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# Understanding the High Performance Workplace

The Line Between Motivation and Abuse



Edited by **Neal M. Ashkanasy,**  
**Rebecca J. Bennett,** and **Mark J. Martinko**

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## ABUSIVE LEADERS OR MASTER MOTIVATORS?

### “Abusive” is in the Eye of the Beholder

*Robert J. Bies, Thomas M. Tripp, and Debra L. Shapiro*

Leaders have been described as “abusive” when they continually behave toward their followers in ways that include hostile verbal and nonverbal behaviors. Such leaders have also been called “petty tyrants” (Ashforth, 1994) and “brutal bosses” (Hornstein, 1996). Regardless of the label used to describe these leaders, their “abuse” is undesirable because, as numerous studies have shown, abusive supervision tends to be associated with various types of negative outcomes for employees and their organizations (see Tepper, 2007, for a review).

Yet, among such “abusers” are celebrated leaders (e.g., Vince Lombardi, Bela Karolyi, Steve Jobs, Martha Stewart). These leaders have a “brand” of yelling (Schrage, 2013), but they also have received accolades for producing high performing teams and/or successful protégés. Indeed, they are often viewed as heroic figures because they inspire people to achieve great feats. In other words, they are viewed as “master motivators.” So, which is it: Are they abusive leaders or master motivators? In this chapter, we explore the circumstances and factors that make aggressive behaviors on the part of leaders, such as yelling, seem “abusive” by some yet “motivating” to others.

As a departure from the individual difference–related approach (e.g., personality trait–based explanations), we focus on *social contextual* factors that account for differences in perceived levels of “abusive supervision.” Guided by the aforementioned anecdotal evidence, one social contextual factor we examine is the extent to which a supervisor’s teams/organizations are winning rather than losing. This factor regarding a leader’s record of success may influence how abusive a leader is perceived to be. “Winning” versus “losing” may be objectively assessed, such as with sports game results and business school rankings, but more generally, a history of succeeding versus failing may also be subjectively assessed, evidenced

by the varying ways an experience with a firm or its leaders is described in anonymous internet postings (cf. Kulik, Pepper, Shapiro, & Cregan, 2012).

A second, and related, social contextual factor we focus on is the extent to which a subordinate trusts a supervisor (Dirks & Ferrin, 2002). Trust is related to history because repeated interactions are necessary for trust to develop. Moreover, as we will argue later in this chapter, trust colors the sensemaking process such that subordinates who trust their supervisors should be more likely to make positive, benign attributions for aggressive behavior, especially in ambiguous situations, while those who distrust their supervisors should be more likely to make negative, sinister attributions for aggressive behavior.

A third social contextual factor we examine is the accounts or explanations given to make *legitimate*—or make *illegitimate*—the behavior in question (Bies, 1987). These accounts may be offered by the supervisor and/or others in the organization and, in essence, provide the motives for supervisor's actions (Bies & Shapiro, 1988). Given the uncertainty surrounding the sensemaking of a supervisor's behavior, peer opinions also have been found to be a critical social contextual factor that can influence an employee's interpretations of events, such as a supervisor's fairness (e.g., Folger, Rosenfield, Grove, & Corkran, 1979) or, relatedly, a supervisor's degree (if any) of "abuse" (Bies & Tripp, 1998).

The overarching question that motivates our chapter is: Does the *social context* influence leaders' perceived abusiveness as well as subordinates' reactions to that abuse? In other words, is perceived abusiveness "in the eye of the beholder"? In taking this perspective, we will argue that it is possible, at least occasionally, for a supervisor's actions (e.g., a supervisor's communication of negative performance feedback and/or a disciplinary warning to a poor-performing employee) to be labeled "abusive" when in fact they are *not*. Given the penalties typically levied against those believed to be abusers, the latter situation would make the falsely accused supervisor the "victim" and the falsely accusing subordinate the "perpetrator."

The possibility of false accusations is currently missing from the abusive supervision literature, evidenced perhaps most vividly by the fact that the adjective of "abusive" is paired exclusively with "supervision" and never with supervised individuals. Relatedly, the labels of "victim" and "abuser" in studies of abusive supervision always correspond with reference to subordinates versus supervisors, respectively. Yet occasionally false accusations happen—including, for example, when the accusation regards sexual harassment or sexual abuse (e.g., O'Donohue & Bowers, 2006; Thoennes & Tjaden, 1990). Even if false accusations of abusive supervision occur rarely (although we know of no study that has measured this), we posit that the occurrence of false accusations is *not* zero. As such, theorizing and empirical study of "abusive supervision" needs to reflect variables and, ideally, metrics that help distinguish "abusive supervision" that is objectively—rather than subjectively—evident.

## **Framing the Question: Abusive Leader or Master Motivator?**

One of the primary responsibilities of organizational leaders is to motivate employees to perform at high levels and, relatedly, to tell employees how well they are performing. This is why performance feedback has been described as a key motivational tool (Ilgen, Fisher, & Taylor, 1979). Yet reactions that demotivate can sometimes occur from performance feedback. For example, feedback recipients sometimes perceive criticism as undeservedly harsh or interpersonally humiliating, hence unfair (Folger & Greenberg, 1985), and perceptions of unfairness, in turn, often lead to punitive evaluations and vengeful behaviors (Bennett, 1998; Bies & Tripp, 1996; Tripp, Bies, & Aquino, 2007). As a result, one of the toughest challenges for supervisors is making employees feel valued and respected while telling them, when necessary, that their performance has been disappointing (Bies, 2013).

Employees generally feel more valued and respected, and thus also generally perceive fair interpersonal treatment, or “interactional justice” (Bies & Moag, 1986), when managers communicate unfavorable decisions (e.g., critical performance appraisals, denials of resource requests, layoffs, pay freezes) in a manner that is more rather than less interpersonally sensitive (e.g., Bies, 2001; Brockner, DeWitt, Grover, & Reed, 1990; Greenberg, 1990; Shapiro, Buttner, & Barry, 1994). In the case of critical remarks about subordinates’ performance, when these are given in a ridiculing or humiliating manner, this also illustrates what has been called “abusive supervision” (Tepper, 2000). Although positively correlated and conceptually related (Lonsdale, 2013), the two constructs of interactional injustice and abusive supervision have been found to be distinct—due probably to the fact that abusive supervision, unlike interactional injustice, is conceptualized in terms of persistent, or gratuitous, mistreatment (cf. Tepper, 2007). But that conjecture has yet to be tested by empirical assessment (cf. Shapiro, Bies, Tripp, Aquino, & Hanges, 2015).

