

Sweat the Small Stuff, How Small Incidents of Negative Workplace Behavior Lead to Larger Misconduct

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Small losses, measurable incremental negative workplace behaviors that do not align with organizational and societal norms often trigger a dynamic, magnifying process that produces greater undesirable outcomes, which once started, can often result in a downward spiral. Quickly addressing small problems can prevent minor misconduct and wrongdoing from escalating into greater difficulties later that can appear unstoppable. Failure to tackle the small issues and big problems will often follow. Managers should celebrate small victories or wins but also need to address small losses. Just as small wins can result in significant organizational gains, small losses can result in business losses.

Keywords: workplace behavior, workplace misconduct, deviation amplifying processes

INTRODUCTION

“For want of a nail the shoe was lost; for want of a shoe the horse was lost; for want of a horse the rider was lost; for want of a rider the message was lost; for want of a message the battle was lost; for want of a battle the kingdom was lost; and all for the want of horseshoe nail” (Franklin, 1758).

This aphorism refers to situations where small, outwardly minor problematic actions lead to more serious, undesirable consequences. It means that opening the door to something small (such as losing a shoe) may lead to something larger and more undesirable (like the battle for the kingdom). The trivial things matter! The importance of small, trivial matters was highlighted in a paper entitled “Small Wins: Redefining the Scale of Social Problems” (Weick, 1984). A series of wins defined as “concrete, completed, implemented outcomes of moderate importance” (Weick, 1984, p. 43) at small, but significant tasks reveal a pattern that attracts allies, deters opponents, lowers resistance to subsequent proposals, and enhances the prospects of change and big gains. Bassiri (2018) noted in her TED talk that “Small wins have transformational power. Once a small win has been accomplished, forces are set in motion to favor another small win and another small win until the combination of these small wins leads to significantly larger and greater accomplishments.” Positive organizational change often emerges from the accumulation of small wins characterized by a series of gradual, incremental small-scale successes (Amabile & Kramer, 2011a, b; Kolb & Porter, 2015; Termeer & Dewulf, 2019; Termeer & Mertz, 2019; Vermaak, 2013; Weick, 1984).

Amabile and Kramer (2011b) observed that a small win's perspective underlies what they refer to as the progress principle in which mundane workday advancement events can make or break employees' inner work lives. It is this forward momentum (small victory) in meaningful work progress that creates the best inner work lives. According to them, small wins are one of the most important aspects of progress, motivation, and confidence in people's lives that are overlooked. The reality is that they are the building blocks, the steps, the brush strokes to building a masterpiece. Success breeds success.

The irony is that people often feel silly when they acknowledge something small or simple. They tend to rank small or simple tasks as not meaningful or important. The reality is that small victories matter and their impact multiplies much more than even the context of where that win was experienced. Moreover, Amabile and Kramer (2011a, b) noted that people consistently underestimate the significance of small events in their workdays because their experience teaches them that they need not worry much about minor changes. Unfortunately, this understanding sometimes leads people to unwisely ignore a sequence of small positive changes that aggregate into a large one.

Weick (1984), Amabile and Kramer (2011a, b), Bassiri (2018), Wender (1968), and others focus on small virtuous spirals, which often begin with a small victory. Using the similar circumstances of small wins, we apply similar logic to the idea of small losses, i.e., events, actions, or performances that are minor, trivial, and often considered insignificant that result in small deviations from accepted organizational, moral, or social norms. Just as the most positive organizational change often emerges from the gradual accumulation of small wins (Termeer & Dewulf, 2019; Termeer & Mertz, 2019; Vermaak, 2013; Weick, 1984), transformative negative actions often occur through the buildup of small losses. Lindblom (1959) introduced such incrementalism as "continually building out from the current situations, step by step and by small degrees" (p. 81).

