Is it Me?
Pressures at the Workplace

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Abstract

Mistreatment in the working environment is a topic we cover in management studies, and, generally the cases discussed are sexual harassment and gender issues, which are classical textbook, leaving less room to other types of mistreatment at the workplace. After collecting some of the quotes from various respondents, we decided to look into the topic and study it thoroughly, hoping that there could be a pattern identified, or some suggested action drawn to help the ones mistreated protect and stand up for themselves. Interviewing our respondents, we identified several issues that were mostly repeated and classified them into the following categories: inefficiency when working, difficulty to prove misbehavior, hating the organization, changing nothing even after leaving. The article attempts to explain these categories and show that they are common and not the fault of a single worker incapability. After explaining the triggers and typical reaction, the article provides some of the possible ways to avoid mistreatment and protect from ones who exercise it. We believe that this article increases awareness of possible workplace mistreatment and helps protect from it.

Keywords: bullying, employee mistreatment, psychopath, work performance
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Introduction

Workplace performance is one of the determinants of success of any organization and in order to make sure performance is high, every management theory and consultant suggests that necessary conditions be created for the employees to work efficiently. However, there may be many factors that create discomfort of negatively affecting the performance of workers, pressure of mistreatment being among them. Unfortunately, the pressure and stress created by the mistreatment of an employee by especially the senior or superior position is the pressure that is not widely discussed, at least with the ones who are the source of pressure, in our case the superiors. Instead, the employees who really care about their performance start questioning themselves in the decreased performance and inability to deliver the results adding more stress into their current condition. This was the case with our ten respondents and having received detailed explanation and their side of the story, it was decided to study the topic thoroughly. We believe that by acknowledging the source of this pressure and externalizing the blame for decreased performance, the employees will be able to objectively analyze their actions and the position in order to help themselves become more focused, goal oriented and eventually stop blaming themselves. We believe, acceptance of an external source of pressure will help them open up with their problem for discussion with peers or even supervisors leading to more open and honest communication in the organization, giving a chance for resolution of the inconveniences created from this pressure.

Aims of the Research

The aim of the research is to identify several key issues that are common among the individual cases of the respondents. This allows us to classify the commonalities into result categories that eventually lead to the decreased performance of the employees. In order to study the reasons of the pressure, the research focuses on the following categories of the outcome: inefficiency when working; difficulty to prove misbehavior; hating the organization; changing nothing even after leaving. Research attempts to prove that the above mentioned end statements are not a fault of a single worker incapability. In doing so, the research is aimed to explain the triggers and typical reactions in the workplace,

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when particular respondents are under pressure. In the end the research provides some of the possible ways to avoid the mistreatment and protect from ones who exercise it, by increasing the awareness of possible workplace mistreatment.

Research Methodology

Researchers identified ten respondents who had left the working environment due to the pressure at work from colleagues and superiors and, as a result, experienced the decrease in the work performance. As a means to explain the reasons of decreased work performance, all of ten respondents put a blame on their own actions and perception of the actions during their working period. The interviews were conducted in two stages: initial unstructured interviews and second structured interviews.

Initial interviews were unstructured and held with respondents where the events at the workplace were identified and details of actions discussed. The events were grouped in terms of similarities and consequences and links to the actions were analyzed together with the respondents. The results of ten separate initial interviews were later compared by the researchers and commonalities into the result categories identified as: inefficiency when working; difficulty to prove misbehavior; hating the organization; changing nothing even after leaving.

Second interviews were structured interviews and followed the four categories identified after the comparative analysis held following the initial interviews. Agreeing on the four outcomes of the pressure and self-blame, the actions and perceptions of each respondent were once again discussed, providing literature analysis and explanations to the respondents on possible reasons behind each action taken. At second interviews respondents not only explained their actions but also discussed the reasons and the triggers of the actions. Afterwards, the researchers compiled the actions into concrete recommendations on some of the possible ways to avoid the mistreatment and protect from ones who exercise it.

Contribution of the Research

The research conducted was a touch of the tip of an iceberg, since there is an extensive literature on the workplace behavior, however, we believe that the originality of the research is an attempt to reveal the mistreatment and pressure on the resulting poor performance of the workers. We believe that the key to solving the pressure problems is acknowledging the source of the pressure itself and externalizing it so that the workers do not blame themselves for decreased performance and in all of the cases leave the company they enjoyed working at, not mentioning the harm that companies had exercised due to inefficiency of its employees.

