. Others use employee self-reports of abuse with supervisor reports of abuse which yields more useful and less flattering numbers. Others employ experience sampling, asking brief questions on a day to day basis, which provide information about experiences instead of memories. Third party observation or coded recording of meetings is a smaller set. Every step to observable behavior decreases the need for memory and grievance and every step increases the price of the study, which is one reason the cheap cross-sectional survey still dominates.

6. THE QUESTION THAT CHANGES THE OUTCOME WHO FAILED, OR WHAT FAILED

This popular saying is a distillation of a lot of safety research into one comparison. The manager's question is **how we fix this**. while a damager's question is **who made this mistake**. For forty years, there has been a trend away from the second question in the practice of investigation in high hazard industries, and the reasons are recorded.

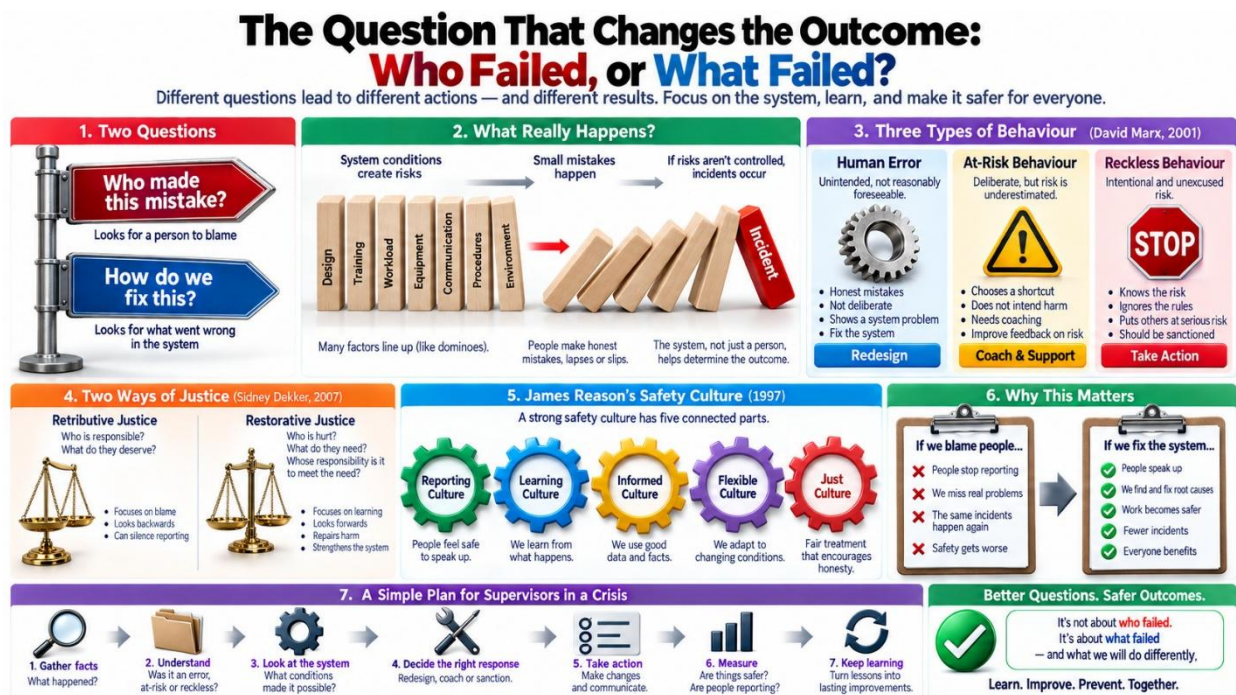


Fig -4: Root Cause Assessment Determining Whether Failure Originates from Individuals or Systems

In 1997, James Reason had proposed that most unsafe acts are honest mistakes, lapses and slips made by competent people and that it is counterproductive to punish them and that it will suppress the information the organisation needs. He proposed his model of safety culture that was a combination of a reporting culture, a learning culture, an informed culture, a flexible culture, and a just culture. The final one covers the difficult aspect a blanket amnesty for all unsafe acts is not credible or fair, as a few acts are

acts of wilful risk taking, intoxication or sabotage.

In 2001, David Marx created a model that was commissioned by the American space agency and has been widely used in the healthcare sector which made the line explicit by dividing conduct into three categories. Human error unintended, and not reasonably foreseeable by the person is an indicator for redesigning the system. At-risk behaviour is deliberate behaviour that deviates from safe practice, due to the person's underestimation of the risk and requires coaching and enhanced feedback on risk. Reckless behaviour is an intentional and unexcused risk which is known to be dangerous and should be sanctioned as such. In 2007, Sidney Dekker made a distinction between retributive justice, which poses the questions of who is responsible and what do they deserve, and restorative justice, which asks who is hurt, what do they need and whose responsibility is it to meet the need.

The significance of these differences is that they provide a regular supervisor with a plan to follow in a crisis. Who made the mistake seems to be a question of accountability and is simple to justify to a superior. It is more time consuming to sort the event into an error, at-risk choice or recklessness, involves talking to the individual involved and frequently results in an uncomfortable conclusion that the procedure is unworkable. Organisations that don't take that second path end up seeing the reporting pipeline fall apart within a year or two of implementing a safety management system, when staff see that there is a disconnect between the written policy and what happens to those who report on colleagues. This does not give any license to poor work. Transfers the question. It doesn't ask whether someone is at fault, but rather what the organisation will now do differently and makes that measure of whether the investigation was worthwhile.

7. PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY AS THE LINK BETWEEN BEHAVIOUR AND LEARNING

The construct that links supervisory behaviours to team outcomes was provided in a 1999 paper by Amy Edmondson in *Administrative Science Quarterly*. Team psychological safety is a shared belief that the team is safe to take interpersonal risks, that is, to ask a question, make a mistake, or challenge a plan will not lead to embarrassment, rejection, or punishment. This belief is typically unspoken. It's not something that team members talk about, it's something that team members do. The paper examined 30 work teams in one manufacturing company, using both surveys and interviews, and observer ratings. Psychological safety was a significant contributor to the variance in self-reported learning behaviour and approximately 30% of the variance in observer-rated learning. After adding contextual support, leader coaching and team efficacy, psychological safety continued to be a significant factor. There was also a mediational effect of learning behaviour on the effect on observer rated performance. The structural claim is that team design and leader coaching is not about behaviour, it is through behaviour.

Edmondson has been cautious about the construct's not. It's not group cohesion that can stifle dissent to the level of groupthink. It's not permissive or being positive for positive's sake. It's not about the interpersonal trust between two individuals but the property of a group. She finds learning where there's high safety and high standards, and she believes that a team can be psychologically safe and still have high standards. In 2015, an internal research programme at a large internet company, summarised publicly, identified psychological safety as the first of five key factors that set their best performing teams apart, and drove the idea into the mainstream of management practice. This publicity came at a price. Nowadays, the word is used more generically to refer to comfort, and some employers have embraced this as a slogan but the behaviours that create comfort remain unchanged.



Fig -5: Psychological Safety as a Mediating Mechanism Between Behavior and Learning Outcomes

The mechanism is provided by the construct for the manager/damager contrast. The hurtful actions in Tepper's scale are the very same actions that will help a team learn that it's unsafe to speak up public humiliation, silent treatment, reminders of past failures, blame passed down to the team. Each episode is witnessed by those not intended, and a dozen people who were merely present may be changed in their behaviour by a single public humiliation. The other way around building behaviours. When a supervisor simply admits that he or she was wrong, expresses gratitude to the individual who pointed out the issue, and outlines what will change, he or she is making the personal risk very clear that it is survivable. In quantifiable terms, they are increasing the odds that the next issue will be reported before it becomes a big issue.

8. CREDIT, ATTRIBUTION, AND THE ECONOMICS OF TAKING THE TEAM'S WORK

The popular saying **takes credit for the work of others**, goes hand in hand with **shifts blame** and the two have the same psychological tendency. Since the 1970s, there have been several studies on attribution, where subjects consistently attribute their own successes to their own ability and their failures to the situation. Supervisors are not immune and the bias has greater repercussions, since they typically have the authority to set the tone for the upward flow of information. It's a very simple mechanism. A project is summarised by a supervisor to senior management, and the summary is written in the first person singular. Contributors names are not retained as they ascend the hierarchy. What a junior employee suggests at a meeting is discussed again by the supervisor a week later and as if it's his idea. Employee voice studies show that the success of an idea depends greatly on whether the person who comes up with it is credible to those above, and an intermediary can be very powerful in simply changing the name of the person who had the idea, without lying.

It's easier to describe the costs than to price them. The money of internal labour markets is credit. Getting noticed by decision makers who don't often see the work is the key to promotions, project assignments,

and pay raises. If that visibility is lost when a supervisor is involved, the earning path of the employee involved is altered and the firm's ability to recognize who's capable is as well. If a company is promoting based on appropriate credit, it is promoting based on corrupted data and each time the credit is corrupted, a new group of people will have their credit records corrupted by the same person.

Credit, Attribution, and the Economics of Taking the Team's Work

When contributions lose their names, people lose opportunities — and organisations make worse decisions.

Same work. Different story. A simple look at how credit can change hands, why it matters, and how to stop it.



Fig -6: Credit Attribution and the Recognition of Team Contributions in Collaborative Work Environments

There is a low cost in discretionary effort. Contributions that aren't apparent in the formal record are based on goodwill helping a colleague with a problem, documenting a process, mentoring a new hire. These acts have been shown to be sensitive to perceived fairness in all studies of OCB. When staff feel that they have done enough to ensure that unrecorded work is covered by another member of staff, then they focus on what is measured and attributable. Resilience does not appear stable for an extended period, but output can. Another wrinkle in the research on leader member exchange. Supervisors develop varying quality relationships with other team members and provide more information, trust, and opportunity to in group members. Not all differentiation is unfair, as some is in keeping with the true difference in reliability. It can be harmful if the criterion is based on loyalty to the supervisor, and if the out group is unaware of the criterion. The most inexpensive defence is transparent records of what is done by whom, and any team can have them, if they want.

9. THE TOOLKIT FOR SEEING SUPERVISORY BEHAVIOUR

There are now several ways for an employer to monitor supervisory behavior, with each of these having known shortcomings. The workhorse is still the fixed item engagement survey. The most widely used instrument is a 12-item set that has been validated on millions of respondents in tens of thousands of business units and has published meta-analyses which correlate unit-level scores with productivity, turnover, safety incidents, and customer measures. Knowing what is expected, having materials to do the work, receiving recognition, and having someone at work who encourages development are actually measures of manager behaviour as experienced by the person.

Short cycle pulse surveys are surveys that are administered a few questions a week or month. The benefit they have is timing when a team's climate changes is evident within weeks, not a year later. They are quick to fatigue, and slow to game when they don't see any activity after their responses. Multi-source feedback, also known as 360-degree feedback, gathers feedback from colleagues, direct reports, and supervisors. It has moderate predictive validity for behaviour change and only then if the ratings are used as a basis for coaching and not payment.