We focus on small losses because they are often overlooked and can lead to more serious counterproductive conduct in what is often called a slippery slope phenomenon (Welsh, Ordóñez, Snyder, & Christian, 2015) or a vicious downward spiral—a progressive degeneration phenomenon—in which small, minor worker misconduct feeds back into itself, causing progressively, more serious, wrongdoing (Wender, 1968). Small losses are not overwhelming or threatening but are not trivial in the long term (Vermaak, 2013), or they will always remain small (Weick & Quinn, 1999) because they have the potential to accumulate through non-linear processes that can amplify and cumulate into large-scale negative organizational behavior, particularly in complex systems characterized by a high level of interconnectedness (Weick & Quinn, 1999).

Minor negative workplace behavior often acts as an initial event or "kick" (Maruyama, 1963, p. 164) that serves as a trigger or catalyst for a dynamic, exponential magnifying recursive process that produces downward spirals that are disproportional to the size of the initial difference resulting in greater maladaptive, undesirable outcomes. According to Masuch (1985), over time behaviors and processes that yield small negative outcomes can degenerate into "vicious circles in organizations" (p. 16) because they are deviation-amplifying loops or action loops that have counterproductive results. Masuch (1985) goes on to say that "Vicious cycles lead to an absurd existence since everyone should avoid deviation-amplifying feedback. Yet, once caught in a vicious cycle, human actors continue a path of action that leads further and further away from the desired state of affairs" (p. 23). These downward trends arise when mutually causal processes feed back into one another to lock a system into a mode of operation that yields progressively more severe negative outcomes (Maruyama, 1963; Masuch, 1985; Senge, 1990; Weick, 1979).

In this paper, we discuss workplace misconduct, followed by a discussion of the reasons why supervisors and managers often do not address minor wrongdoing, followed by an examination of Maruyama's (1963) deviation-amplifying model and its applicability to the slippery slope of small losses. We then present examples of vicious downward-spiraling phenomena that cause minor events to become progressively worse. We conclude with a summary and implications for managers and supervisors.

DISCUSSION

Workplace Misbehavior

Workplace transgressions range the full spectrum from minor to profoundly serious in two broad but related categories (Mackey, McAllister, Ellen III, & Carson, 2021; Robinson & Bennett, 1995): organizational and interpersonal misbehavior. The harmful effects of negative workplace behavior are especially problematic for organizations because most employees engage in it to a degree, which costs organizations billions of dollars a year in lost productivity and other expenses (Bennett, Marasi, & Locklear, 2018).

Researchers have given such misbehavior many different names including workplace deviance (Bennett & Robinson, 2003; O’Leary-Kelly, Griffin, & Glew, 1996), employee misconduct (Kidder, 2005), organizational misbehavior (Vardi & Weitz, 2004), counterproductive work behavior (Dalal, 2005; Mangione & Quinn, 1975), antisocial behavior (Giacolone & Greenberg, 1997), corruption (Ashforth & Anand, 2003), and negative workplace behavior (Zhong & Robinson, 2021, Appendix A). We use the term negative workplace behavior because it is a more encompassing term for undesirable behavior.[1] Such behavior may arise due to various individual (the “bad apple” perspective) and organizational and societal (the “bad barrel” perspective) intervening variables (Werbel & Balkin, 2010) and includes diverse manifestations of workers’ harmful behaviors that we refer to broadly as negative workplace behavior that is “either illegal or morally unacceptable to the larger community” (Jones, 1991, p. 367). It involves breaking a company rule, law, or ethical principle leading to misconduct, and it may not be willful or intentional (Lefkowitz, 2009).

Examples of minor negative behaviors impacting organizations are leaving early, frequent lateness, talking excessively, disrupting other employees, failure to follow procedures correctly, intentionally working slowly, and wasting resources while more serious behaviors include sabotaging equipment, accepting kickbacks, and lying about hours worked, and stealing. Examples of minor negative workplace behaviors directed toward persons include showing favoritism, gossiping, blaming others, not treating co-workers with respect, or acting rudely to them, while more serious negative workplace behaviors include verbal abuse, stealing from coworkers, endangering co-workers’ safety and health, and sexual harassment.