Who are Psychopaths and What are the Results of their Actions in Workplaces

After having interviewed respondents about the treatment they encountered at workplace we have identified the commonalities in the treatment as well as the reactions to the treatment, all recognizing "a single-minded, ruthless and anti-social manager or staff member who lies, lacks empathy, and will do just about anything to get what they want." (Connolly, 2014). In order to thoroughly understand the motivation behind mistreating employees, we analyzed the literature and previous research done on the topic. Analysis of the traits drew us to medical literature, where we identified a "psychopath", a medical term used to describe a person who "does not care about the individual, society or people as a group" (Connolly, 2014). The diagnosis according to the book published in Babiak, "Snakes in the Suits", is that traits are shown differently in different people, so it is rather difficult to coin a person as a psychopath, anyone of us having a chance to demonstrate certain degree of characteristics that this group may possess. According to Connolly, "there are two groups of sociopaths, the unsuccessful ones who end up in prison because they are not very smart, and the very successful ones, such as, a CEO who does not care about staff at all" (Connolly, 2014). Having such workers in the workplace results in disruption of the system, forcing the employees into the stressful situations and exploiting them in order to receive personal gains. "Corporate psychopaths use the ability to hide their true selves in plain sight and display desirable personality traits to business world" (Babiak & O'Toole, 2012).

According to Jon Ronson, author of The Psychopath Test: A Journey Through the Madness Industry, "while only about 1 percent of the population are psychopaths, 4 percent of business leaders and CEOs are psychopaths" (Ronson, 2012). What makes this group especially dangerous is that "psychopaths are incapable of experiencing basic human emotions and feelings of guilt, remorse, or empathy. They display emotions only to manipulate individuals around them" – as was concluded by Functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging (FMRI) research, co-authored for FBI conducted by Paul Babiak and Mary Ellen O'Toole. (Babiak & O'Toole, 2012). Later Babiak expended his research on the topic of psychopaths and in the next study he and his colleagues concluded that "approximately 3% of those assessed in management development program study scored in the psychopath range – well above the incidence of 1% in the general population. By comparison, the incidence of psychopathy in prison populations is estimated at around 15%" (Babiak, Hare & Neumann, 2006). Research was conducted by Dutton, in which he developed a scale to measure psychopathy and according to him, "psychopathy can be defined by three categories of characteristics, including fearless dominance, self-centered impulsivity, and cold heartedness" (Dunton, 2013).

As a general characteristic trait of a psychopath that helps them succeed, the research identifies several, among which according to an article, "Snakes in Suits" is talent for "reading people" (Babiak & Hare, 2006). As stated, psychopaths are motivated and very good at sizing up people quickly, finding out their weak spots and vulnerabilities, so they can craft the course of action that allows to trigger the identified traits to manipulate a person. Another characteristic of psychopaths is excellent ability to use the charm and manipulation skills, "psychopaths can deliberately preplan their activities, without face-to-face situation where they might get found out" (Connolly, 2014), their communication skills both oral and written allow to manipulate without getting caught. And the third trait that helps psychopaths be effective in what they do is the impression management, this allows to change the situation around them skillfully "as it suits their game plan" (Babiak & Hare, 2006). "If they are in office setting, they only talk to people in power, people who "matter" and totally ignore people at the bottom – such as cleaners, admin staff, and trainees – unless they need something from them" (Connolly, 2014).

Modern technology has contributed to more demonstrations of mistreatment in the workplace due to the access to all kinds of information about our coworkers. Now the psychopath knows more about the other people's lives and this makes it very easy to use and exploit them. When reading about the ways to cope with psychopaths, unfortunately, most of the literature pieces of advice to rid of the situation of mistreatment, resulting in leaving the workplace, and as ironic as it may seem, leaving the psychopath right in the place or even offering a promotion "the more senior they are, the less likely it is that they will be dealt with" (Connolly, 2014). Literature talks about staying calm and holding your ground by recording and reporting the mistreatment to corresponding offices, but considering the inability of human resources departments or other corresponding offices, it becomes almost impossible to fight the psychopath and keep calm. So, eventually the end point is leaving the organization. We believe that this is a rather serious problem of the modern workplace, which happens in most of the organizations and is being pushed under the carpet, ruining the careers and the psychology of the ones mistreated. Our paper tries to identify the possible explanations of why mistreatment is successful and gives ways to act and protect oneself, since as we saw, there is no help provided.

Due to the possibility of immediate exposure, modern workplace and practice make it harder for the sociopath to thrive, but it does not eliminate the possibility. So, everyone should be alert. Even in the most transparent organization, with very well established internal policies, code of ethics and conduct and high sense of corporate social responsibility, there are cases of mistreatment of workers and, unfortunately, in most of the cases these mistreatments are hidden deep under the carpet. "Individuals with sociopathic and narcissistic personalities are very likely to exist" (Connolly, 2014) and human resources departments and the organizations as a whole should not neglect the possibility of having them in their organizations. "Psychopaths' thrill-seeking behavior and impulsivity are mistaken for high energy and enthusiasm, action orientation, and the ability to multitask", making them the best candidates for promotion and appraisal (Babiak & O'Toole, 2012).