The Toolkit for Seeing Supervisory Behaviour

Different tools give different clues. Each has strengths and limits. The real insight comes when several tools tell the same story.

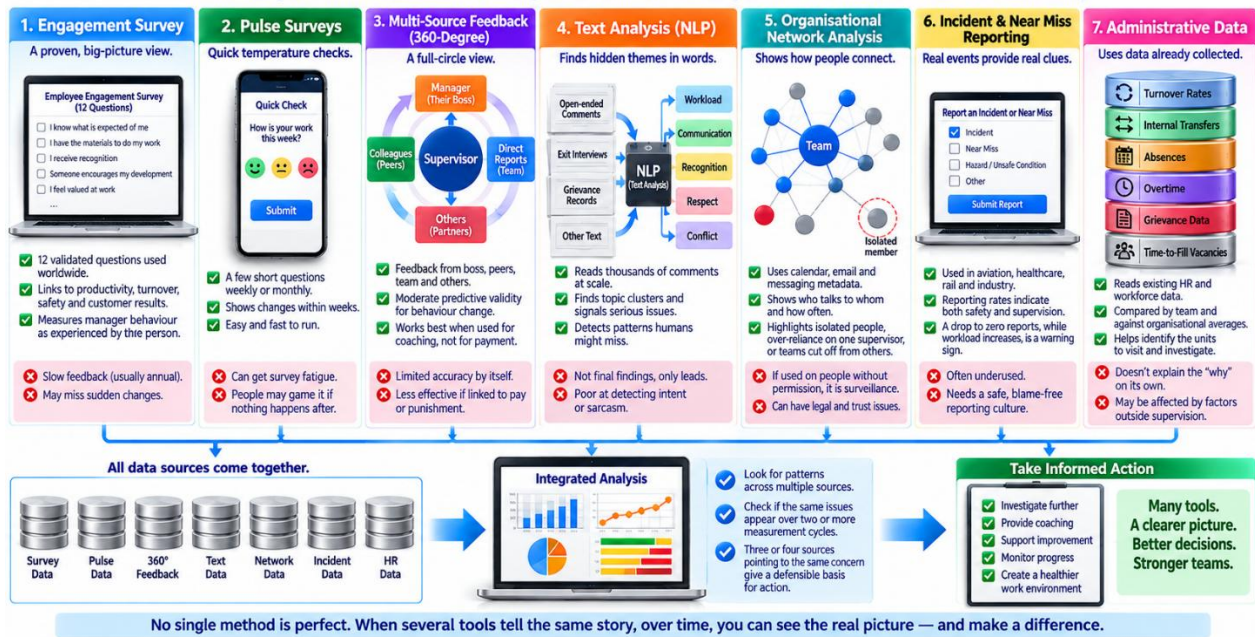


Fig -7: Framework and Assessment Tools for Identifying Supervisory Behavior

The scope has been broadened by text analysis. NLP can code open-ended survey comments, exit interview notes and grievance records at scale to generate topic clusters and severity signals that human readers would not be able to detect in tens of thousands of comments. These outputs are not findings but leads for investigation with reasonable accuracy about topic detection and poor accuracy with regard to intent and sarcasm detection.

Organisational network analysis involves analyzing and visualizing the metadata found in calendars, email, and messaging to understand who is communicating with whom, and how often. If applied at the aggregate level, it can show a team that has stopped communicating with other teams, a supervisor that is the only one that communicates with anyone, or a member that is isolated. If it is used on people without their permission, it is surveillance and the legal and trust implications are obvious.

Incident and near miss reporting systems are common in aviation, healthcare, rail, and heavy industry, but are underused sources of management information. Reporting rates are traditionally interpreted as a safety signal, and as a supervision signal. When unit reports drop to zero, and workload increases, it's telling its employer something about its supervisor.

Administrative data fills in the missing pieces. The team turnover data, internal transfers requested, absences, overtime distribution, grievance data, and time-to-fill data for vacancies are already collected for other purposes. They are read by team and compared to organisational averages, and they identify

the units to visit. None of these methods can single-handedly identify a damaging supervisor. If three or four of them converge, and this convergence happens over two or more cycles of measurement, then this is a defensible basis for action.

10. WHERE MEASUREMENT CROSSES THE LINE

The same weapons that can be used to destroy a bad boss can be used to destroy an employee, and the law is starting to set some limits. The European Union's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) requires that workplace monitoring is based on a lawful purpose, it is proportionate to that purpose and that those who are monitored are aware of the monitoring. Power imbalance makes consent a weak basis in employment and employers typically rely on legitimate interest and should document a balancing exercise. Some countries impose worker representation requirements and in some, a works council must approve the monitoring of technology.

Where Measurement Crosses the Line

Technology can reveal a lot about work — but there are legal, ethical and scientific limits. The same tools that can expose a bad boss can also harm an employee. Here's how the rules, risks and protections fit together.