We spotlight minor organizational wrongdoing because of the prevalence of this type of behavior in the workplace, and the significant long-term expenses often associated with such conduct (Appelbaum, Iaconi, & Matousek, 2007). Indeed, recent costly corporate scandals have been described as resulting from a slippery slope involving a series of small infractions, which gradually increase in severity over time (e.g., McLean & Elkind, 2003; Rose, Rose, Suh, Thibodeau, Linke, & Norman, 2021; Schrand, & Zechman, 2012; Welsh et al., 2015). Serious misconduct often results from a series of smaller infractions that increase over time (Kirchner, 2010; McGuire, 2012; Secker, 2011; Welsh et al., 2015). Disgraced American financier, Bernie Madoff, who pleaded guilty to stealing more than \$18 billion from his investors told his secretary: “It starts out with you taking a little bit...you get comfortable with that, and before you know it, it snowballs into something big” (Silberberg, 2016, p. 112).

Why Small Negative Workplace Behavior is Frequently Overlooked

It is quite safe to assume that most, if not all, employees engage in misconduct related to their jobs (Weitz, Vardi, & Setter, 2012). Such behaviors appear to range the full spectrum from the relatively minor to the very serious, for example, workplace incivility, insidious and insulting behaviors, social undermining, theft of company assets, acts of destructiveness, vandalism and sabotage, substance abuse, and misconduct toward fellow employees, the employer, or toward other organizations (see Fox & Spector, 2005; Greenberg, 2010; Griffin & O’Leary-Kelly, 2004; Kidwell & Martin, 2005; Vardi & Weitz, 2004).

Both individual and organizational factors contribute to the occurrence of negative workplace behavior, but we feel that supervisors’ disregard of minor infractions contributes a greater impact to the downward spiral of more serious negative workplace behavior than other factors. This downward spiral starts when supervisors unintentionally or intentionally refrain from addressing or imposing sanctions on

workers engaging in minor negative workplace behavior. It is important that dysfunctional behavior not be tolerated or ignored. The difficulty, however, is that managers in organizations tolerated minor transgressions for a long time because managers are eager to avoid conflict and confrontation if possible (Doyle & Tindal, 1987).

While fear of being caught and disciplined can be an important deterrent to misconduct in organizations (Chiou, Huang, & Lee, 2005; Manrique de Lara, 2006), managers and supervisors are often reluctant to address minor wrongdoing despite the long-term benefits of these discussions. This failure to speak to minor misconduct is a function of several factors that separate or together inhibit managers from dealing with employees' negative workplace behavior.

Overall, addressing negative feedback and transmitting unwelcome news is a stressful experience that supervisors try to avoid (Tesser & Rosen, 1975) despite the long-term benefits of such discussions (Levine, Roberts, & Cohen, 2020). Yariv (2006) termed this pervasive hesitation that most people have in delivering unwelcome news to others the MUM Effect which happens in part because people simply do not want to deal with the negative emotion it evokes in the receiver. It also happens because of the "shoot the messenger" problem. Bearers of unwelcome news, even when they are not responsible for it in any sense, tend to be blamed and have negative feelings directed toward them (Sutton, 2010).

Even so, difficult conversations are a necessary part of everyday work life, and supervisors and managers are frequently tasked with the unpleasant job of delivering negative news and critical feedback. In its impact on doctor-patient relationships (Waitzkin, 1984), organizational functioning (Larson, 1984), and group psychotherapy (Kivlighan, 1985), the reluctance to transmit bad news is a perennial professional concern, and sometimes the bad news is withheld (Conlee & Tesser, 1973) while other times, the news is distorted to make it seem better (Fisher, 1979; Ilgen & Knowlton, 1980).

Tesser and Rosen (1975) attribute such reluctance to people expected discomfiture from conveying bad news (e.g., rumination over the victim's plight, sympathy with the receiver's bad news distress, or guilt for their good fortune) while Bond and Anderson (1987) characterize the reluctance as a self-presentational display (delivers of bad news want to appear sympathetic and human and to avoid an unfavorable impression). Moreover, supervisors have a strong aversion to addressing worker misconduct because they do not want to damage the workplace relationship between the employee and employer in large part because poor worker evaluations may be due to the biased perceptions people have about their performance.

