9-1-2008

Recent Research of Note

Steven Meisel
La Salle University

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"Ain't Misbehavin": Workplace deviance as organizational resistance

by Thomas B Lawrence and Sandra L Robinson in *Journal of Management*, 2007, Vol. 33 (3), 378–394.

Summarized and Interpreted by Steven Meisel

La Salle University

Organization
Management
Journal

With great power there must also come… great responsibility. (Peter Parker, *Amazing Fantasy #15*, August 1962)

This article offers a theory of workplace deviance as a form of resistance to the abuse of organizational power. More to the point, Lawrence and Robinson make the reasonable observation that the system and types of organizational power lead to frustration, aggression, and other forms of employee pushback.

Deviance is defined by this study as "voluntary behavior that violates significant organizational norms and thus is perceived as threatening the well-being of the organization or its members" (p. 380). The important connection to organizational functioning is the authors' assertion that workplace deviance is provoked by everyday expressions of power whether fair or unjust. The use of power results in three types of disparity all too familiar to anyone who has worked in complex organizations. These are: loss of autonomy; threats to one's social identity; and need for fair application of the rules and rewards. The need to address these situations is the well-known basis for Equity Theory but can also be the source of amplified forms of redress such as defensiveness, sabotage, and revenge.

Many of the authors' ideas about the cause and effect of deviant behavior are summarized in a figure titled: "The impact of the form of power on types of workplace deviance" (p. 388). We can see that influence (e.g. decision making, agenda setting) most likely results in political deviance (e.g. spreading rumors, backstabbing). The episodic or discrete nature of influence as a type of power results in a relatively low level form of deviance. Although not desirable, we have all learned to expect and manage this form of behavior. However, as the forms of power become systemic, everyday tactics such as discipline (e.g. surveillance, examination) or domination (e.g. actuarial practices, discrimination) lead to responses of production deviance (e.g. absenteeism, withholding effort) or property deviance (e.g. theft, sabotage). At the unfortunate margin of this power–response equation, we see episodic power like force expressed as restraint or physical violence resulting in deviance that may also escalate into personal aggression such as verbal abuse or physical assault. This upward spiral of power use and employee behavior outcomes can be summarized in pointing out that the worse people feel they are treated (objectification), the

greater the sense of frustration. Workplace deviance is the consequence of frustration.

An important moderating effect of deviant behavior seems to be the perception of procedural justice. That is, "target's perceptions of whether power treats them as subjects (one of a class of people) or objects (the distinct target) will lead to greater frustration, which in turn will create motivation to resist with deviance" (p. 386).

Some concerns about the assumptions

It would be useful if the authors had more to say about the constraints available to those in power. The use of power is taken as a given in organizational life and this is reasonable. However, there are inhibitors to the use of power that need to be overcome. These include conscience, moral training, costs, psychological comfort with use of power, and cultural norms. The constraints are in place in some form for both managers and organizations. We bring to work our own set of psychological or ethical moderators and these are worthy of some attention. A decision is made to enact power and a decision can be made to pull back from use of power to gain compliance.

This leads to some questions about definitions and meaning. Deviance, by definition, is explained as a *response* to power. However, it seems as if there should be some room in this study for the occasional example of deviance as an *expression* of power. To this point, the authors assert that revenge may be a method of "demonstrating one's socially valued attributes" (p. 381). This is thought provoking but seems not to recognize other motives including lack of self-efficacy, personal versus employee anger, and a distinct lack of emotional intelligence. Can it really all be about reacting to authority? People bring their own issues from other parts of their life to work and the workplace might just be the venue for their expression of frustration or anger. It would be useful if this article had addressed more on this point.

Another concern is the assertion that power will always provoke deviance because it inevitably leads to a loss of autonomy and identity. This certainly seems to fit our time and experience. However, maybe there has been a time or place where power does not provoke. This might be the case if people freely invest those in power with greater moral authority. This could happen in times of crisis, change, or other forms of organizational uncertainty. In response to crisis, we might narrow our cognitive field to see only the benefits of cooperating with those in power.

Finally, if we accept that people may find their self-efficacy in acting against the demands of authority, we should also mention that there is a possibility for legitimacy of the response. This is especially true if those in power are acting illegally or in ways that seem unethical. We may wish for greater emotional intelligence in how employees respond to power but deviance may also be a social construction and open to interpretation and issues of attribution.

Implications of this article for practice

(1) Through the Typology of Workplace Deviance (p. 386), we can see how a minor problem like absenteeism can develop into a more severe form of deviance such as theft or sabotage. As in treating an illness quickly and effectively before it becomes life-threatening, an employer might spot signs of workplace deviance and act to remove some of the more overt forms and frustrations of organizational power. Left untreated, the "illness" can worsen in the individual and spread to other employees.

(2) Through this study we can also learn to predict some types and levels of deviance. For instance, whether a specific manager is held responsible for an employee's frustration or if the organization is blamed depends on the type and style of the perceived insult. By using a sort of "reverse engineering" of the problem, we can determine the proximate cause as well as the possible range and depth of the deviance that follows.

(3) The greatest implication of this work may be the need for those in authority to understand something about the consequences of their actions. Episodic use of power is less damaging than systemic power unless it is seen as a personal attack. In addition, an employee's perception of being an object or a subject of the power act is an important indicator of the forms and intensity of resistance.

(4) Implications for practice from the above might include: in supervision, we would be wise to remember that discipline is less likely to provoke deviance if it is seen as part of a fair system of organizational response. In negotiation, we can see that domination is likely to breed resentment and avoid (or at least disguise) a perception of overwhelming advantage. Finally, in conversation, sarcasm is rightly seen as

personally focused aggression and as such, may result in the sort of angry response unfortunately known as ''going postal.'' This is certainly not an inevitable part of the workplace experience.

(5) Critical thinking can support greater knowledge about workplace deviance. We can consider possible attributions by employees and possible outcomes of any expression of power. This is likely to be a two-step approach. For example, an executive might ask the following questions before acting:

(a) If we put this policy into place, what will be the response of the employees?

(b) Is our assumption of what the employee response will be supported by data? If the answer is no, do we need to check our assumptions through the use of surveys, or other data generating techniques?

(6) While some employee workplace deviance is inevitable, we can think our way around many of the most offending power actions in the organization.

In summary

This article gives a great sense of how the various types of power and influence provoke workplace deviance. Each type of power has the possibility of a specific type of response and the overall results can be read as cautionary tale to managers, leaders, and even professors to be careful of the types of power we create. The specific response might not be always predictable but the fact that there will be a response is known. We have moderating factors but these are less important than understanding that workplace deviance is not controlled by adding controls. We need to understand the implications of enacted power, the important connection between procedural justice and daily performance demands, and the view from those at the business end of organizational power.

About the author

Steven I. Meisel is Associate Dean for Research and Professional Activity in the School of Business at La Salle University in Philadelphia. He earned a Master's and Ph.D. in Group and Organizational Psychology from Temple University and his B.S. in Psychology at West Chester University. His current research and teaching interests are in the areas of power and influence, organizational behavior and management skill development. He consults in management education for a variety of private and nonprofit organizations and is a fellow and Past President of the Eastern Academy of Management. He received the Lindbach Award for Distinguished Teaching from La Salle University. He may be reached at meisel@lasalle.edu.