

# Supervisor-Subordinate Communication: Workplace Bullying and the Tyrannical Mum Effect

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## Abstract

Real, or perceived, workplace bullying exhibited by a supervisor against a subordinate may condition a subordinate to withhold disagreement, or communication of contrarian information, from the supervisor. Existing research and literature demonstrate the mum effect and its influence on communicators given generally neutral associations with message recipients. The mum effect is the tendency for communicators to feel a sense of guilt and association with bad news delivered to a message recipient. Given an alternative, communicators prefer to remain mum than to deliver the bad news. However, research of the mum effect has minimally explored divergent conditions. Through an exploration of workplace bullying, whistleblowing, and existing literature regarding the mum effect, the author presents a divergent theme to the hierarchical mum effect which the author labels the tyrannical mum effect. The tyrannical mum effect is established under the framework of seven propositions which provide the foundation by which a supervisor exhibits workplace hostility to subordinates, subordinate interpretation of the hostility, and the willingness of the subordinate to communicate disagreement in a hostile work environment. The seven propositions of the tyrannical mum effect provide opportunity for future research.

**Keywords:** Mum effect, hierarchical, tyrannical, workplace bullying, hostile, retaliatory, retribution, aggressive, whistleblowing, fear, retribution, insecurity, apathy

## 1. Tyrannical Mum Effect

The Industrial Revolution ushered in a new era of mass production which married a dependence on both manual labor and powered resources. This method of manufacturing established a highly productive workforce of which the world had not seen before. Since the Industrial Revolution, management and leadership theory has continuously evolved to adapt to emerging business, consumer, and employee needs. Arguably, one of the greatest paradigm shifts in management and leadership theory is in response to the reduced reliance on manual labor and increased dependency on the knowledge worker (Drucker, 1999). Drucker describes the rapid growth of the knowledge worker represents organizational increased dependency on a tremendous amount of both advanced and theoretical knowledge. Arukhe (2014) argues the importance of organizations to implement strategic knowledge management systems to capture the valuable knowledge and information available within a diverse workforce.

Obtaining information from a workforce, in addition to the implementation of knowledge management systems, is equally dependent upon the workforce's willingness to communicate both good and bad news for the benefit of organizational long-term prosperity. Šebestová and Rylková (2011) posit that organizations that establish learning *into the doing* of daily operation develop increased competitive advantage within their respective industries. Conversely, Gandel (2010) suggests that organizations that do not foster open and honest communication in fact reinforce "bad behaviors instead of fixing them" (p. 1). Effective knowledge management systems may be inhibited by workplace cultures that foster subordinate choice of "silence and equivocation" in lieu of risking the continued subordinate-supervisor relationship by communicating contrarian information (Bisel, Messersmith, & Kelley, 2012, p. 138). The mum effect, which has developed since the early 1970's, is a phenomenon by which individuals fear personal association with the communication of bad news.

The knowledge worker requires a different management style than that of the Industrial Revolution laborer. Knowledge workers require autonomy and the ability to innovate. Rather than seen as an operational cost,

Drucker (1999) contends the knowledge worker should be viewed by management as an asset that produces quality more so than quantity. Subordinates who believe they cannot communicate with supervisors effectively inhibit organizational innovation and, particularly for the knowledge worker, work in a less satisfying career. In the workplace, the mum effect can directly challenge a subordinate's workplace self-esteem and diminish job satisfaction (Payne, 2007).

The article first explores the existing research establishing the mum effect. Seven propositions establish the foundation for additional research into the tyrannical mum effect. These seven propositions are presented via an exploration of established research connecting the hierarchical mum effect to workplace bullying and organizational whistleblowing procedures.

## 2. Progression of Mum Theory

Tesser and Rosen (1972) identified the mum effect in their study examining the reluctance of a communicator to share bad news when the communicator and recipient shared similar and dissimilar fates resulting from the communication. In this study, both the communicator and recipient received low levels of electric shock when the participants shared the same fate of "bad news." However, in the event the recipient was the only individual subjected to "bad news" and received a shock, this individual was instructed to respond as though receiving an electric shock causing extreme pain. The researchers found through their collection of data that the communicators were most likely to feel guilt when communicating bad news effecting the recipient only. Particularly, the communicators themselves felt an "association" with the message.