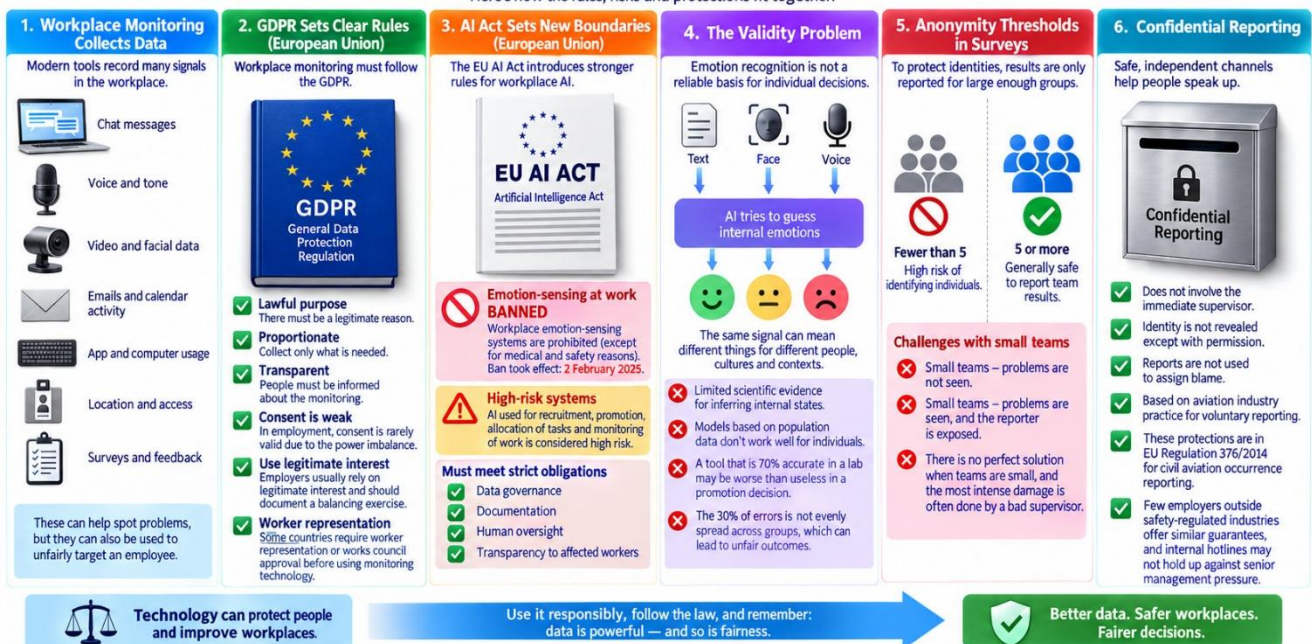


Fig -8: Measurement Boundaries: Identifying the Point at Which Evaluation Becomes Overreach

The Artificial Intelligence Act introduces new, more precise boundaries. Workplace emotion sensing systems are banned except for medical and safety reasons, and the bans took effect on 2 February 2025. Systems for recruitment, promotion, allocation of tasks and monitoring of work are considered high risk, and consequently obligations for data governance, documentation, human oversight, and transparency to workers affected by these systems. Not only is there a validity issue, but now there is a legal issue for anyone who wants to use sentiment analysis of team chat or voice tone analysis in performance reviews. The validity issue is one that should be given consideration on its own merits. There is limited scientific evidence to support the inference of internal states from text, face, or voice. The literature on emotion recognition suggests that the relation between the observable signals and the felt emotion is different for different individuals, different cultures, and different contexts, and therefore, models of emotion recognition that are based on population statistics are not suitable for individual decisions. A 70%

accurate tool in a lab may be worse than useless in a promotion decision as the 30% of errors is not evenly spread across groups.

Anonymity thresholds are the applied protection in survey research. Most organisations only report team level results if the group that's responding is large enough to not identify individual responses, typically 5 or more. It breaks down in small teams, and there is no neat answer, where the most intense damage is done by a bad supervisor. Small teams up problems are not seen; small teams up problems are seen, and reporter is exposed. Confidential channels help. The aviation industry has experience with voluntary reporting and the protection that it must afford, including a process that does not involve the immediate supervisor, a commitment to not revealing identity except with permission, and a prohibition on using the report to assign blame. Such protections are now in binding law with European Union Regulation 376/2014 for civil aviation occurrence reporting. Few employers, except those in safety regulated industries, have anything like this for supervisory behavior and even those that do have in house hotlines usually don't think the guarantees of confidentiality will hold up against a senior manager's wrath.

11. HEALTH EFFECTS THAT APPEAR IN MEDICAL RECORDS

The best evidence of the importance of supervision is not from opinion surveys. It is based on cohort studies, where employees themselves assessed their managers or the conditions of their work and then tracked the employees over the years in medical registers.



Fig -9: Health Outcomes and Clinical Effects Documented in Medical Records

The Swedish WOLF study is the best single illustration. About 3,100 men working in the Stockholm area, responded to questions concerning their managers and their ratings of clarity, information, feedback, and support. During a mean follow-up of 9.7 years, there were 74 cases of ischaemic heart disease. The lower the risk, the higher the leadership scores, and the longer the time the same workers spent in the same workplace, the lower the hazard ratios, which were adjusted age to range from 0.76 for one year of



employment to 0.61 for four years. This was true when the researchers accounted for other risk factors such as education, social class, income, physical load, smoking, exercise, body mass index, blood pressure, lipids, fibrinogen, and diabetes. This was the same with the analysis limited to acute myocardial infarction and cardiac death. The study was done on men in one country with few events and should not be interpreted as an agreed amount.

The general trend of work conditions research is similar. The pooled analyses of European cohort data, which includes nearly 200,000 subjects, show that job strain high demands and low control is linked to an increased risk of CHD by about 20–25%, and a population attributable fraction of a few percent. Demand and control are in part determined the organisation is designed, and in part determined each day by the individual who schedules the work. In 2016, it was estimated that approximately 745,000 deaths were due to ischaemic heart disease and stroke, caused by working 55 hours or more per week, according to joint estimates by the World Health Organization and the International Labour Organization published in 2021. Again, usually it is a supervisor who determines those hours.