Leaders have been described as “abusive” when they continually behave toward their followers in ways that include “hostile verbal and nonverbal behaviors . . .” (Tepper, 2000, p. 178). Consistent with this, Keashly (1998) has described abusive leaders as those who yell or scream, use derogatory names, and/or publicly ridicule others in the workplace (see Mitchell & Ambrose, 2007, for a more recent review of this literature). In our own read of the literature, it appears that most research on abusive supervision uses Tepper’s definition. As Tepper (2007, p. 262) notes in his review of the literature:

This work suggests that the most common manifestation of destructive supervisor behavior involves nonphysical actions such as angry outbursts, public ridiculing, taking credit for subordinates’ successes, and scapegoating subordinates (Keashly, Trott, & MacLean, 1994). Researchers have

used several different labels to refer to these kinds of behaviors including petty tyranny (Ashforth, 1997), supervisor aggression (Schat, Desmarais, & Kelloway, 2006), and supervisor undermining (Duffy, Ganster, & Pagon, 2002), but most of the work conducted to date has employed the term abusive supervision.

Since Tepper's review, related constructs such as "toxic leadership" (Padilla, Hogan, & Kaiser, 2007), "narcissistic supervision" (Hochwarter & Thompson, 2012), and "abusive supervision climate" (Priesemuth, Schminke, Ambrose, & Folger, 2014) have emerged. But even in these papers the authors use Tepper's conceptual definition or his scaled assessment of abusive supervision.

Bies and Tripp's (1998) work on "tyrannical leadership" also referred to verbal abuse by leaders (e.g., supervisors). But in contrast to scholars studying supervisors who behave in ways that fit descriptions of abusiveness, Bies and Tripp noted an interesting irony: Tyrannical bosses are often celebrated on business magazine covers depicting them as an "intolerable boss" (Lombardo & McCall, 1984), an "unbearable boss" (Goleman, 1986), or a "Psycho Boss from Hell" (Dumaine, 1993). Such celebration comes despite these same bosses being deeply resented and scorned by their employees, who refer to them with names that have become synonymous with tyranny in the workplace, such as "Captain Bligh" (Nordhoff & Hall, 1932) and "Captain Queeg" (Wouk, 1951).

Some behaviors of tyrannical bosses reported by Bies and Tripp (1998) matched the hostile verbal behaviors theorized and reported by Tepper (2000, 2007) and by others, such as those named earlier. These included descriptions of derogating, ridiculing, and criticizing employees' character as well as their performance, and doing these things publicly. One respondent in their study told them, for example, that on more than one occasion, such actions would "bring men and women to tears." Another respondent described his boss as a "master of sarcasm" who delighted in "putting people down" in public. But beyond these, Bies and Tripp (1998) found that tyrannical bosses generally exhibit an obsession with perfection. This obsession manifests itself in bosses setting unreasonably high performance expectations and, at the same time, showing impatience with, and no forgiveness of, mistakes. In support of this line of reasoning, Mawritz, Folger, and Latham (2014) found that employees who perceived their task goals' difficulty as exceedingly high (rather than more achievable) tended to report greater supervisory abuse.

That abuse and tyranny exist in the workplace is not in dispute; their harmful effects have also been documented. Numerous studies have shown, for example, that employees' perceptions that they are victims of abusive supervision tend to be associated with: higher psychological distress (Duffy et al., 2002; Tepper, 2000), lower job satisfaction and stronger intentions to quit (Tepper, 2000), and fewer behaviors relating to organizational citizenship (Zellars, Tepper, & Duffy, 2002) and creativity (Liu, Liao, & Loi, 2012). Cumulatively, this pattern suggests

that supervisors who are more (rather than less) abusive ought to have low-performing work units.

In their review of abusive supervision research, Martinko, Harvey, Brees, and Mackey (2013) identified a problematic aspect of the conceptualization of abusive supervision, which also carries important empirical implications. They note that Tepper (2000, 2007) focuses on supervisors who *are* more abusive to subordinates rather than *perceived* to be more abusive to subordinates. Tepper does not distinguish actual abuse from perceived abuse; the absence of this distinction is important conceptually because some individuals may view a supervisor as abusive while others may view the same supervisor as inspirational (Martinko, Sikora, & Harvey, 2012). As Martinko, Harvey, Sikora, and Douglas (2011, p. 752) note:

A clear implication of the limits and constraints placed on the definition of the abusive supervision construct is that, because it is dependent on subordinates' perceptions and because subordinates' perceptions may differ, at least some of the variance in reports of abusive supervision may be accounted for by individual differences among subordinates. Moreover, if individual differences do account for a significant proportion of variance in abusive supervision perceptions, we cannot infer that the costs associated with these perceptions are all due to abusive behaviors by supervisors. Given that the costs of abusive supervision described above are significant, it appears that if we are to fully explain and comprehend the causes and consequences of perceptions of abusive supervision, we must also explore and understand how the individual differences among subordinates are related to perceptions of abuse.

We agree that the factors that shape those perceptual processes become extremely important when one wants to explain or predict when and why people view their supervisor as abusive or not. In their constructive revision of Tepper's (2007) emergent model of abusive supervision, Martinko et al. (2013) identify a variety of factors that may shape perceptions of abusive supervision. But their primary focus is on personality or individual difference variables that are key factors related to those perceptions (e.g., negative affectivity, attribution style, self-esteem).