Weening, Groenenboom, and Wilke (2001) explored Tesser and Rosen's study results and argued a counter position. Weening et al. contended that the level of established relationship between the communicator and recipient may be a mitigating factor to the degree of guilt with which the communicator may associate. However, Yariv (2006) refutes Weening et al. through a study of negative feedback coaching methods. Yariv found that message communicators in fact continued to demonstrate strong associations of guilt for communicating bad news despite skills practiced through negative feedback coaching. Yet, neither Weening et al. nor Yariv specifically explored the extreme conditions of hostile work environments or the resulting effect on subordinates' willingness to speak out.

### 2.1 Moral Mum Effect

The mum effect was further studied by Bisel, Kelley, Ploeger, and Messersmith (2011) in an examination of research participants' willingness to justify, or deny, making immoral decisions in the workplace. In their study, Bisel et al. presented subordinates and supervisors with morally questionable scenarios. The researchers identified participant willingness to withhold disagreement to the use of certain immoral scenarios. Particularly, it was identified that "females, younger workers, and those with the least work experience are most indirect in denying an unethical request" (p. 465). Consequently, Bisel et al. demonstrate the application of the mum effect in the workplace and subordinate willingness to change their behaviors given circumstances of moral ambiguity, thus coining the term *moral mum effect*.

### 2.2 Hierarchical Mum Effect

Bisel, Messersmith, and Kelley (BM&K) (2012) coined the term *hierarchical mum effect* building their theory that organizational command structure and relational context may foster a mum workplace. In the BM&K model, nine propositions were established to identify conditions which may influence a subordinate to remain mum to their supervisor. The first proposition suggested workers with employment contracts felt greater security than those without (#1). The next two propositions assume supervisors are more motivated in protecting their own public self-image (#2) than their subordinates' (#3). In contrast, the following two propositions presume subordinate interest in protecting both their own (#4), as well as their supervisors' (#5), public self-images. Next, the propositions establish that supervisor public self-image is more threatened by negative feedback from subordinates than visa-versa (#6), and subordinates tend to use "silence and equivocation" in lieu of communicating disagreement which may threaten the supervisor (#7). Larger hierarchical structures are presumed to heighten the effects of the hierarchical mum effect (#8). As a mitigating proposition, the authors suggest anonymous feedback channels as a means to overcome work environments subject to the mum effect (#9). In order to test the researchers' propositions, BM&K recommended future research using field observations to capture socialized expectations and culture which may suppress organizational dissent.

### 2.3 Organizational Leadership Awareness

Beakley (2015) conducted a modified Delphi study to further explore the BM&K propositions. Via successive rounds of survey data collection to further establish the conditions which foster a mum workplace, the Beakley

study explored the opinions of knowledgeable participants the supervisor and subordinate characteristics which foster a mum environment and to identify leadership styles most conducive to subordinate freedom to communicate bad news. A panel of knowledgeable participants via a modified Delphi method study, with qualifying years of management and work experience, was used in lieu of alternative qualitative study methods, out of concerns that observations or direct interviews of employees performing in a mum environment may provide biased and dishonest feedback due to the mum effect itself. Based on Yukl (2013) leadership definitions provided, study participants ranked each leadership style on a scale of (+5) strongly cultivating open communication, and (-5) strongly cultivating a mum environment. The Beakley study found transformational and participative leadership styles most conducive of honest subordinate-supervisor information sharing, whereas transactional and intellectual leadership styles were the least conducive (see Table 1).

Table 1. Leadership styles fostering mum versus open-communication environments

Leadership Style	Mean	Median	Mode	St. Dev.
Transformational	3.71	4	4	2.12
Transactional	-1.11	-2.5	-4	3.15
Participative	2.76	4	4	2.49
Charismatic	.9	1	3	2.83
Intellectual	-.14	0	2	2.34
Strategic	.97	2	3	3.05
Self-Sacrificing	1.21	2.5	4	3.18
Servant	1.83	3	5	2.95
Situational	.89	1.5	2	2.82

(Beakley, 2015, p. 90).

The Beakley study further identified the supervisor and subordinate characteristics most likely to contribute to fostering a mum workplace, as well as the disparity between the characteristic and upper-management awareness of the characteristic. The Beakley study found several characteristics of the hierarchical mum effect which support several of BM&K propositions, including: Supervisor ego non-conducive to negative feedback (proposition #6), subordinate passive or insecure (proposition #7), perceived closed-door culture (proposition #8).

While, the study yielded less insight into propositions 1-5, the results of the study did produce ample opportunity to further explore the conditions under which proposition #9 is applicable:

“Anonymous feedback channels (when used frequently and heedfully by top-level decision makers) moderate the association between structural and functional distance in supervisor-subordinate relationships and organizational learning outcomes” (Bisel et al., 2012, p. 140).