There is more evidence on mental health, and it is primarily self-reported, and thus not as robust. Burn-out has been included in the eleventh edition of the International Classification of Diseases (ICD-11) by the World Health Organization (WHO) as an occupational phenomenon, not a medical condition, and is defined as a state of exhaustion, mental disengagement from work and diminished professional effectiveness. This framing puts responsibility on the level of working conditions. There are two cautions to be taken. Reverse causation is possible as those who are already ill might be more critical of managers. But a good manager will not be able to compensate for lack of staff, unsafe equipment, or low pay. Supervisory behaviour is one of several factors that can influence employee health, it is a factor that affects health over the years, and it can be seen in hard outcomes if the studies are well designed to reveal

12. WHAT IT COSTS, AND WHICH COST FIGURES SURVIVE SCRUTINY

Money arguments are more likely to propel organisations than ethical arguments, and so the cost literature associated with damaging supervision needs to be handled carefully. There is one number that stands out in the number of citations 23.8 billion US dollars in losses to American corporations, because of absenteeism, healthcare costs, and lost productivity, which can be attributed. It's been drummed into the practitioners head for almost 20 years in journals, textbooks, and practitioner literature. It also has poor to fair holding qualities. A 2013 review in the Journal of Organizational Behavior questioned the assumptions on which the figure was based, determined that there was no direct link between the sources and the concept of abusive supervision in the research, and investigated the sources of the figure. It is fair to say that there is no defensible national level aggregate cost estimate for hostile supervision. The omission of that caveat in citing the number is a little bit of misinformation which this literature has done thousands of times.

However, costs can still be added on a bottom-up basis, as individual employers should do. Replacement cost for an employee leaving is the cost of recruiting, interviewing time, onboarding, productivity ramp of new employee and the temporary burden on other employees. The usual estimates are based on a few months to a year of salary according to the skill level and any organisation can work out its own estimate from its own records and not from a benchmark. Overtime premiums to make up for absences, handling grievances, and other costs are all in accounts already. A suppressed near-miss report is one that has an expected cost probability of the eventual accident times consequence that persuaded aviation to

protect reporters.



Fig -10: Cost Analysis and Validation of Economic Impact Estimates

The defensibility is wider than supervision, the aggregate figures. The figure of 8.8 trillion US dollars, which is nearly 9 per cent of global gross domestic product (GDP), is an estimate from a survey organisation's 2023 global report and considers lost productivity for all reasons. The estimated cost of depression and anxiety to the world, according to the World Health Organization, is about one trillion US dollars per year and includes lost working days, which are estimated to be about 12 billion per year. Supervision is a source to both pools. It is not known what percentage it is. The good news is one randomized trial is worth mentioning, and that's because it's rare. In 2017, a cluster randomized study in an Australian fire and rescue service provided a four-hour mental health training session to managers, and found that managers in the intervention group were less likely to be on work-related sick leave 6 months after the training, with a return on investment estimated to be between 10 and 1. The results of a single trial in a single occupation should not form the basis for general statements about training returns, but this is the sort of study that the field needs much more of, not evidence for manager training pays.

13. THE MARKET THAT HAS GROWN AROUND MANAGER BEHAVIOUR

The measurement and repair of supervisory conduct is now a commercial sector knowing the logic of the revenue helps to explain which claims get amplified.

Subscription revenue is the biggest source of revenue. Employee listening platforms are usually paid for on a per employee per month basis for survey administration, dashboards, and benchmarking. The durable asset is the benchmarks because as soon as a provider has comparable data on thousands of organisations, so do customers pay for the comparison as much as for the survey and the costs for switching increase as the historical trend lines are within the platform. Consultancies offer diagnosis and manager development programmes at day rates, many of which are based on proprietary instruments, which are licensed, to create additional revenue. Executive coaching is an hourly service, usually provided

to senior managers and therefore the person who has the widest span of control over frontline employees is the least likely to receive it.

The Market That Has Grown Around Manager Behaviour

Measuring and improving supervisor behaviour is now a real industry. Here's how the technology, money and rules fit together.



Fig -11: The Growth of the Market for Managerial Behavior Assessment, Development, and Improvement

There are different prices for the same risk in adjacent industries. Supervisory behaviours are part of the outcome that insurers are pricing for employment practices liability, group health and workers compensation cover and some insurers are now providing premium incentives for documented psychosocial risk management. Legal services bill for grievance investigation and litigation defence a market that expands when prevention doesn't work.

Measurement is a necessity that is established by disclosure rules. The 2018 ISO 30414 provides guidance on internal and external reporting of human capital metrics such as turnover, absence, investment in training and leadership indicators. In 2020, American Securities regulations were updated to include a description of the human capital resources of the registrants and the methods used to manage them, but not necessarily which ones. The European Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD) and its reporting standards on own workforce venture further into the audited space and audit requires data lineage, definitions, and controls. Each rule makes a soft management issue, a reporting requirement and a budget.

There are two aspects of this market to dampen enthusiasm. First, the motivation to report positive results is on the part of the remedy's promoter, and many of the reported results of the management interventions have not been peer-reviewed or independently replicated. Second, measurement is a more inexpensive commodity than change. Installation of a platform can take place in weeks. Rewriting promotion criteria to make supervisory behavior part of the criteria is slow, contentious, dull, and is the part that will make the difference if any of the measurement is worthwhile. The buyers who buy the dashboard without the extra effort should anticipate the trend that is seen in safety management systems a spike in reporting, then a drop-off in reporting when staff realizes that nothing happens because of what they report.