As a point of departure from Martinko et al. (2013), we broaden the focus of analysis in two ways. First, we focus on behavior of supervisors that involves *delivering negative performance feedback to employees*, hence on supervisory behavior that does *not* match descriptions of supervisors being verbally hostile such as *personally* attacking employees (e.g., an ad hoc insult, such as calling employees "stupid"). Second, as noted previously, we focus on the role of *social contextual* factors that may shape individual perceptions of abusive supervision, an area of study that has been largely neglected in research on abusive supervision. We are aware of only one study that has studied the effect of social contextual factors,

conducted by Tepper, Moss, and Duffy (2011). But their focus was on supervisor, not subordinate, perceptions. In summary, the present analysis focuses on the role that *social contextual factors* play in leading *subordinates* to interpret, and thus experience, “abuse” or “inspirational motivation” when receiving critical performance feedback from their supervisor.

### **When Is Critical Performance Feedback “Abusive” Versus Inspirationally Motivating? The Role of Social Contextual Factors**

In this section, we focus on several social contextual factors that may influence whether a supervisor’s performance-criticizing remarks are perceived and interpreted by the receiver as evidence of (varying levels of) “abuse” versus “inspirational motivation.” These social contextual factors are: (a) the supervisor’s success in developing subordinates; (b) the subordinate’s trust in the supervisor; (c) causal accounts provided for motives guiding the supervisor’s behavior; and (d) peer opinions about the supervisor.

#### ***Supervisor Success in Developing Subordinates***

In broader terms, an important contextual variable that can shape an employee’s perception of abusive behavior on the part of a performance-criticizing supervisor is the history he or she has had with this supervisor. Consistent with this, leader-member exchange (LMX) theory identifies the quality and history of the relationship between supervisor and subordinate (e.g., Bauer & Green, 1996; Gerstner & Day, 1997; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995) as important in determining how subordinates will interpret the actions of their supervisor. Generally, the more positive the relational exchange has been between leaders and “members” (i.e., subordinates)—that is, the more informational and socioemotional support characterizing the leader-subordinate relationships (cf. Sparrowe & Liden, 1997; Viduyarhi, Liden, Anand, Erdogan, & Ghosh, 2010), the more favorably subordinates interpret leaders’ actions. Put more succinctly, “higher LMX” tends to be associated with more positive evaluations by subordinates of their supervisors and vice versa. Indeed, Shapiro, Boss, Salas, Von Glinow, and Tangirala (2011) found that subordinates who perceive higher LMX tend to more favorably evaluate even *transgressing* leaders, leading them to conclude that LMX, like love, can blind subordinates from seeing fault in leaders—including, potentially, abusive actions. Thus, history strongly shapes the “today” that people see.

Extrapolating from this to a context involving the need for a supervisor to give unfavorable performance feedback, a subordinate who perceives a more (rather than less) positive history (e.g., higher levels of LMX) ought to interpret a supervisor’s a critical performance appraisal more positively (e.g., as “motivational”)—and, relatedly therefore, less sinisterly (e.g., as “abusive”).

Hollander (1958) similarly takes into account a leader's history. Specifically, Hollander predicts that leaders who have a consistently positive track record—or what he terms an accumulation of idiosyncrasy credits—are better able to escape scorn from subordinates when they later deviate from normative practices. This is because, Hollander explains, the subordinates of leaders with credit accumulations (i.e., a record of success) will be more likely to perceive leaders' deviations from behavioral rules or norms as “idiosyncratic” rather than emblematic. That is, the subordinates will likely make external rather than internal attributions for the leaders who have records of success.

Evidence that this attribution process occurs for leaders in the context of delivering performance criticism includes the following anecdotal observations from the sports domain: The former head coach of men's basketball at Indiana University, Bobby Knight, well-known for his brand of “yelling” critical remarks at his team members, received *accolades* in news coverage suggesting that he was a master motivator, yet coverage of Knight's yelling became far harsher once his team's losses began to equal or exceed the frequency of wins (Berger, 2000; cf. Schrage, 2013).

This pattern occurred, too, for the former head coach of men's basketball at the University of North Carolina, Matt Doherty. As Burke (2012) explains, despite Doherty's well-known brand of yelling critical remarks, sometimes foul-mouthed, at his team members, news coverage of Doherty's leadership style was positive and even included his being selected “ACC Coach of the Year” (e.g., *Miami Herald*, 2001)—while his team was consistently winning. However, news coverage of his leadership style turned negative once Doherty's team began losing with enough frequency to drop out of the nation's top-ranked men's collegiate basketball teams. Both these coaches were fired for reasons that pointed to the abusiveness of their leadership style at a time when their respective teams no longer had winning records. Although the harshness of evaluations received by both these head coaches may be driven by their own performance records, the fact is that their leadership style (which remained constant across time) received punitive evaluation only *after* these leaders' number of wins declined.

As another example—this time from the business–technology industry—Apple Computer's Steve Jobs had a leadership style involving yelling and name-calling (Isaacson, 2011). Interestingly, Jobs was ousted from his leadership position at Apple in 1985 when Apple's stock rapidly declined to near its historic low. Yet Jobs's style of leadership did *not* stop Apple from rehiring him years later when they believed only he could save Apple. Additionally, after being rehired, Jobs's style of leadership went unsanctioned as Apple's stock steadily climbed to historic highs. Apparently, Steve Jobs's yelling behavior was more acceptable (at least to those with authority to hire and fire him, such as the company's board of directors) when Apple's stock price was climbing rather than declining.

Although these anecdotes indicate that history is objectively assessed (for example, by the number of game wins and/or the rise or fall of a company's