Interestingly, the Beakley study found that supervisor characteristics of being *retaliatory*, *non-responsive to subordinate communication*, and having *aggressive demeanor* were among the highest characteristics identified by study participants. Additionally, the researcher found high upper-management disparity in awareness of each supervisor retaliatory behaviors. Further, this study found the greatest subordinate characteristics likely to foster a mum environment were the *fear of consequences*, *insecurity*, and *apathy*. Likewise, the Beakley study found very high disparity in upper-management’s awareness of the subordinate characteristics of *fear of consequences*, *insecurity*, and *apathy* (see Table 2).

Table 2. Factors fostering a mum work environment

Factors	Fostering Environment (Mean)	Mum	Upper-Management's Awareness of Factors (Mean)	Disparity
Retaliatory ( <i>Supervisor</i> )	8.58		4.54	4.04+
Supervisor Non-Responsive to Employee Communication ( <i>Supervisor</i> )	8.25		4.42	3.83+
Aggressive Behavior/Demeanor ( <i>Supervisor</i> )	8.17		5.04	3.13
Fear of Consequences/Retribution ( <i>Subordinate</i> )	8.92		4.29	4.63+
Insecure / Lack of Confidence ( <i>Subordinate</i> )	7.63		4.17	3.46
Apathetic / Disengaged ( <i>Subordinate</i> )	7.13		3.92	3.21

(Note: + = very high disparity; \* = very low disparity) "Very high/low" set at +/- 1 point of study mean disparity of 2.83.

(Beakley, 2015, pp. 98-99, & p. 191).

The author acknowledges that different leadership styles are necessary under different work conditions, industries, and cultures. As such, aggressive and retaliatory supervisor behaviors, which in turn may be related to subordinate fear of retribution, are not necessarily present in all work environments. Thus, additional supervisor and subordinate characteristics of the hierarchical mum effect may be found which further support BM&K propositions 1-5. Nevertheless, the Beakley modified Delphi study ( $n = 24$ ) represents strong evidence of workplace bullying as an important element which may foster workplace mumming effects. As workplace bullying was a divergent theme in the modified Delphi study, Beakley acknowledged this area as an opportunity for future research. In the following paragraphs, the author describes the tyrannical mum effect

#### 2.4 Tyrannical Mum Effect

Whereas the hierarchical mum effect addresses the propensity of subordinates' option to remain mum to supervisors due to the constraints of the hierarchical structure and that structure's emphasis on protecting the supervisor's public self-image, the tyrannical mum effect is a divergent theme which directly explores workplace bullying when the supervisor is the perpetrator of hostility. Although related, the emergence of this divergent theme as a strong predictor of mum workplace environments may reflect certain conditions which may influence the hierarchical mum effect by either pre-empting, or possibly further exacerbating, the hierarchical mum effect. What is not clear is if the BM&K propositions further support a workplace environment which protect a tyrannical supervisor, if a tyrannical supervisor establishes workplace conditions that render the BM&K propositions unreliable, or if the tyrannical supervisor has no influence on the hierarchical mum effect at all.

A discussion of the tyrannical mum effect revisits the Weening et al. (2001) and Yariv (2006) debate with a unique perspective: The mumming effect of an overtly abusive supervisor. Weening et al. postulated the degree of association between the communicator and message recipient is an influential factor to whether the mum effect causes the message communicator discomfort in communicating disagreement or negative information. Yariv refuted this, citing study evidence demonstrating negative feedback coaching sessions failed to mitigate a communicator's negative feeling of association to communicating bad news. However, Yariv's study did not address the divergent theme of overtly aggressive message recipients. While Yariv's position may refute Weening et al.'s argument that associated relationships between communicator and message recipient may influence the mumming effects on the communicator, Yariv's position does not address the compounding complications of the mum effect upon the communicator resulting from specifically a hostile relationship with the message recipient. Thus the opportunity to further explore subordinate reluctance to disagree, or communicate bad news, to a tyrannical supervisor is additionally supported.

The author believes that when the workplace bully is the message recipient, and in particular is the supervisor, a communicator is further predisposed to respond differently to negative feedback coaching sessions than would a communicator with only an associated relationship to the message recipient. Therefore, in support of Weening et al.'s position, the author proposes the level of developed association between communicator and message recipient is, in fact, an influential factor to the receptiveness to negative feedback coaching sessions, and thusly the willingness of a communicator to attempt application of lessons learned.