Results of Research

As mentioned above, our interviews were addressed to the purpose of identification of mistreatment, linking it to the person mistreating and explaining the motivation and behavior based on the traits that are mostly demonstrated by corporate sociopaths in the modern working environment. After having discussed, the cases with the respondents we attempted to draw a course of necessary actions need to be done by the person mistreated. Interviewing our respondents, we identified several issues that were mostly repeated and classified them into the following categories: inefficiency when working, difficulty to prove misbehavior, hating the organization, changing nothing even after leaving.

Result 1: Commonality 1: Inefficiency when Working

When looking at what exactly is the mistreatment, the respondents had difficulty describing what exactly triggered the mistreatment, but all agreed about the psychological pressure and inability to function when being around with a certain person. Some of the quotes are as follows: "I absolutely lose the ability to function when I am around this person"; "It seems like this person comes to a meeting prepared with an agenda on which every item is to hurt me"; "every action of this person is against me, to destroy me emotionally, make me fail in my career".

"A sociopath boss can make a person doubt themselves and believe that they are somehow the problem" (Tapp, 2017), which partially explains why the respondents talked about the loss of concentration. But when asked about how others reacted to that particular person, there were no definite repeating reactions that could be categorized in the same context. As stated in literature, "in an office environment, overly emotional individuals are often at a disadvantage because their judgement is clouded by a desire to protect those they care about," (Clifford, 2016), so the people often mistreated can be this type of workers, but this still does not explain why mistreatment happens at the first place.

Since sociopaths are most likely to spot the weaknesses in others, the more weakness one has, either emotional, or intellectual, or in terms of lacking certain skills, the more they are likely to become the subject of mistreatment. One solution we can recommend is to treat the weaknesses. Workplaces create competition among the workers in order to keep them in shape and help them become better. It can be useful to view the mistreating person as a competition and work on developing the skill or the competence that an employee is the least capable of. "Lacking empathy, more

often than not, will help in an environment where decisions are to be made that create negative consequences by necessity for other people" (Clifford, 2016).

Result 2: Commonality 2: Difficulty to Prove Misbehavior

The difficulty of tracing and proving the misbehavior is what makes the condition problematic because, as respondents explained, there seem to be double standards in treatment of employees in the organization. Some of the quotes about this issue include: "I tried to seek justice and talked to my manager about what I was going through, but I could not provide any proof"; "I can't prove mistreatment because this person only acts this way when we are alone and absolutely differently when we are with others"; "how can you prove that the person liked by everybody is constantly mistreating?".

Two different ways are identified in literature that sociopaths view their actions and image they maintain. In one of the cases, "a key feature of a sociopath is lack of embarrassment if they are caught lying or deliberately undermining colleagues. They have a complete disregard for what other people think and don't believe they need to conform to society's rules and expectations" (Connolly, 2014). The second group "all they care about is their image, which is usually measured in terms of money, looks and perception" (Boddy, 2010). In both cases, they are very skillful in manipulating everyone around them so that when a person opens up about the mistreatment, "it's kind of stuff that when it happens, it really takes your breath away, you think they can't possibly have done that" (Connolly, 2014).

A solution to mistreatment that cannot be proved is almost impossible, in most of the cases ending up in either allegedly a false claim or insufficient report that is left unprocessed. "Sometimes, I think organizations are very nervous about getting rid of those people because they wonder what they're capable of" (Connolly, 2014). One of the solutions proposed is discretely recording misbehavior and reporting to corresponding bodies. "Psychopaths try to control others with threats and aggression. They may stand over you when talking or they may make veiled threats. Stand your ground in an assertive manner and report harassment or bullying to human resources" (Morin, 2017). But, as mentioned above, unfortunately, those bodies end up neglecting the claims and as a result, the employee leave unhappy exchanging the silence with a considerable compensation package. In some ways that's a fairly natural reaction, because sociopaths make other people very uncomfortable and because they aren't bound by regular, they are generally feared. "They'll try to go around them instead of through them" (Boddy, 2010).

Result 3: Commonality 3: Hating the Organization

One of the biggest problems of being mistreated is the result, when the employee starts seeing the organization as a negative institution as a whole. Some of the quotes identified were the following: "I walked around in the office building thinking how I came to a point of hating the place I once was the best advocate of"; "I used to work voluntary overtimes and my commitment to workplace was fullest. Now everybody in the office seems like a traitor, they are aware of my condition but no one wants to get involved"; "I cannot stand my room, the people I work with and the organization as a whole seems so irritating".