stock price), it is important to note that historical records are themselves subject to manipulation. This is because history is, itself, a perception that can be shaped by “snapshots” of one’s past that get selected or talked about by oneself or by others, including “infomediaries” who shape public opinion via the tenor and framing of news (cf. Deephouse & Heugens, 2009; Pfarrer, Pollock, & Rindova, 2010; Pollock & Rindova, 2003). For instance, organizations sometimes may be politically motivated to reinterpret the past in order to create “scapegoats” for an organizational failure. Lest anyone doubt this, the manipulability of historical records becomes vividly clear during political campaigns (Damore, 2004; Devlin, 1989). Moreover, claims of unjust treatment by employees, former employees, prospective employees, customers, and even business competitors can be posted on the internet with little if any way of determining their accuracy and/or correcting their accuracy if need be (cf. Grégoire, Tripp, & Legoux, 2009; Kulik et al., 2012). For example, websites (e.g., Glassdoor.com) have sprung up over the last few years to allow employees and former employees to post one-sided and often anonymous complaints about firms and their leaders. The “identity-spoiling,” and ultimately stigma, that occurs for those who are targets of negative characterization (Goffman, 1963), including firms who receive negative media attention, is sometimes due not to guilt but, rather, guilt by association—also referred to as “negative spillover” (cf. Barnett & Hoffman, 2008; Barnett & King, 2008; Kostova & Zaheer, 1999; Lange, Lee, & Dai, 2011). One example of this is when the tenor of media coverage received by a focal firm becomes less positive after *other* firms in its industry have engaged in wrongdoing such as product recalls (Zavyalova, Pfarrer, Reger, & Shapiro, 2012). Moreover, Goffman (1963: 49) explains that correcting “history” associated with stigma is difficult since the “visibility”—or perception—of one’s stigma is heightened by gossip about the targeted individual or, in the case of firms, by negative media attention (Zavyalova et al., 2012) that ultimately harms one’s perceived reputation and legitimacy.

Another aspect of history is the role of time and reinterpreting bad events in the past in more favorable terms later. In his analysis of people’s reactions to bad news, Bies (2013) poses the following examples: “Consider the example of a faculty member who is denied tenure at a university, which is obviously bad news. But, then, at a second institution, the faculty member receives tenure, and creates new academic programs that would not have been possible at the first institution. As a result, the faculty member reconceptualizes the initial bad news of tenure denial as ‘good news’” (p. 156). In the case of abusive supervision, a recipient of abuse may find meaning in being the target of such action as a means of coping with the suffering associated with the abuse (cf. Frankl, 1946/2006). Indeed, temporal processes and time may lead those who experienced what they perceived to be abusive behavior to reinterpret the experience more favorably (potentially as inspirationally motivating) when at a later time they perceive that they benefited from the experience (e.g., became stronger,

obtained opportunities that otherwise would not have come to them, etc.). We will return to this issue of time and reappraisal of events later in the chapter.

To summarize, the observations (anecdotally as well as empirically based) suggest that a key variable in determining the “abusiveness” of a performance-criticizing supervisor is how successful this supervisor is perceived to be. Thus, we propose that subordinates are more likely to view unfavorable performance appraisals by supervisors as evidence of “abuse,” rather than as evidence of “inspirational motivation,” when the supervisors lack a history of success in developing subordinates into top performers. Furthermore, one’s history is itself vulnerable to social manipulation, as occurs when employees become targets of gossip or other forms of undermining in the workplace (Duffy et al., 2002; Duffy, Ganster, Shaw, Johnson, & Pagon, 2006) or in social media or other internet-based sites (Tripp & Grégoire, 2011) and, similarly, when firms become targets of negative media coverage (cf. Zavyalova et al., 2012). As a result, it becomes important to understand how subordinates come to evaluate a supervisor’s success, including the extent to which they derive this evaluation from objective data (e.g., the number of new clients a leader has brought to his or her firm) and/or subjective sources (e.g., comments about a leader that are heard at the water cooler, so to speak, or seen on electronic water coolers, cf. Kulik et al., 2012, and various types of news sources, cf. Zavyalova et al., 2012).

### ***Subordinate Trust in the Supervisor***

An important contextual variable that can shape an employee’s perception of abusive behavior on the part of a performance-criticizing supervisor is the extent to which the employee trusts the supervisor. We posit that subordinates who trust their supervisors will view supervisors’ actions with rose-colored glasses. Specifically, trust biases an employee to see benign intention behind aggressive behaviors, and thus trust may buffer against the tendency to see hostile or sinister intent behind harmful actions (Kramer, 1994). Conversely, Gollwitzer and Rothmund (2009) argue that a distrusting, “suspicious” mind-set creates an attributional bias to corroborate a priori expectations that others are not trustworthy. Thus, if subordinates view a supervisor’s performance-criticizing remarks as motivated by benign goals (e.g., he or she wants to encourage me to perform my best) rather than malicious goals (e.g., he or she wants to intimidate me into complying with his or her unreasonable demands, perhaps to bully me), subordinates will likely describe the remarks as “motivational” rather than “abusive,” respectively. In short, much as LMX, like love, can blind subordinates to supervisors’ faults (Shapiro et al., 2011), so can trust. In fact, trust is intertwined in the LMX process (Brower, Schoorman, & Tan, 2000; Scandura & Pellegrini, 2008), which may explain why highly trusted leaders (just like high-LMX leaders) are generally evaluated more positively by their subordinates (Dirks & Ferrin, 2002). Extrapolating from this, performance-criticizing supervisors are likely to

be evaluated more positively—hence as “motivational”—and less sinisterly—as “abusive”—when their subordinates trust rather than distrust them.

To empirically test this attribution explanation of the effect of trust would require examining a behavior on the part of a supervisor that occurs identically across subordinates (e.g., a criticism of performance) and for the subordinates who receive this criticism to be asked to assess the extent to which this criticism seems abusive or inspirationally motivating. We know of no study that has done this. Part of the reason no such study exists is because the operationalization of “abusive supervision” excludes reference to performance-criticizing remarks; instead, the scale assessing this refers to remarks that are personally attacking (e.g., “My supervisor tells me I am stupid,” cf. Tepper, 2000).

Indirect support for our prediction comes from the findings of Liu et al. (2012), who observed that when a supervisor’s perceived abusiveness was attributed to more benevolent motives (such as performance-enhancing goals) rather than more malicious motives (such as injury-seeking goals), there were generally more positive team outcomes, such as greater team creativity. Similarly, but conversely, Eschleman, Bowling, Michel, and Burns (2014) found that when a supervisor’s perceived abusiveness was deemed unintentional rather than intentional by his or her subordinates, the subordinates tended to engage in fewer counterproductive behaviors. Note, however, that neither of these findings tell us if the level of *perceived abuse* lessened when subordinates attributed more benevolent rather than sinister motives to their supervisor. Findings by organizational justice scholars reinforce our belief that the level of perceived abuse on the part of a performance-criticizing supervisor depends on motives attributed to the critique. This is because employees have been found to perceive less distributive injustice when they perceive an unfavorable allocation to have been motivated unintentionally rather than by an intention to harm them (Bies & Shapiro, 1987, 1988; Tripp & Bies, 2009).