### 2.5 Workplace Bullying

According to Saunders, Huynh, and Goodman-Delahunty (2007), the discussion of workplace bullying only began to build momentum in 1992. Prior to that, Saunders et al. explain, the focus on bullying behaviors centered largely on discriminatory behaviors in the workplace against protected classes based on sex, sexual orientation, race, national origin, and religion. Accordingly, a myriad of diverse definitions of workplace bullying began to develop, including such characteristics as persistent downgrading, criticism, vicious humiliation, slander, and unseen acts including isolation and assignment of meaningless tasks (Nazarko, 2001; Karatuna, 2015). It was not until 1994, Saunders et al. cites the Swedish Board of Occupational Safety and Health, that the first anti-bullying legislation was passed which provided a working definition for workplace bullying as “recurrent reprehensible or distinctly negative actions which are directed against individual employees in an offensive manner and can result in those employees being placed outside the workplace community” (p. 342).

Workplace bullying is a phenomenon which occurs both between coworkers as well as across hierarchical positions of authority. Nazarko (2001) emphasizes the significance of supervisor bullying tactics in describing “the bully’s ‘management skills’ consist of aggression and undermining staff” and effectively diminish subordinate encouragement, abilities, and motivation (p. 14). The tyrannical supervisor complicates work processes by withholding information necessary for subordinate success (Takaki, Taniguchi, & Hirokawa, 2013). The onus of responsibility to seek clarification of work processes arguably falls on the subordinate. However, Bartlett and Bartlett (2011) caution that the tyrannical supervisor stifles and overrules opinions and flaunts status and power to discourage feedback from subordinates. Subordinates dependent on the tyrannical supervisor for direction are discouraged from seeking help and fear failing to meet the supervisor’s expected performance results:

*Proposition 1:* The tyrannical supervisor uses threats and intimidation to influence the subordinate to meet or exceed performance expectations under the supervisor’s specific instructions.

The tyrannical supervisor expects the subordinate to meet or exceed performance expectations via the precise direction provided by the supervisor. The tyrannical supervisor makes effort to ensure the subordinate performs as directed through excessive monitoring, and if the subordinate is found to be under-performing, the supervisor gives unfair criticism and blocks individuals from promotion (Randle, Stevenson, & Grayling, 2007; Rayner, 1997; Simpson & Cohen, 2004). Such aggressive supervisory tactics, Nazarko (2001) explains, leave subordinates feeling vulnerable and powerless, and as a result from damaged self-esteem, subordinates’ fail to deliver their best work product, progressively fear continued supervisor retribution, and eventually quit their jobs. Subordinates are not provided the necessary resources from tyrannical supervisors to succeed, and consequently are punished for it:

*Proposition 2:* The tyrannical supervisor uses retaliatory tactics to punish subordinates who fail to meet or exceed performance expectations following the specific instructions given by the tyrannical supervisor.

Subordinates of a tyrannical supervisor may believe bullying is part of the organizational culture. Harvey, Treadway, and Heames (2007) emphasize that bullying is, in fact, more likely to occur if the tyrannical supervisor believes the organization supports such behaviors. The Beakley study found although the leadership style most restrictive to open and honest communication is transactional leadership, it is also the most commonly cultivated in the workplace. A leadership style, common to many organizations, which is contingent on exchange of benefits and pay for work performed could be abused by hostile personalities. Consequently, subordinates who perceive upper-management to condone tyrannical supervisor behaviors cause the subordinate high levels of anxiety and despair due to the helplessness of their condition (Leymann, 1990). The result of the Beakley study creates an interesting dichotomy with Harvey et al., in that subordinate perception that organizational leadership condones hostile supervisory behaviors does not mirror the reality that a high disparity exists between supervisor aggressive demeanor and upper-managements’ awareness of that demeanor. Nevertheless, the subordinate’s perception is, in fact, their own reality:

*Proposition 3:* The subordinate presumes that the tyrannical supervisor through tenure, positional authority, or relational context within the command structure, is less likely to receive punishment for workplace infractions than is the subordinate employee for workplace infractions.

### 2.6 Whistleblowing

BM&K’s ninth proposition argues the use of “anonymous feedback channels moderate the association between structural and functional distance in supervisor-subordinate relationships and organizational learning outcomes”

(p. 140). The use of anonymous feedback mechanisms has risen since the early 1990's with particular growth following the enactment of Sarbanes-Oxley Act in 2002. Also known as whistleblowing, such mechanisms provide employees of organizations a channel through which to identify and report workplace improprieties. Channels include internal management, organizational hotlines, and external third party hotlines. Such hotlines typically permit reporters to make either anonymous or confidential statements. According to the United States Sentencing Commission (USSC) (2013), whistleblowing hotlines are a necessary practice for all organizations, in part, to establish an effective compliance program.

