



Elizabeth E. Umphress
 Montague - CTE Scholar
 (2008-2009)
 Department of Management



Group Reactions to Bad Bosses: The Influence of Status

As students prepare to enter the workforce, it is important that they possess an understanding of the social dynamics that exist within an organization. Knowledge of why people behave the way that they do can benefit these future employees when they are presented with new and potentially uncomfortable experiences. The exchange between supervisor and employee is one such dynamic that may result in a negative experience.

This research, generously funded by the Montague Center for Teaching Excellence, focuses on one aspect of this supervisor-subordinate exchange—employee reactions to bad bosses. More specifically, and in line with a growing trend toward teams in organizations, it discusses how groups of employees may collectively react to unjust treatment from a supervisor.

In addition to educating current and future employees, this research is also highly relevant to exchanges within the classroom. Indeed, exploring supervisor mistreatment (low interpersonal justice climate) of a group of employees can help us understand the unfair exchanges between professors and a class full of students.

Are group reactions to bad bosses universal? Do all groups react to all unfair supervisors in the same way? I propose that this relationship is more complex than previously suggested. In particular, I claim that group reactions to an unfair justice climate, or the group-level shared perception of unfair treatment are influenced by the status of the supervisor, the group, and the organization as a whole. Further, I propose that unfair treatment directed at a group may actually have a silver lining associated with it.

Supervisor Status

- Some supervisors are granted certain latitude to behave outside of group norms.
- Specifically, groups tolerate unfair treatment by supervisors with idiosyncrasy credits (high status).
- It is believed that these supervisors provide an enhanced opportunity to learn and connect others with a rich social network.
- Thus, in order to sustain potential benefits, employees are more willing to tolerate deviant behavior by these supervisors.

Proposition 1: Groups with supervisors who have low levels of idiosyncrasy credits will have stronger reactions to low interpersonal justice climates than groups with supervisors who have high levels of idiosyncrasy credits.

Group Status

- High status groups are especially sensitive to low interpersonal justice climate they believe their status entitles them to respect and dignity
- Unfair interpersonal treatment also signals a loss of benefits enjoyed by high status groups.
- Low status groups might perceive that low interpersonal justice climate is more justified
- Thus, they are less sensitive to unfair treatment

Proposition 2: High status groups will have stronger, negative reactions to low levels of interpersonal justice climate than low status groups.

Organizational Status

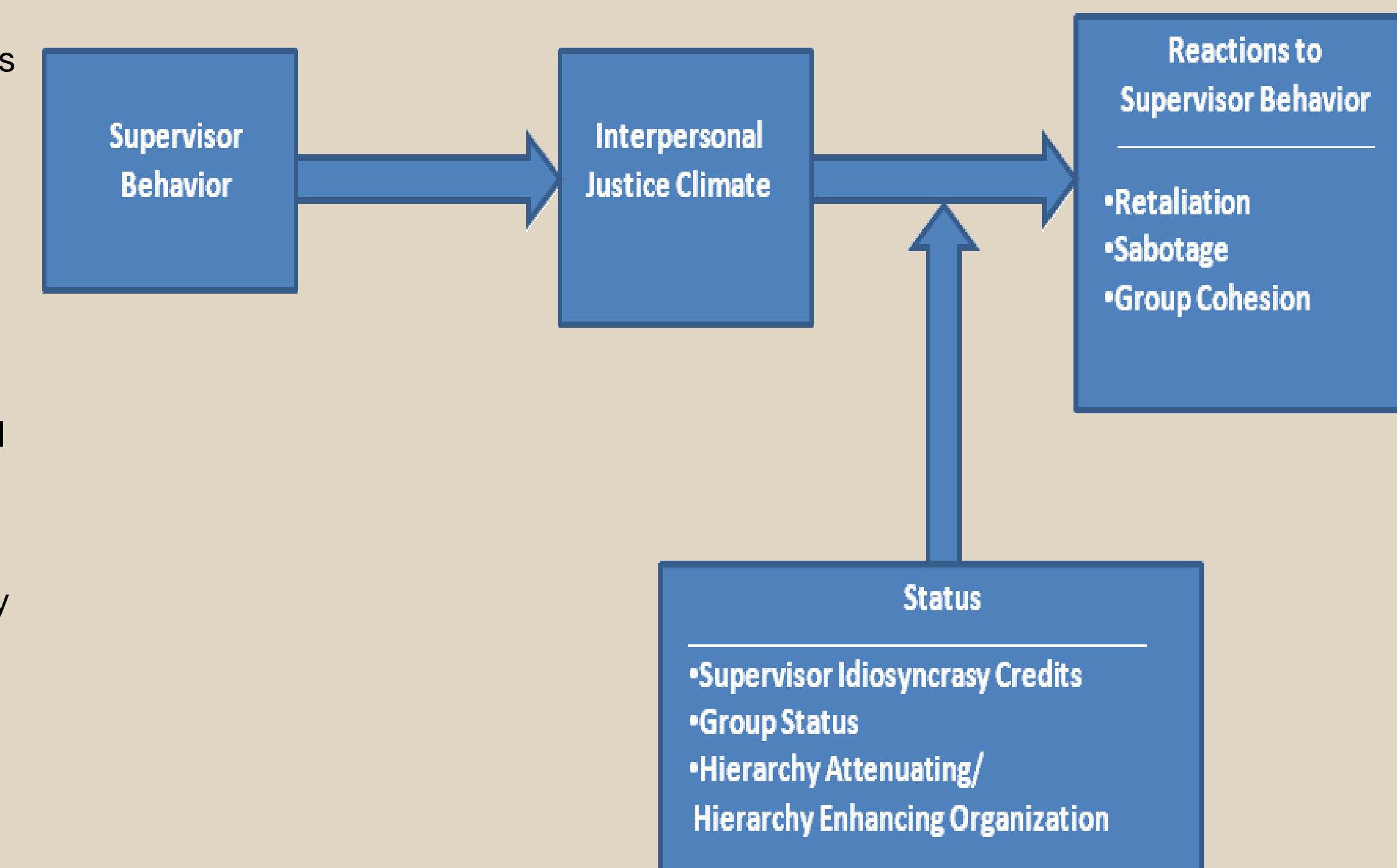
- Organizations and institutions can be classified as supporting hierarchy-enhancing or hierarchy-attenuating belief systems.
- Hierarchy-enhancing belief systems support inequality among groups, whereas hierarchy-attenuating belief support egalitarianism within society.
- People will join an organization that meets their general belief regarding social dominance.
- Groups in hierarchy attenuating organizations are likely to react strongly to unfair treatment because it suggests inequality between the supervisor and the group.

Proposition 3: We propose that groups within hierarchy-attenuating organizations will have stronger negative reactions to low levels of interpersonal justice climate than groups within hierarchy-enhancing organizations.

Favorable Reactions to Unfair Treatment

- When people are treated badly, they experience a cognitive inconsistency (they expect to be treated with respect, and thus do not understand why they were treated unfairly).
- Those who experience these inconsistencies will be aroused to reduce them.
- One way to accomplish this reduction is through social affiliation.
- Thus, members of a group who are being treated unfairly will tend to lean on each other for support, thus increasing co-worker trust and group cohesion.

Proposition 4: Low levels of interpersonal justice climate could enhance group cohesion.



This research was presented at Cornell University during the annual ‘Research on Managing Groups and Teams’ conference, co-sponsored by Cornell and Stanford universities. It is currently under review for publication in the 2010 edition of the ‘Research on Managing Groups and Teams’ academic textbook. Finally, it has been shared with management students and Mays Business School faculty.