Given the importance of trust and attributions, it is necessary to understand why subordinates might trust their supervisor. The extent to which subordinates trust their supervisor is, according to Mayer, Davis, and Schoorman (1995), guided by their assessments of three qualities—namely: (1) their supervisor’s degree of competence (i.e., relevant knowledge and skills), (2) their supervisor’s benevolence (i.e., interest in their well-being), and (3) their supervisor’s integrity (i.e., doing what one said one would do or what one values doing, consistency in demonstrating reliability and dependability). Higher perceived levels of all these qualities generally lead to higher levels of trust in the supervisor.

The three qualities leading to higher trust suggest social contextual factors that can help leaders earn more trust from their subordinates, even in the context of criticizing performance. First, leaders need to highlight the successes that are in their history because doing so will likely highlight their competence or skill. Such successes will ideally relate to the context of the performance appraisal, as might occur if supervisors refer to examples of former subordinates who under

their supervision developed into top-performing employees and, potentially, current organizational leaders. From such evidence, subordinates may infer that the supervisor has more of the skills and types of accomplishments that are the subject of the performance valuation than the subordinate. Furthermore, the subordinate may conclude that it would be instructive to trust and follow the supervisor's advice.

Second, leaders need to highlight their benevolence—that is, their interest in the well-being of their subordinates. This may be challenging to do in situations involving criticism. Yet, as noted at our chapter's outset, even critical messages can demonstrate care if these are delivered in ways that emphasize the leader's desire to *help the subordinate* perform at his or her maximal capability. Referring to such a goal provides subordinates with the motive behind the leader's message. For instance, the communication described in the previous paragraph likely reduces perceptions of abusive supervision because it refers, also, to the consistency with which one's leadership style has been used with others; as a result, subordinates receiving this communication are unlikely to perceive themselves as "singled out" for unduly demanding tasks. Thus, subordinates can rule out perhaps the worst inference of supervisor motive—that is, that the supervisor is "out to get" them.

A third action likely to enhance trust in supervisors, even performance-criticizing ones, is highlighting actions that demonstrate integrity. Such actions might include referring to an abundance of "success stories" (rather than only one) regarding subordinates who under the leader's supervision became top performing, thereby demonstrating *consistency over time* with regard to how the leader treats his or her subordinates. Another possible action might be to explain to subordinates the criteria that led him or her to believe performance improvement, including maybe even a complete do-over, is needed from them. Such explanation emphasizes that the supervisor is implementing stated values and doing what the supervisor said he or she would do—that is, judging performance by the stated performance criteria (Bies, Shapiro, & Cummings, 1988). Such consistency also enhances "procedural justice" by showing that the supervisor is following the rules (Leventhal, 1980). Moreover, providing adequate explanations likely enhances the perceived fairness of the decision that a "do-over" is needed (Folger & Greenberg, 1985).

In short, supervisors who have a history of successfully developing subordinates into top-performing employees, and ideally, into current organizational leaders, are likely to be perceived as more competent as well as more benevolent than supervisors lacking this success. Greater perceived competence is typically associated with greater success on whatever metric is being evaluated. Demonstrating competence in developing subordinates into leaders is likely to demonstrate, too, a desire to help subordinates succeed in their own careers. As such, demonstrating competency as a mentor also demonstrates interest in employees' well-being, hence benevolence.

To summarize, subordinates tend to evaluate the actions of supervisors more positively and less sinisterly when they trust rather than distrust them. Therefore, we propose that supervisors' performance-criticizing communications to subordinates will likely be perceived as "motivationally inspiring" rather than "abusive" when such communications are delivered in ways that enhance rather than harm trust—hence in ways that strengthen supervisors' perceived competence, benevolence, and integrity. Given the desirability of highly motivated and high performing employees in organizations, we propose that it behooves managers as well as management scholars to understand what actions *by performance-criticizing supervisors* may strengthen subordinates' trust in them so that critical communications are perceived as motivational, not abusive.

### ***Causal Accounts for Motives Guiding Supervisors' Behavior***

As the prior arguments imply, trust and attributions of motive are influenced by the accounts supervisors and peers provide for the aggressive behavior. For example, in the Bies and Shapiro (1987, 1988) studies on attributions for unfavorable allocations, the motives that study participants perceived were guided by causal accounts, or explanations, that supervisors provided for their actions. For this reason, Greenberg (1990) suggested that the types of causal accounts managers choose are those that will enable them to "*appear fair*" and not those that necessarily enable them to "*be fair.*" A specific application of Greenberg's advice can be made to the delivery of bad news. Bad news deliverers in general can mitigate negative reactions to their news when they provide receivers with explanations (Bies, 1987, 2013). These explanations need to be perceived as adequate by their receiver for their conflict-mitigating effect to be realized (Bies et al., 1988; Shaw, Wild, & Colquitt, 2003). To seem adequate, the explanations should be reasonable and specific (Shapiro et al., 1994) and should indicate the communicator's perceived sincerity (Bies & Shapiro, 1987). Such communication likely reduces perceptions of abusive supervision because one of the components of abusiveness is *insincerity*, captured by some of the scale items of Tepper's (2000) abusive supervision scale (e.g., "My supervisor lies to me" and "My supervisor broke promises s/he made to me"). Insincerity, like dishonesty, may be interpreted as a lack of concern for the subordinate ("She doesn't even care about me enough to tell me the truth"), and thus the supervisor may be perceived as having bad motives toward the subordinate.

Research on effective apology giving also supports the importance of giving causal accounts and how such accounts may affect trust. Tomlinson and Mayer (2009), in a review of the literature, construct a model where accounts that affect attributions and trust are the key part of the model. Kim, Ferrin, Cooper, and Dirks (2004) show that it is best (e.g., repairs trust) to offer a causal account for one's behavior or failure, but only when one sincerely admits culpability—although

not a lack-of-benevolence culpability, but a lack-of-competence culpability, and ideally competence issues due to external circumstances and not inherent skill (Tomlinson & Mayer, 2009). Extrapolating from these past works, the type of causal account provided to subordinates by their supervisor for whatever performance criticism the supervisor delivers is key in shaping whether subordinates will perceive the supervisor as having benign or malicious motives, hence as being “motivationally inspiring” versus “abusive,” respectively. But again, research is needed to empirically test this.