14. SELECTION, TRAINING, AND SPAN OF CONTROL

Supervisory behaviour is not a static characteristic of a manager, but a management variable, which is influenced by three levers who becomes a supervisor, what is taught to him, and how much is asked of him.



Fig -12: Key Management Factors: Selection, Training, and Span of Control

Selection is the least studied. Supervisors are often promoted because they are good at their technical work, but the new job involves assigning work, making decisions, settling disputes, and providing feedback and that's not always an accurate predictor of success. Structured interviews that include behavioural questions, situational judgement tests and work sample exercises are all methods with reasonable predictive validity for these demands that are offered by the personnel selection research. A large re-analysis of validity evidence that was published in 2022 put structured interviews in the group of stronger single predictors of job performance and lowered previous estimates. Many organisations don't have a competency requirement for a first-level supervisor and the use of such processes for internal promotion is rare.

There is some, but not a lot of, training evidence. The manager training to increase knowledge, attitudes and behaviour towards staff mental health was recommended in the World Health Organization's 2022 guidelines on mental health at work, and evidence of an increase in manager knowledge and supportive behaviour was found. Length is not the key short, specific, behaviorally framed sessions which rehearse conversations are more likely to change behaviour than lecture-based leadership theory courses. Feedback loops are important, too a manager who gets the outcomes of the team twice a year and has a coach to discuss the results is in a different learning position than one who gets a report and no conversation.

Levers organisations most often overlook, and individuals are blamed for are span of control and

workload. If a supervisor is responsible for 20 direct reports and has a full individual workload, then they can't have one to one meetings regularly, and behaviours that create psychological safety are time consuming. The flattening of structures reduces the cost of headcount and increases spans, and the impact of the flattening on supervision is hardly ever documented against the decision to flatten. The trickle down study of hostile supervision indicates another impact. Hostility at one level is likely to manifest itself as hostility at the next level. There are two details of structure that complete the picture. First, if an organisation only looks at conduct when it's time for promotion, there is no way for the supervisor to come back from a bad pattern, some employers now take conduct feedback out of pay decisions, which increases the likelihood that the feedback is genuine. Secondly, staff members must have an escape. The internal transfer rights without the current supervisor's approval restrict the amount of time any individual can keep a team hostage and the rate of transfers requested is a good early indicator of where a problem lies.

15. NATIONAL ECONOMIES, PUBLIC SERVICES, AND DAILY LIFE

The overall picture of the importance of taking supervision seriously is based on three links between team-level behaviour and national accounts.



Fig -13: The Economic Foundations of Public Services and Everyday Experiences

The first one is the supply of labour. While voluntary quitting due to supervisory behavior rarely leads to a loss of labor force participation, it does cause periods of unemployment, underemployment and sometimes even a change of profession. In several countries, health systems have reported losses of doctors and nurses due to factors including climate management. Early exit is a loss of public investment in a clinician who has been trained for several years in a country. Also work in occupational health has been connected to disability pension and long term sick leave, which both are a cost to public budgets



due to poor management climate.

The second is productivity. The amount of output per hour is dependent on the solution of problems at the level at which they arise. An early fault reporting, process change suggesting, and early ignorance admitting workforce operates closer to the technical potential than a concealing workforce. It's not a statement of motivation only. It's a statement about the flow of information and it's what causes the differences in customer outcomes and quality to exist at the unit level in the same company, with the same technology, the same pay plan.

The third stream is for health expenditure and public security. The cost of mental illness and workplace injury because of supervisory behaviour falls on public health systems and social insurance, in part. Psychosocial hazards are now being considered by regulators as normal occupational hazards and as such, are being assessed and controlled. Since December 2015, the Japanese government has mandated that workplaces with 50 or more employees conduct an annual stress check on their employees. Some European inspectors report on psychosocial risk in their regular inspections and the United Kingdom's national management standards define 6 areas of management, including demands, control, support, relationships, role clarity, and change, which could be interpreted as a description of the practice of supervision.

The impact is down to earth and unglamorous in everyday life. A week's work planned by a supervisor saves a parent from last minute cancelations of childcare. One who writes it down will save the evening of redoing a misunderstood task. When someone clearly communicates the characteristics of good work, the low level anxiety of guessing is eliminated. On the other hand, persistent, negative supervision permeates families, asleep, in temperament, in family risk-taking e.g. taking out a mortgage or enrolling in a course of study. These are the transmission points where management behaviour is not a private grievance but becomes public.

16. FAIRNESS TO THE SUPERVISOR RATING BIAS, DUE PROCESS, AND THE COST OF MISCLASSIFICATION

The consistent application of the just culture logic is the extension of the just culture logic upwards. An organization that reacts to a bad team survey by firing the supervisor is using another instrument to ask the question, **Who failed**.

There are three sources of error which merit consideration. One is **rating bias**. Performance appraisal research and research on how students rate teachers reveal that the same behaviour is rated differently depending on the rater's expectations for the person being rated, and that the rating of such behaviour is documented to differ by gender, such as the rating of assertiveness, directness, and corrective feedback. Women, younger age, and minority status in their work environment are risk factors for supervisors to perceive ordinary firmness as hostility. This problem is inherited by upward feedback, which doesn't provide any avenue for looking at the problem since it is anonymous.

The second is the small numbers issue. Two of the respondents are not very happy and in a team of six, they move an average dramatically. If one of those respondents has recently been given a bad appraisal, the arrow may point from the appraisal to the rating, rather than from the conduct to the rating. Single cycle survey results on small teams have too large an error margin to be used for personnel decisions and are routinely used for the same.