It is well-documented that people hold overly positive self-evaluations (Ferris, Johnson, & Sedikides, 2018; Taylor & Brown, 1988; Zell, Strickhouser, Sedikides, & Alicke, 2020). This widespread phenomenon where people overestimate their positive qualities and abilities and underestimate their negative qualities vis-a-vis others is known by many names including the "better than average effect" (Alicke & Govorun, 2005), self-enhancement bias (Kramer, Newton, & Pommerenke, 1993), the "Lake Wobegon Effect" derived from a fictional U.S. town in a long-running radio show where "all the women are strong, all the men are good looking, and all the children are above average" (Betts et al., 2011, p. 734), and the "Dunning-Kruger effect" (Dunning, 2011; Kruger & Dunning 1999) where individuals occupying inferior positions in numerous performance domains are unaware of just how deficient their expertise is. Worse yet, Dunning's (2005) research revealed that it is the most deeply incompetent people who make the most inflated self-assessments.

For example, Meyer (1975) indicated that 58 percent of a sample of white-collar clerical and technical workers rated their performance as falling within the top 10 percent of their peers in similar jobs, 81 percent rated themselves in the top 20 percent while only about 1 percent rated themselves below the mean. Furthermore, Baker, Jensen, and Murphy (1988) found only .2 percent of the 4,788 employees in one organization received the lowest rating; 94.5 percent were rated "Good" or "Outstanding." In a second firm, Baker et al. (1988) observed that none of the 2,841 workers received an "Unacceptable" or "Minimum Acceptable" rating, and only 1.2 percent received a rating of "Satisfactory," while 95 percent of the employees are rated "Good" or "Superior." The biased perceptions of individuals about their performance may explain why supervisors seem to have a strong aversion to providing subordinates with negative feedback and giving them poor evaluations. Moreover, Dunning, Heath, and Suls (2004)

reported a study by Zenger (1992) of hundreds of engineers at two high-tech companies and found that 32 percent of the engineers in one company and 42 percent in the other rated their performance in the top 5 percent of all engineers.

Furthermore, research has found robust support for a “holier than thou effect” (Epley & Dunning, 2000, p. 862) in which people tend to think they are special and that the rules do not apply to them and believe they are kinder, more altruistic, and estimate they would engage in a moral behavior significantly higher than some of those who behave morally when confronted with the same situation in real life than the typical person (Epley & Dunning, 2000). Moreover, Klein and Epley (2017) found that such self-righteousness was asymmetric because participants believed that they were less evil than others but no more moral than them. Specifically, participants were less likely to make negative character inferences from their unethical behavior than from others’ unethical behavior, believed they would feel worse after an unethical action than others would, and believed they were less capable of extreme unethical behavior compared to others. An implication of the Klein and Epley (2017) investigation is that workers may be especially likely to resist policies aimed at preventing their unethical behavior, simply because they do not believe they would ever do anything unethical, but wording policies as promoting ethical behavior rather than discouraging unethical behavior might be more effective in creating more ethical people and more ethical organizations.

Additionally, supervisors are often reluctant to report minor lapses (Ginsburg, Regehr, Hatala, McNaughton, Frohna, Hodges, Lingard, & Stern, 2000; Phelan, Obenshain, & Galey, 1993), or to fail underperforming trainees for fear of harming their reputation, getting a promotion, or obtaining a desirable assignment (Monrouxe, Rees, Lewis, & Cleland, 2011). Lack of development and training also may limit reporting misconduct. Ziring, Frankel, Danoff, Isaacson, and Lochnan (2018) found that, while 93.5% (87/93) of schools had policies/ expectations that faculty address professionalism lapses directly with students, fewer than half had any formal faculty development for this role. A sometimes-excessive workload and competing priorities may make reporting misconduct feel burdensome and so supervisors may avoid this aversive task (Schepers, Falk, de Ruyter, de Jong, & Hammerschmidt, 2012).