### ***Peer Opinions About the Supervisor***

We suggest that the motives subordinates “see” in supervisors’ behavior are significantly influenced by not only their supervisor (as described earlier), but rather by the remarks they hear coworkers and/or team members making about their supervisor. As work assignments have become increasingly team based over time, explanations for supervisors’ performance-criticizing remarks or other communications (e.g., decisions about various resource allocations) are increasingly given by team members, not necessarily by higher-ups (cf. Bies & Tripp, 2012). It is thus a matter of practical as well as theoretical importance to consider how peer opinions may influence the extent to which subordinates perceive evidence of “abuse” or “inspirational motivation” in a supervisor’s expressed performance criticism of them.

People’s evaluations of others are often a result of perceptual, or cognitive, biases—a phenomenon long supported by social attribution theories and empirical findings (Petty & Cacioppo, 1996b; Petty, Wegener, & Fabrigar, 1997), including those relating specifically to “contagion dynamics” (cf. Morris & Keltner, 2000). Scholars studying emotional or social contagion (Barsade, 2002) have illuminated the ease with which one person’s feelings and/or viewpoint, including relationally oriented ones, spread to others (Venkataramani & Dalal, 2007). Specifically, employees’ comments about how fairly they are treated, or about work-related experiences more generally, influence others’ fairness perceptions (Roberson & Colquitt, 2005; Roberson & Williamson, 2012), others’ perceptions of abusive supervision (Martinko et al., 2011), others’ feelings of envy (Menon & Thompson, 2010), and overall, the work-related attitudes of others (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978). Indeed, Folger et al. (1979) demonstrated that peer opinions can alter the perception of inequitable treatment to be perceived as equitable treatment. Reliance on the opinions of others is especially strong in situations marked by uncertainty (Festinger, 1957), hence in situations where subordinates may be receiving critical performance feedback for their first time (i.e., new employees) or when this is unexpected. Following this line of reasoning, it is highly likely that subordinates’ perception of a supervisor’s performance criticism as “abusive” versus “motivationally inspiring” is influenced by how negatively versus positively they hear peers describe the supervisor, respectively.

## Abusive Supervisor or Master Motivator: A False Dichotomy?

Up to now, we have been analyzing abusive supervision and inspirationally motivating behavior as an “either/or” proposition. That is, a leader is engaging in either abusive actions or inspirationally motivating behavior or is perceived to be either “abusive” or “inspirationally motivating.” This is the current paradigm that governs the theory and research on abusive supervision.

Following from the framework we have proposed in this chapter, we challenge the either/or assumptions underlying the current paradigm that a leader’s actions may be guided by only one motive: abusive or inspirational. First, supervisors may actually have both motives. Much as negotiators have multiple “mixed motives” (i.e., cooperate *and* compete) (Komorita & Parks, 1995), it could be that a leader’s actions are guided by both motives. Returning to the subordinates’ perspective (which is this chapter’s focus), it is also possible that subordinates may perceive their supervisor as *both* abusive and inspirationally motivating and that whichever perception dominates at any given point in time depends on social contextual cues. For example, while their college sports teams were winning or while the company’s stock price was rising, apparently the evaluators of team coaches and/or top managers perceived more “evidence” in these leaders of “inspirational motivation” rather than “abuse”; when team and company performance began declining, evaluators perceived instead more “evidence” of “abuse” warranting the leaders’ dismissal (as we noted earlier in this chapter). It is possible, too, that both these perceptions are perceived simultaneously and that, as long as “motivational” is perceived, concerns about possible “abuse” are put aside.

To elaborate on our reasoning, Table 13.1 presents a 2×2 in which one axis is the perception of abusive leader behavior (low, high) and the other axis is the perception of a leader’s inspirational motivation (low, high). In Quadrant #2 and Quadrant #3, we see an inspiring motivator and an abusive supervisor, respectively. These represent the exemplars in the current paradigm of abusive supervision. But it is the other two quadrants, #1 and #4, that prove interesting, if not intriguing, from paradigmatic and practical points of view.

**TABLE 13.1** Subordinates’ Perception of Abusive Versus Inspirationally Motivating Leader Behaviors

		Inspirationally Motivating	
		Low	High
Abusive	Low	Quadrant 1 <i>Laissez Faire</i>	Quadrant 2 <i>Inspirationally Motivating</i>
	High	Quadrant 3 <i>Abusive</i>	Quadrant 4 <i>Abusive and Inspirationally Motivating</i>

In Quadrant #1, a leader is perceived to be neither abusive nor motivating. For instance, consider a supervisor who is too “nice,” tries to become friends with subordinates, or for whatever reason avoids conflict and thus never provides balanced feedback that might better direct, if not frighten, an employee into trying harder. The leadership style referred to as “laissez faire” fits this description (Lewin, Lippitt, & White, 1939). Such a supervisor may rarely offend or stress subordinates, and thus no one speaks of this supervisor as abusive. But this approach to leadership creates workplace stressors and psychological distress for employees (Skogstad, Einarsen, Torsheim, Aasland, & Hetland, 2007). If this supervisory style impedes subordinates’ ability to develop into high performing employees, and thus stunts the career growth subordinates might otherwise have, then this style of leadership also harms subordinates; in this sense, then, this is also abusive. If we define “abusive supervision” solely by the scale items that have been created to assess it (cf. Tepper, 2000), the latter insight gets overlooked.

It is Quadrant #4, characterized by high levels of both abusive and inspirationally motivating supervisory behaviors, that proves most interesting. In contrast to the current paradigm governing theory and research on abusive supervision, which has assumed single motive-driven behavior, Quadrant #4 illustrates that leaders can be guided by simultaneous motives that may seem in conflict with each other. Such a combination may in actuality capture the leadership of many leaders.