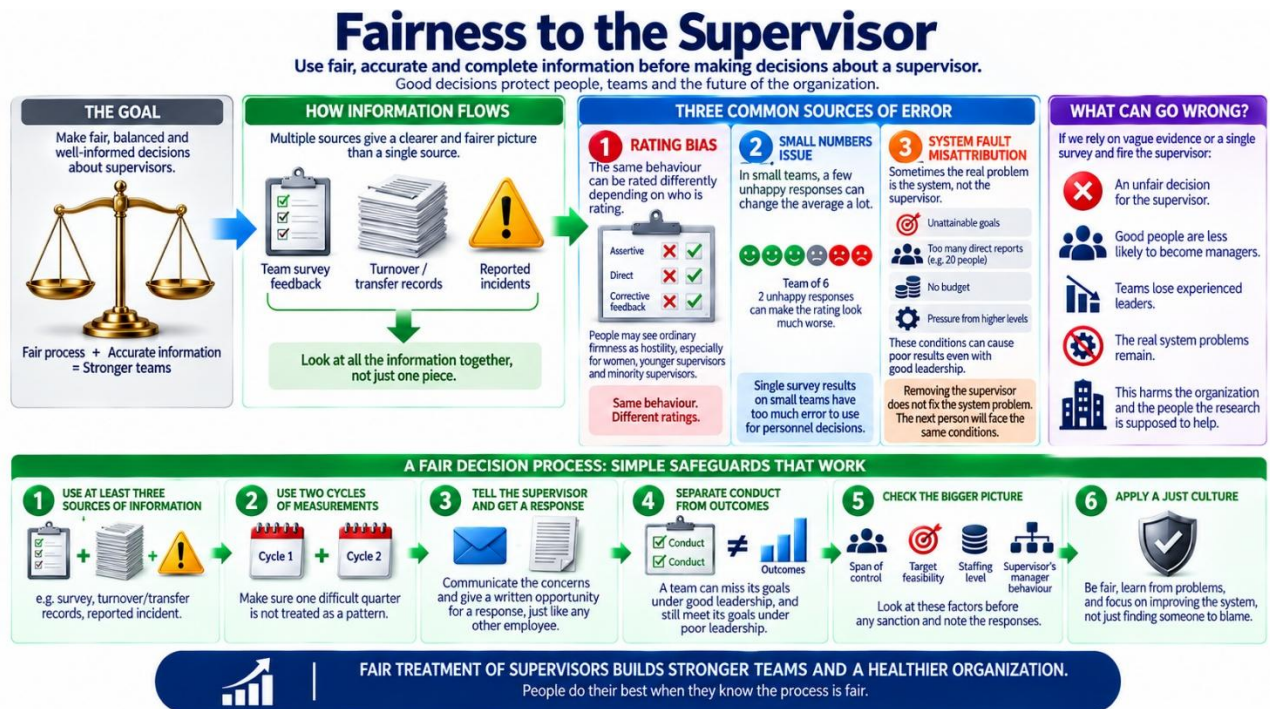


Fig -14: Fairness to the Supervisor

The third is when the system fault is misattributed. The observable signature of a damaging manager is unclear expectations, no one to one meetings, hasty decisions, and employee turnover, all of which will result from a supervisor who gives an unattainable goal, 20 direct reports, and no budget. That person's removal does not affect anything, as the next person that is appointed will have the same conditions. Research into transmission of hostile supervision suggests that the pressure that is exerted at one level is likely to manifest at the next level down, so that the behaviour that is seen at the front line is often two or three levels above.

Modest, workable safeguards are in use and exist in other contexts. Ensure that there is at least three independent sources of information e.g. survey, turnover/transfer records, reported incident before acting. Need two cycles of measurements, to make sure that one difficult quarter is not considered a pattern. Communicate the nature of the concern to the supervisor and provide a written opportunity for a response, as with any other employee, for disciplinary action. Don't confuse and conflate assessment of conduct with assessment of outcomes, because a team can fail to achieve its objectives under good leadership, and achieve its objectives under bad leadership. Prior to any sanction, look at span of control, target feasibility, staffing level, and behaviour of supervisor's own manager, and note the responses. Not only is there unfairness to one person in the cost of getting this wrong. When supervisors are fired based on vague evidence, workers understand that there is no process of protection for those who are managers and good candidates are less inclined to seek managerial positions. This is harmful to the very population that the research is supposed to help.

17. WHAT ORDINARY READERS CAN DO WITH THIS INFORMATION

For non-specialists the research provides three items that can be used vocabulary, a list of observable signals, and a short list of actions.

What Ordinary Readers Can Do With This Information

Three tools. Many signs. Practical actions. A fairer, healthier workplace for everyone.



Fig -15: Practical Applications and Actionable Insights for Readers

The vocabulary is important as naming a pattern alters the way the pattern is talked about. A co-worker who claims that a boss's behavior fits the characteristics outlined in the definition of abusive supervision occurring for months and toward multiple targets is making a different claim than a co-worker who claims that the boss is unpleasant. If a supervisor, using the definitions of the industries that is regulated by safety standards, can state that an incident appears to be a human error and not recklessness, then there has a defensible reason for coaching and not disciplining.

The signals that are observed are open to all within a team. The lowest cost measure is meeting behaviour who talks, who is interrupted, whoever admits they are wrong, when bad news comes early or late. Next, departure patterns when you have people leaving your team at a higher rate than similar teams, you're saying something. Documentation habits are a third, since it is more difficult to accuse a supervisor of stealing credit if he or she maintains written records of the decisions and contributions.