Individuals who identify workplace improprieties opt to use anonymous feedback channels out of fear of communicating bad news to their direct chain of management (Callegari, 2012; Ray, 2006). Apaza and Chang (2011) finds the use of reporting hotlines greatly improves subordinate-supervisor communications and significantly reduces wrong-doing. Although the USSC instructs organizations to implement anonymous feedback channels for reporting workplace improprieties, a study by Brennan and Kelly (2006) finds that the internal structure of many organizations either do not provide a reporting hotline, or if provided, may actually discourage employees from using it. However, Cassematis and Wortley (2013), as well as a study by Public Concerns at Work (PCAW) (2013), indicate in some instances whistleblowers are still identified despite efforts to remain anonymous. Such identification in these instances was found to not only lead to retribution against the reporter, but also discourage other would-be reporters from trusting anonymous reporting hotlines (Ethics Resource Center, 2012). Subordinates under a tyrannical supervisor suffer severe fear and anxiety (Glasø & Notelaers, 2012), which gradually diminishes the subordinate's confidence and self-esteem (Adams, 1997; Illinois University, 2009). Ultimately, discouraged subordinates give up hope that conditions will actually change (Karatuna, 2015):

*Proposition 4:* Subordinate information not shared with the tyrannical supervisor is unlikely shared via anonymous feedback channels due to latent fear of association with the message and consequential tyrannical supervisor retribution.

*Proposition 5:* Subordinates tend to use "silence or equivocation" (Bisel et al., 2012), when they perceive a supervisor as tyrannical.

The tyrannical supervisor is not the perpetrator of a single isolated incident of mistreatment. Most people have an occasional bad day and behave abnormally. Rather, Glasø and Notelaers (2012) demonstrates that bullying behaviors are generally persistent and repeated over a long period of time. Even seemingly innocuous behaviors, such as ignoring a subordinate or failing to respond to subordinate requests for help, when performed over a long period of time, may be experienced by the subordinate as an act of bullying. Workplace bullying, over an extended period of time, negatively affects the subordinate's relationship with the supervisor (Glasø, Nielsen, & Einarsen, 2009; MacIntosh, 2005), harms teamwork (Baillien, Neyens, DeWitte, & De Cuyper, 2009; Gardner & Johnson, 2001), reduces morale, reduced creativity, lower productivity (Baruch, 2005; Bilgel, Aytac, & Bayram, 2006; Hauge, Skogstad et al., 2010; Namie, 2003; Quine, 2003), and decreases commitment to the organization (Gardner & Johnson), all of which have significant consequences to organizational culture. Bisel et al. (2011) in stating "females, younger workers, and those with the least work experience are most indirect in denying an unethical request," demonstrate an interesting caveat (p. 465). Older subordinates, with more work experience, may be more likely to possess the workplace self-identity and self-esteem necessary to speak out against a tyrannical supervisor as would a junior subordinate with less work experience.

*Proposition 6:* The longer a subordinate works under a tyrannical supervisor, the less likely the subordinate will be to voice disagreement to the manager.

*Proposition 7:* The longer a subordinate works under a tyrannical supervisor, the less likely the subordinate will be to voice disagreement through anonymous channels.

### 2.7 Future Research

The author recommends researchers employ either field experiments or a Delphi study to test the propositions outlined above. Field experimentation may be used to identify perceived relationships between subordinates and supervisors, and each groups' perception of allowable communication. Field observations are likely inappropriate to future opportunities for research into the tyrannical mum effect as the incidence of workplace hostility is both unpredictable and likely hidden from outside observers. Alternatively, a Delphi study incorporating informed participants, such as management and a human resources professionals, may yield insight into this phenomenon.

### 3. Conclusion

The phenomenon known as the mum effect is a still relatively untapped opportunity for additional meaningful inquiry. While Tesser and Rosen (1972) established a firm foundation of the mum effect upon which further study could develop, to date the study of the mum effect in the workplace is still only minimally explored. Weening et al. (2001), Bisel et al. (2011), BM and Yariv (2006) establish both data and theory to address the moral and hierarchical mum effects in the workplace ceteris paribus. In the perspective of restricted organizational learning, the mum effect also requires further inquiry where subordinate-supervisor relationships are strained due to hostility in the work-environment. Exploration of the seven propositions of the tyrannical mum effect will help advance scholarly and practitioner knowledge of the mum effect and exacerbating influencers of the mum effect. Moreover, further inquiry into the tyrannical mum effect may uncover additional mitigating, and aggravating, influencers of the mum effect in the workplace.

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