Procrastination may be another factor in why supervisors may not address negative workplace behavior. Procrastination can be defined as postponing, delaying, or putting off work or action that would ideally be conducted in the present in hopes of a better result overall (Steel, 2007). Unfortunately, such hope suggests that “... any strategy that espouses high ideals without at least laying the groundwork for turning that strategy into reality is fruitless at best and hazardous at worst” (Weber, 2018). Procrastination occurs when present costs are unduly salient in comparison with future costs, leading people to postpone tasks until tomorrow without foreseeing that when tomorrow comes, the required action will be delayed yet again. In this case, each error of judgment causes a small loss, but these errors cumulatively result in large losses over time and cause considerable regret on the part of the decision-maker. Moreover, procrastinators view adverse consequences as remote in time, only probabilistic, and still avoidable now. People who are procrastinators are often viewed as bad, harmful, or foolish (Van Eerde, 2003), and those who are prone to defer duties perform poorly overall (Ariely & Wertenbroch, 2002; Dewitte & Lens, 2000; Ferrari & Tice, 2000).

Supervisors may also not be motivated to search for misconduct because supervisory monitoring of employee behavior is often perceived negatively as micromanaging by subordinates and undermine the quality of supervisor-subordinate relationships (Werbel & Balkin, 2010). To an extent, close monitoring also conflicts with employee empowerment efforts and, indeed, the positivity zeitgeist that permeates cultural, managerial, and leadership perspectives over the last several decades (Von Bergen, Bressler, & Campbell, 2014). Thus, sometimes managers may be urged not to make a big deal out of small infractions to avoid being seen as extremist and petty (Volkov, 2003).

To overcome what they perceive as involving a moral conflict between being honest and being kind, managers engage in paltering—telling the truth but misleadingly (Rogers, Zeckhauser, Fino, Norton, & Schweitzer, 2017). For example, a supervisor might comment only on the good aspects of a worker’s performance without mentioning the areas where he or she needs improvement. Supervisors may not make their employees immediately sad or angry by sugarcoating negative feedback, but we will limit their

worker's career and personal growth overall. In their attempt to balance honesty and niceness, they managers in both categories. While withholding information does not feel like a lie—at least not to the person withholding it, when individuals have information withheld from them, they judge the act differently. It is considered equivalent to an outright lie. Additionally, when we share hard truths only partially, we still create harm. The difference is that the harm lies in the future. We may not make our associates immediately sad or angry by sugar-coating our negative feedback, but we will limit their career and personal growth overall.

Supervisors may also have difficulties monitoring performance as spans of control have increased in organizations due to mergers, acquisitions, and the use of electronic communication technologies that permit supervisors and subordinates to operate in different geographic locations. Moreover, performance appraisal practices that focus on outcomes exclusively with little attention given to behaviors may contribute to employee misconduct because supervisors may have minimal knowledge of how subordinates achieve their performance outcomes since they are not required to monitor employee behavior and provide behavioral feedback in an outcome-based performance appraisal system (Werbel & Balkin, 2010).

A common justification for worker misconduct is that a supervisor approved it. If a supervisor endorses an action or remains, often interpreted as consent, (Corcoran, 2000), the checks and balances within a firm are likely to symbolically convey legitimacy to the misconduct. Finally, once a worker has benefited from a minor or trivial form of misconduct, then they may consider performing a more serious form of misconduct to overcome a performance hurdle later.

