



To Err Is Human, To Forgive Is Divine. Abusive Bosses and Turnover Intention: The Moderating Effect of Employee Forgiveness

Teh Hong-Leong^{1*}, Ng Shwu-Shing¹, Norhayati Md Isa¹, Farhana Hanim¹,
Shanthi Nadarajah¹, Hatijah Md Salleh¹, Norharyani Adrus¹

¹ Teh Hong Piow Faculty of Business and Finance, Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman, Jalan
Universiti, Bandar Barat, 31900 Kampar, Perak, Malaysia.
tehlh@utar.edu.my

Abstract. Abusive leaders are a nightmare to work under. As expected, employees who are unwilling to face this nightmare anymore resign as soon as the opportunity presents itself. This is a growing concern because despite the good intentions of shareholders and top management to retain high performing employees, the presence of abusive leaders may sometimes go under the radar and still be prevalent within the organization. This complication arises because abusive leaders may only show their ‘true colors’ to their subordinates but hide these abusive behaviors from the higher ups. Thus, it may not be possible to completely root out abusive leadership within an organization. As at the time of writing there is a lack of studies that examine the beneficial moderating effect of employee forgiveness on abusive leadership and turnover intention. The current paper therefore proposes a framework whereby employees who are more likely to forgive their leaders report lower turnover intentions. Because employee forgiveness is a trainable aspect, an important implication of this is that organizations should invest in workshops that teach employees how to properly manage conflict and to forgive and stay focused on the job. Although it may take some time for an abusive leader to be properly dismissed by HR after the issue has reached higher-ups, at least the organization is able to retain its high-performing employees rather than lose them over the short-term.

Keywords: Forgiveness, Abusive leadership, Turnover intention

1 Introduction

Abusive leaders are a nightmare to work under. According to [13], an abusive leader is someone who ridicules and humiliates employees, is condescending, rude, puts employees down in front of others, unnecessarily reminds employees of past mistakes, blames employees to save the leader’s own skin, tells employees that they are useless and incompetent, lies to employees, and openly badmouths employees. Without surprise, employees who are unwilling to put up with this nightmare anymore resign as soon as the opportunity presents itself [1, 11]. This is a growing concern because despite the good intentions of shareholders and top management to retain

high performing employees, the presence of abusive leaders may sometimes go under the radar as it is hard to fully regulate or eliminate abusive behaviors within the organization [6]. Abusive leaders may only show their ‘true colors’ to their subordinates under their department but hide these abusive behaviors from the higher ups or other managers.

Although it may not be possible to completely root out abusive leadership within an organization there is at least a glimmer of hope within literature. Previous studies reveal that employees who forgave the transgressions of an abusive leader eventually reported higher job performance [15], displayed productive organizational citizenship behaviors (OCB) [5], and remained within the organization to voluntarily contribute ideas for the benefit of the organization [10]. Employees who choose to forgive, move on, and not take it personally were more likely to stay focused on the job.

In addition to this, previous studies also revealed that various personal and environmental factors mitigated or lessened the negative impact of an abusive leader. Previous studies found that an employee’s internal emotional regulation [7], mindfulness and situational awareness [16], self-esteem [2], and emotional support from other colleagues [17], lessened the impact of abusive leaders and their desire to quit the organization.

Despite the previous evidence presented within literature, as at the time of writing there are a lack of studies that examine the beneficial moderating effect of employee forgiveness on abusive leadership and turnover intention. The current paper therefore attempts to fill this literature gap and proposes a conceptual framework that employees who choose to forgive their leaders are more likely to report lower turnover intentions. An important significance of this study is that because employee forgiveness is a trainable aspect, organizations should invest in workshops that teach employees how to properly manage conflict and to forgive and stay focused on the job. Although it may take some time for an abusive leader to be properly dismissed by HR after the issue has reached the higher-ups, at least the organization is able to retain its high performing employees rather than lose them in the short-term.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Abusive leadership and Turnover Intention

In a nutshell, an abusive leader is someone who creates an atmosphere of fear and dread among employees [14]. According to [13], an abusive leader is a tyrant who openly disparages staff members, is condescending, puts staff members down in front of others, blames staff members for past errors to protect their own reputation, tells staff members they are worthless and incompetent, lies to staff members, and makes fun of them. Although bosses may sometimes be rude to employees based on the circumstances, abusive leaders are different because they are not just rude to employees, but are unkind, unfair, and also inconsiderate leaders [4].

Without any surprise, employees who are unwilling to live in continuous fear of this nightmarish boss opt for resignation. Multiple studies support this as abusive leaders were found to exponentially increase turnover rates [1, 2, 11, 17], cause em-

employee burnout and emotional exhaustion [2], reduce employee job satisfaction [11], and motivate employees to seek revenge [1, 8].

Based on the evidence found within literature, it is thus posited that: Proposition 1: Abusive leadership has a positive relationship with turnover intention.

2.2 Forgiveness

To err is human, to forgive, divine [12] 300 years later and the benefits of forgiveness by this famous 18-century poet still hold true at the workplace. A comprehensive meta-analysis by [9] identified the various benefits of forgiveness at the workplace namely: improved well-being, better personal and career growth, reduced stress, more positive emotions, better harmony and less conflict at the workplace, stronger social bonds, and overall improvement of mental health among individuals. In line with this [3]'s famous quote "you can't control how people will treat you, but you can control how you react to it" holds true especially in the context of the current study. Within academic literature, forgiveness was also linked to higher job performance, even when employees were under an abusive leader [15].