Being mistreated by one person in an organization can be spread to hating the organization as a whole and everybody working in it and it eventually can turn the workers against each other, damaging the culture within an organization and its efficiency as a whole. "Workplace bullies are usually larger-than-life characters who have a grandiose sense of self, operate dishonest practices that alienate staff and turn them against each other, creating a hostile work environment" (Tapp, 2017). When especially in the period of having a general problem in the working environment, "they are self-centered and it is usually everyone's fault when something goes wrong", so everyone avoids this kind of stress (Connolly, 2014).

As a solution, literature pays attention to initial introductions in an organization, "if you meet someone for the first time and he is totally into you, "be very careful", initial introductions are very important and human resources department should be very careful not to trigger the mistreatment by poor introductions (Boddy, 2010). Human resources departments are also recommended to monitor employee satisfaction and trace possible mistreatments before it becomes contagious to others and ends up in lost trust within the organization. Leaders of the organizations are expected to set an example of honesty, descent treatment and respect, but what can be done when the mistreatment comes from the leader himself, which is mostly the case. "The more senior they are, the less likely it is that they will be dealt with" (Connolly, 2014).

Result 4: Commonality 4: Changing Nothing Even after Leaving

When discussing the actions taken by the respondents, majority of them had left the job believing in the inability to change anything, and even after leaving were convinced nothing changed in the working environment. Some of the unfortunate quotes received were: "Today I am leaving the workplace I once loved more than anything, never imagining that this would end up this way"; "I am proud that I kept my ground and stayed true to my principles by leaving the workplace that does not support me"; "I left and no one seems to see the point. Everything is running smoothly as if I never existed."

Mistreatment may occur in different cases with different participants, and "it is necessary to decide whether you will work around them or find other employment" (Connolly, 2014). Depending on the values of the person, or the stage in the career, sometimes some of the fights are worth fighting for while others are unnecessary. So, it's a personal decision. However, there are the consequences that need to be faced. According to the studies of the responsive behavior, "if they have a boss who is very horrible, the best way to solve that is to find another job and get away from that person; that's probably the simplest" (Connolly, 2014).

Being mistreated once and considering oneself a failure may have serious consequences on career and emotional development of a person, leading to more failures in career. We need to be careful that being mistreated does not become a repetitive trend, because "we promote them, we elect them, and sometimes, a lot of people feel comfortable when people like that are in charge of our lives" (Clifford, 2016).

One of the proposed solutions is to lower one's expectations on how the organization responds further on the case. Once having left an organization one needs to focus of personal development and avoiding further mistreatment in a new environment. Leaving an organization just because one does not want to buy into somebody else's story, is the courage to stand up to the mistreatment. Learning from experience is best one can do at this point when there are no actual policies against sociopaths and the organizations are filling up underneath their carpets the dark secrets they are not strong enough to face.

Conclusion

As a conclusion to the research conducted, we focus on the recommendations for the following categories of outcome: inefficiency when working; difficulty to prove misbehavior; hating the organization; changing nothing even after leaving.

Loss of concentration during the mistreatment leads to being prone to psychological pressure resulting in the inability to function when being around the source of the mistreatment. And as discussed in the results of the research, emotional attachment makes an employee mistreated a subject, so as a conclusion, a focus on objectives of the job and particular task for in an organization might serve as a reminder of why the task was given at the first place and that personalities are less important that the achievement of the task for organization. Organizations might encourage their employees for reaching organizational goals and common achievement rather than personifying the results that would trigger more mistreatment of the employees due to the recognition of their achievements.

Externalizing the fault for poor behavior and accepting the sake of source of pressure in this performance takes courage, since according to the research results, the mistreatment is very difficult to be proved, ending in failed attempts of workers blaming others. In order to take matter in one's hand, an employee needs detailed recording of the actions taken and more proof of the mistreatment needs to be provided, which in many cases is impossible because the mistreatment generally happened verbally and there is a double standard of treatment when around others. Keeping a record can be assisting from the organization in the form of creating a correspondence system and channels of communication that are transparent. This enables formal communication to be visible by a third party.

The most disappointing result of the research is the loss in the trust of the company and the effect of an employee viewing an organization in a negative aspect. Having to go through the mistreatment and not being able to prove it discourages an employees and leads to perceiving an organization as the mistreating institution as a whole. Concluding recommendations on this topic address the system of management and approaches towards the employee morale and feedback that need to be done on frequent basis in order to spot the possible disappointments of individual workers that become outsiders as a result of irritation by personal mistreatment. Instead of being an advocate of an institution an employee works for, the employee is pushed to being a hater and every organization should build a system that identifies these mistreatments before the process is irreversible.

According to the results of our survey, in all of the cases the decision of leaving the job was the best option, but the respondents recall being disappointed with own selves and having undermined self-confidence which affected their performance in later jobs. As a recommendation to this finding, as mentioned in the findings, obtaining the experience and learning from mistakes is the best solution, without once again personalizing the case.

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