To illustrate this, let us return one more time to evaluations of business icon Steve Jobs. Descriptions of Jobs’s interpersonal style include behaviors such as yelling at employees or being merciless in dealing with poor performance (Isaacson, 2011), that may be characterized as “abusive” (e.g., Tepper, 2000). Yet others who worked closely with Steve Jobs describe his style as “performance driving”—that is, one that pushed everyone, including himself, to continually reach and surpass high standards—leading them to describe Steve Jobs with accolades (Isaacson, 2011). Whether Steve Jobs was an “abusive leader” or a “master motivator” thus depends on whom one asks and the context in which the question is raised, including whether this query was raised before versus after Steve Jobs’s death. Moreover, because people’s feelings and perceptions are guided by those expressed by others (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978)—a phenomenon that can also potentially result in “social (or emotional) contagion” (Barsade, 2002)—the answers provided by Steve Jobs’s biographer’s (Walter Isaacson’s) interviewees likely depend on whom they had been talking to about their experiences. The ease with which a supervisor’s behavior may be characterized as “abusive” or “inspirationally motivating” depends on which social cue is salient, and the ease with which this characterization may change, again depending on which social cue may become salient, reinforces the potential “slippage” between the quadrants shown in Table 13.1. It is this slippage, triggered by social cues, that prior work on perceptions of abusive supervision seems to have neglected.

The presence of two seemingly conflicting or mixed motives guiding behavior is not a new idea (e.g., Axelrod, 1984). Others have noted, for example, that

we may trust and distrust leaders at the same time (Lewicki, McAllister, & Bies, 1998; Sitkin & Roth, 1993) and that it is such conflict between the motives that may make us ambivalent toward such leaders (Lewicki et al., 1998). However, unlike our predecessors, we raise the possibility that the motives *perceived by subordinates* for their supervisors' actions also may be mixed and that such circumstances create a blurry perceptual distinction between the supervisor as "abuser" versus "inspirational motivator," the resolution of which is guided by social contextual cues. Following this line of reasoning, employees in abusive relationships may simultaneously harbor strong feelings of love, as well as hate, for the leader (Petty & Cacioppo, 1996b). This we believe is the dynamic that captures the strong feelings of ambivalence that viewers of the movie *Whiplash* experience in watching the "abusive" methods of the music director, Terrence Fletcher, in motivating a drummer, Andrew Neyman, to achieve perfection. Clearly, in the eyes of the audience, and more importantly, Andrew, the methods of Fletcher are abusive.

But throughout the movie, Fletcher tells Andrew a story of Charlie Parker and Jo Jones. As the story is told, the young Charlie Parker was once playing with drummer Jo Jones when Parker made a mistake. In a fit of anger, Jones hurls a cymbal at Parker's head, nearly killing him. As Fletcher tells the story, and Andrew understands the story, the violent gesture by Jones motivated Parker to begin a period of obsessive and perfectionist practice sessions that resulted in him becoming one of the greatest musical geniuses of the 20th century. Even though the Charlie Parker story was not, in fact, completely true (Brody, 2014), Andrew was clearly motivated by Fletcher's telling of it.

In the climactic closing scenes, triggered by Fletcher's abusive actions, Andrew delivered a virtuoso performance, stunning Fletcher, Andrew himself, and the audience. The final scene shows both Fletcher and Andrew smiling at each other, acknowledging the achievement. Regardless of how the audience felt, both the participants seemed to signal that the abusive actions were, in the end, inspirational and motivational. If Andrew went on to become, as Charlie Parker did, a successful performer of legendary proportion, would he look back at his band leader, Fletcher, and describe him as only motivationally inspiring? This is possible and even likely if over time Andrew comes to believe that Fletcher's motives were to help him become successful and if Andrew hears many others describe Fletcher in praiseworthy ways. This again illustrates the social contextually cued perceptual slippage that is possible between Quadrants #2 and #3 and between Quadrants #3 and #4 in Table 13.1.

In contrast to employees who experience a supervisor whose behavior matches these Quadrant #4 qualities, employees who experience a supervisor whose behavior has the qualities shown in Quadrant #3 will perceive only abuse and, thus, in no way will be inspirationally motivated. Under the latter circumstances, "abuse" likely will not be tolerated in any way, with such leaders being reprimanded by their bosses, potentially investigated by human resources staff,

or even sometimes fired (Sutton, 2007). This means that supervisors who are perceived to fit Quadrant #4, but not Quadrant #3, likely will be able to escape penalty or receive only mild penalty if they behave in ways that are, or are perceived to be, abusive. In support of this, Shapiro et al. (2011) predicted and found that when subordinates expressed higher levels of trust toward their supervisor, indicated by a higher quality of their leader-member exchange relationship, or LMX (cf. Scandura & Graen, 1984), these subordinates tended to express lower levels of punitive evaluation of their supervisors' transgressions (some of which involved verbally abusing subordinates). This finding led Shapiro et al. (2011) to conclude that LMX, like love, blinds people from seeing others' "faults" (e.g., such as abusive actions).

The possibility that supervisors can simultaneously be "abusive" and "inspirationally motivating" and that, under these circumstances, concerns about their abusiveness may be put aside is intriguing, and disconcerting, for two reasons. First, the possibility of leaders being perceived to have both of these qualities runs counter to the manner in which abusive supervision has generally been theoretically described and empirically tested. Second, if a leader does indeed behave abusively or tyrannically (e.g., by demanding performance improvements or "do-overs" beyond what is reasonable), then disciplinary action ought to be brought against the leader in order to protect his or her subordinates from this abuse. Such sanction should occur no matter if that leader's record of success (e.g., record of inspiring others) is poor or good. Believing otherwise suggests that leaders with successful records are beyond discipline and, relatedly, may encourage leaders to insulate themselves from punitive evaluation by falsifying records of success.

In summary, until now we have reviewed literature leading us to posit the various conditions in which subordinates are likely to perceive critical performance feedback they receive from their supervisor as "abusive" versus "inspirationally motivating" or both. Table 13.1 illuminates the possibility of both these qualities being simultaneously perceived, a possibility that has escaped empirical examination in previous studies on abusive supervision and its consequences. Moreover, our discussion of Table 13.1 illuminates the perceptual slippage that likely occurs between its quadrants. Lastly, the possibility that subordinates can be harmed by *laissez faire* leadership, illustrated by Quadrant #1 in Table 13.1, suggests that the notion of supervisory "abuse" may need to be broadened to include neglectful actions by supervisors that harm subordinates' career growth.