Employee forgiveness as a moderator of the Abusive Leadership-Turnover intention relationship. Previous literature has shed light on the possibility of employee forgiveness as a moderating variable that produces favorable work outcomes, despite the employee being under the supervision of an abusive leader. To elaborate, employees who chose to forgive the offense of an abusive leader reported higher job performance in the end [15], were more likely to display helpful organizational citizenship behaviors (OCB) [5] and were less likely to resign but instead voluntarily contribute ideas for the benefit of the organization [10]. Thus, employees who remained focused on their work were those who made the decision to forgive, move on, and not take it personally.

In line with this, several contextual and personal characteristics also minimized the negative effects of an abusive leader. Despite being under an abusive leader, turnover intention was mitigated by the employee's self-esteem [2], internal emotional regulation [7], mindfulness and situational awareness [16], and emotional support received from other coworkers [17].

Based on the previous trend observed within literature, it is just posited that: Proposition 2: Employee forgiveness moderates the positive relationship between abusive leadership and turnover intention, such that the positive relationship between abusive leadership and turnover intention becomes weaker when employee forgiveness is high.

3 Proposed Conceptual Framework

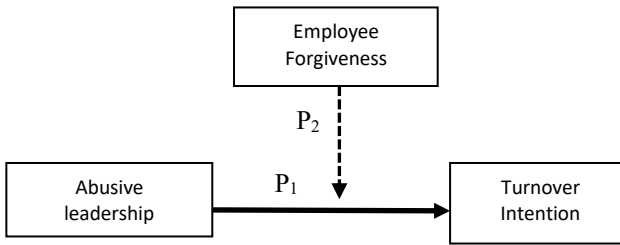


Fig. 1. Conceptual framework

As seen in Figure 1, the current study proposes a conceptual framework whereby employee forgiveness moderates the positive relationship between abusive leadership and turnover intention. Employees who are more likely to forgive their leaders report lower turnover intentions, as opposed to their counterparts who hold a grudge.

References

1. Afshan, G., Kashif, M., Sattayawaksakul, D., Cheewaprabkhit, P., Wijenayake, S.: Abusive supervision, supervisor undermining and turnover intention: mediation of quiescent silence and revenge motives among Thai banking frontliners. *Management Research Review* 45(11), 1479–1502 (2022).
2. Ali, S., et al.: Abusive supervision and turnover intentions: a mediation–moderation perspective. *Sustainability* 14(17), 10626 (2022).
3. Bennett, R. T.: *The Light in the Heart: Inspirational Thoughts for Living Your Best Life*. Goodreads (2016).
4. Dedahanov, A., Baykal, E., Abdurazzakov, O.: Abusive leadership and employee silence: interactional justice as a mediator. *Management & Accounting Review* 24(2), 157–180 (2025).
5. Eluwole, K. K., Ukeje, U. E., Saydam, M. B., Ozturen, A., Lasisi, T. T.: Behavioural responses to abusive supervision in hospitality: forgiveness climate and helping behaviour effects. *International Social Science Journal* 72(245), 543–560 (2022).
6. Harthill, S.: Workplace bullying: Lessons from the United Kingdom. *Minnesota Journal of International Law* 17, 247 (2008).
7. Hu, X., Wan, Y.: Abusive leadership and turnover intention: cultural mediation and moderation effects. *Journal of Management* (2025).
8. Hongbo, L., et al.: Revenge responses in subordinates: a displaced revenge lens on abusive supervision. *Frontiers in Psychology* 11, 503153 (2020).
9. Lahiri, A., Padmakumari, P.: Forgiveness across relationship contexts: a systematic review. *Current Psychology* 1–18 (2025).
10. Mathieu, C., Neumann, C. S., Babiak, P.: Corporate psychopathy and abusive supervision effects job satisfaction and turnover. *Personality and Individual Differences* 91, 102–106 (2016).
11. Tepper, B. J.: Consequences of abusive supervision. *Academy of Management Journal* 43(2), 178–190 (2000).

12. Pope, A.: *An Essay on Criticism*. Lewis (1711).
13. Udin, U., Dananjoyo, R.: Bibliometric insights on abusive leadership for future research trajectories. *International Research Journal of Multidisciplinary Scope* 6(2), 115–126 (2025).
14. Yang, J., Liu, Y., Stackhouse, M., Wang, W.: Attribution and forgiveness: when abusive supervision enhances performance. *Journal of Managerial Psychology* 35(7/8), 575–587 (2020).
15. Yang, W., Xu, S.: Joint effects of abusive work environment and mindfulness on employee wellbeing and turnover intention. *Journal of Hospitality & Tourism Research* 48(4), 712–724 (2024).
16. Zhang, W., Zheng, S., Pletzer, J. L., Derks, D., Breevaart, K., Breevaart, K., Zhang, X.: Subordinate coping with abusive leadership: emotional reactions, counterproductive behaviours and turnover intention. *Journal of Leadership & Organizational Studies* 29(4), 389–408 (2022).
17. Zhang, W., et al.: Coping mechanisms with an abusive leader: affective and turnover outcomes. *Journal of Leadership & Organizational Studies* 29(4), 389–408 (2022).

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>), which permits any noncommercial use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