Four are worthy of mention in the case of actions. Maintain an objective record of contributions and decisions, specific and dated, and communicate progress outside of the immediate supervisor. Utilize any confidential communication that may be available and determine in advance if it goes over your manager's head. Know what is protected in your jurisdiction rules of conduct in the workplace, data protection rights and whistleblower laws vary widely from country to country and are typically more applicable than internal policies. Let the decision to stay or leave be an economic decision, including health cohort evidence suggests that the length of exposure is important.

Those who select or train for supervisory positions can take early action. The skills that lead to positive results are specific enough to rehearse in advance, such as describing in writing what the desired results are, providing constructive feedback in private and in a timely manner, separating the person from the mistake, assigning work openly, crediting others up the chain of command, and asking what the team needs, not what they should have done. Even though most vocational education or business graduates will be supervising someone within 10 years, vocational education and business degrees still spend so



much time on finance and strategy that they don't even spend as much on any of the above. The generational point is without adornment. All people entering the workforce are now on the road of being managed, and likely for some years of managing. If the gap between the two supervisory scripts is teachable and evidence shows it is at least in part, then it is more cost effective to teach it early rather than to **put out fires** later.

18. RESEARCH GAP

There are five gaps, which restrict the responsibly claimable on this subject.

The causal identification is the biggest. Most of the literature on abusive supervision is based on cross-sectional surveys where the same employee reports on the abusive supervisor's behavior and their outcomes at one time. That design cannot distinguish between the supervisory effect and the disposition of employees, and it is not able to set the direction. Longitudinal cohort studies have been conducted in the field of occupational health but generally have assessed overall leadership quality or job strain and the best single study on managerial leadership and heart disease was conducted on men in one country with 74 heart disease cases. Few studies have been conducted that are random or quasi-experimental with a change of supervisory behaviour and a follow-up to determine the results; the 2017 cluster randomized experiment of mental health training for managers is one example of such a study and is limited to one occupation and a short time horizon.

Measurement is an amalgamation of perception and behaviour. Current scales query employees about their perceptions and authors have been called out on their writing about observed behavior as if it were measured. Combination designs that involve employee self-reports and supervisor self-reports, or observer coding and our administrative traces are rare and more expensive.

Cost accounting is not well developed. The widely quoted total number has been called into question and there is no substitute. There are bottom-up methods, but these are not generally used or reported partly since the numbers are commercially sensitive. The lack of credible cost estimates will continue to make prevention lose out in the budget battle with activities that have clear returns.

Coverage is narrow. The evidence is mostly from North America, Western Europe and a few from East Asia and Australasia, and is mostly in the formal sector where there are written contracts. Informal work, agricultural labour, domestic work, or small family businesses which provide most of the jobs in many countries is hardly covered by the picture. There is recognition of cultural differences in the interpretation of directness and hierarchy in the literature, and they are seldom measured using similar instruments in different settings.

There is virtually no research or literature on algorithmic supervision in relation to this evidence base. Software is used to schedule, allocate, monitor, and sometimes terminate the work in platform and warehouse operations. Behaviours that constitute damaging supervision, such as making decisions without explanation, making individual performances public, and not providing a way to ask a question, can be created by a system in which no one is hostile. This categorization of such systems as high risk in the Artificial Intelligence Act, makes it a duty to assess them, yet the research to define a fair automated supervisor is just beginning.

The 6th gap is institutional not scientific. There is no broadly accepted metric for disclosure of supervisory quality, so that even if an employer gathers such information, investors, regulators, and job applicants cannot compare employers on this factor.

19. CONCLUSION

As the pun in this article's title suggests, it's a measurable thing. A supervisor who asks, **how was it possible that this fault occurred**, corrects in private, allocates work transparently and names contributors upward, creates a team that reports problems early, learns from them and stays. A supervisor who asks **who did it wrong** and publicly reveals the answer and takes the credit for the team will create a team that hides, narrowly complies and leaves. The difference is between behaviour and result, provided by Edmondson's work, and rules for action in the event of error, without amnesty or scapegoat, provided by the just culture models of Reason, Marx and Dekker, and the difference is measured in recorded illness over years, not weeks, as shown by cohort studies in occupational medicine.

Wherever it is not possible to assert, it must be said clearly. The most frequently cited cost is not borne out by an analysis of the sources. Estimates of prevalence for hostile supervision are based on the wording of the surveys, which fluctuate the numbers. Most outcome studies focus on employee perceptions and not on supervisor behaviors and cannot exclude reverse causation. Evidence outside of high income formal employment is limited, evidence of software doing supervisory functions is even less.

The gaps do not need to be closed to impact the practical implications. Employers can work out their own replacement costs, know who is absent by team, have a reporting system that does not go through the immediate supervisor, have a set of rules about conduct for promotion into supervisory positions and not have a span of control that is too great for regular individual attention to be arithmetically feasible. As some regulators have started to do, psychosocial hazards can be regulated as they would other hazards such as noise and chemicals. The specific behaviours can be taught as most of the graduates will be supervising someone in the next 10 years and not many are taught how.

The empirical part of what needs to be done is still to be done. There is a need for intervention studies that manipulate supervisory behaviour, and that follow outcomes for years, for measurement to be conducted directly on behaviour, not just perception, for cost estimates to be based on administrative data and be openly published, for data from countries and forms of work not currently represented in the literature, and for a common language to describe the quality of supervision that could be used by investors and job seekers. Until this work exists, the most honest claim is this the behavioural distinction between leading a team and hurting a team is very real, it is partially teachable and the organisations that measure it will know something that others don't.

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