Complicating all this, however, is the fact that "abuse" is a perception, and, as such, it is a matter of practical as well as theoretical importance to distinguish when abuse has occurred *objectively*, not only *subjectively*. Failure to make this distinction risks supervisors being falsely accused of abuse as well as subordinates being actually abused by supervisors who, if they have "winning," or successful, records, will likely be able to escape punitive evaluation, hence appropriate sanctions. Given the paucity of attention to false accusations of "abuse," we turn our

attention next to this possibility and the implications for who is “victim” versus who is “perpetrator” in future research on abusive supervision dynamics.

### **Revisiting Who May Be “Victim” in “Abusive Supervision” Dynamics: A Necessity in Light of the Possibility, Even Probability, of Occasional False Accusations**

With regard to who may be the “victim” in “abusive supervision” dynamics, the often dyadic (supervisor–subordinate) focus of studies regarding these labels suggests the victim options are the supervisor and the subordinate. Yet, in the classic paradigm used to study abusive supervision, the victim is always the subordinate, and the presumed abuser (to varying degrees, given the measure used to assess this) is always the supervisor (e.g., Duffy et al., 2002; Tepper, 2000). Importantly, however, it is also possible that the “victim” in “abusive supervision” dynamics is the *supervisor*. In particular, the supervisor may be accused of being “abusive” for merely having expressed critical performance feedback consistent with qualities associated with Table 13.1’s Quadrant #3—hence in the trust-enhancing ways described earlier in this chapter (e.g., by being *problem* focused, factually justified, etc.). The possibility of being perceived as “abusive” for communications that are merely performance critical is indirectly supported by the finding that employees’ self-esteem *suffers* when low performance ratings given by organizational authorities seem to be more (rather than less) procedurally fair (Wiesenfeld, Brockner, & Thibault, 2000).

False accusations make victims of falsely accused supervisors, in part because punitive actions tend to be levied against those who become targets of unflattering labels, not the least of which is negative gossip or news coverage of the target and, thereby also, spoiled identity for the stigmatized individual (cf. Goffman, 1963) and organizations (cf. Zavyalova et al., 2012). Not surprisingly, therefore, among the ways revenge is sought by subordinates, former subordinates, and/or customers who feel anger and injustice is to engage in gossip (Tripp & Bies, 2009), in negative online “chat” or posts (Kulik et al., 2012), and, more generally, in social undermining (Duffy et al., 2002). Lest anyone think that negative gossip must be deserved, vividly captured by the adage “where there is smoke, there is fire,” even high performing employees can be the targets of social undermining, sometimes due to organizational politics (Shorris, 1981) and sometimes due to a desire to raise one’s own stature by putting down another of similar social status (Lam, Van der Vegt, Walter, & Huang, 2011).

### **Conclusion**

The overarching question motivating our chapter is: Does the social context influence leaders’ perceived abusiveness as well as subordinates’ reactions to that abuse? The literature we have reviewed in this chapter leads us to conclude yes.

More specifically, this chapter illuminates the possibility that leaders who demand high performance may be perceived by their employees as “abusive” or “inspirationally motivating.” The latter, not the former, perception is generally associated with sustained levels of high performance; therefore, organizations need supervisors who will inspire the best performance possible from their employees *without* being—or being perceived to be—abusive. This chapter illuminates the possibility, too, that employees’ positive relationship with their supervisor can blind them from seeing and/or reporting the supervisor when his or her act of critical performance appraisal involves actual supervisory abuse (cf. Shapiro et al., 2011). As a result, it behooves managers as well as management scholars to understand how employees can allow themselves, even when enamored with their supervisor, to recognize and report actual abusive behaviors when these do occur.

In summary, in this chapter we posit that it is time to revisit “abusive” supervision by recognizing, first, that this is a perception and, as such, is vulnerable to social contextual influences. Relatedly, in this chapter we posit that it is time to revisit who the “victim” is in “abusive supervision dynamics”—the subordinate or the supervisor, or both? Scrutiny given to two or more of these options will improve on research to date that has tended to focus solely on the subordinate as the victim. By raising these questions, our chapter illuminates the need to study the perception of abusive supervision as a *dependent* variable, not only as a predictor variable, as theorizing and research before has tended to do (e.g., Mitchell & Ambrose, 2007; Tepper et al., 2008, 2009). Although Martinko et al. (2011) were the first to note this theoretical and empirical need, and a few studies have begun to study antecedents to perceived abusive supervision (e.g., Liu et al., 2012; Tepper, Duffy, Henle, & Lambert, 2006; Tepper et al., 2011), none of these studies examined social context–related variables that may influence supervisors’ perceived level of abusiveness, and none have done so in the context of employees receiving negative performance feedback. Given this gap, the extensive research that has documented negative consequences of perceived supervisory abuse for individuals and organizations fails to tell us how *perceived* organizational abuse comes about and, more specifically, how social context plays a role in shaping this.

We hope this chapter provokes more theorizing and empirical investigations regarding a much needed *social contextual–based* model of perceived supervisory abuse. The increased understanding that such a model can bring promises to alert managers as well as management scholars to the possibility that the label of “abusive” may potentially itself be a form of abuse when this occurs for reasons unrelated to supervisors’ actual actions. We hope, too, that this chapter urges organizational authorities who hear allegations of supervisory abuse to consider both possibilities: that is, that abuse *has* occurred or that the allegation of abuse is unfair, if not outright false, or at least highly subjective.

That being said, our analysis raises a larger, if not ethical, issue of “means” and “ends” in an analysis of leadership. Do the “ends” justify the “means” in terms of abusive methods by leaders? Or are there some “means” that are never justifiable,

that violate human dignity and the sense of civic order? While the present analysis does not answer those profound questions, it does provide a framework for analyzing and understanding why theorists, researchers, leaders, employees, and third parties may come to different conclusions in their answers.

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