By permitting instances of such misconduct, it becomes more established, which also reflects on how the leader is perceived making it more difficult for a leader to punish behavior associated with it. The more wrongdoing that has been tolerated and accepted, the greater the difficulty in punishing it. As problems with punishing such misbehavior increase, the opportunities to engage in it grow, further complicating correction. In effect, condoning unethical behavior makes it increasingly difficult to address it and is met with increasing resistance (Jackall, 1988; Staw, 1981; Treviño, Hartman, & Brown, 2000). When managers let injurious behavior slip, it becomes increasingly difficult to punish it (den Nieuwenboer & Kaptein, 2008). Because misbehavior is often rewarding for those committing it, this behavior is likely to continue if not prevented. This process turns into a spiral very easily as now that such behavior is condoned, the behavior often becomes established and is likely to be adopted by others. This response can occur despite the manager “officially” endorsing norms that define negative workplace behavior as unacceptable. As this process persists, wrongdoing increases continuously and becomes increasingly accepted in the manager's sphere of influence.

A final reason supervisors may not be aware of subordinate misconduct is that they are more attentive to their own needs and their bosses' preferences rather than their subordinates. Leaders are remarkably oblivious to what their employees do: “Secretaries know more about their bosses than vice versa; graduate students know more about their advisors than vice versa” (Fiske, 1993, p. 624). According to Fiske (1993), people pay attention to those with power and who control their outcomes focusing on what the next higher boss is saying and doing rather than what their subordinates act and say to predict and influence what is going to happen to them.

Examples of Minor Negative Workplace Behavior Leading to More Serious Misconduct

In this section, we present exemplars of vicious downward spirals from criminology, moral behavior, and workplace incivilities.

Criminology

Here, we discuss two areas that exemplify how small transgressions often lead to more serious wrongdoing: police misconduct and broken windows theory.

Police Misconduct

Police misconduct is a slippery slope from minor infractions to participation in corruption, often leading to predatory policing (Dean, Bell & Lauchs, 2010). Kleinig (1996) was the first to use the term slippery slope where police officers get caught up in small-scale corruption and slide down the slippery slope into a full-scale corruption career. According to Punch (2009), the slippery slope begins with small deviant acts that may be found disturbing (misconduct). But the deviant finds that rule-breaking becomes easier with each successive act so that he or she slides inevitably down the slope until far more serious forms of deviance become habitual and accepted through rationalization (Dean et al, 2010; Punch, 2009). The slippery slope begins with small-scale deviance, for example accepting gratuities (Kleinig, 1996). This event may seem innocent, but it can lead to unforeseeable consequences, acting as a gateway into corruption. A corrupt career builds through a progression of menial offenses until a serious offense is committed (Ruiz & Bono, 2004). Thus, the slippery slope is a gradual deterioration of social-moral inhibitions coupled with a perceived sense of permissibility for deviant conduct among police (Dean et al, 2010).

Broken Windows Theory

Kelling and Wilson (1982) introduced the broken windows concept based on research conducted by psychologist Philip Zimbardo (1969) in which an abandoned automobile was placed in a high-crime neighborhood where it remained untouched for a week until part of it was smashed by a researcher. Within hours of the initial damage, the car was destroyed. Zimbardo's broken window hypothesis posited that a single broken window if left unrepaired, can serve as a tipping point to more heinous crimes: the trivial signal suggests to potential instigators that no one cares enough about the property to replace the window, thus signaling that inflicting additional damage in the area will not warrant a reprimand. In other words, a failure to enforce minor public offenses contributes to a downward spiral in which residents become less involved and withdrawn from the community, thereby allowing for crime and vandalism to proliferate; moreover, that disorder is indirectly linked to serious crime. Taking minor problems and "nipping them in the bud" before things get worse seems to be the mantra of the broken-windows approach to policing.

Mayor Rudolph Giuliani came to power in New York City during the 1990s. Giuliani and his police commissioner, William Bratton, moved to reduce crime following a broken windows approach by declaring war on minor offenses (individuals who washed windshields at city intersections—the so-called "squeegee men", prostitutes, individuals defecating and urinating on community streets, public intoxication, graffiti tagging, jumping turnstiles in the subways). A significant improvement in crime (both major and minor) during the 1990s occurred. This is credited to the aggressive enforcement of laws against a variety of minor offenses. Malcolm Gladwell (2000) also relates this approach to the reality of New York City in his book, *The Tipping Point*. Others (e.g., Brown, 1978) have also used the term to describe the point at which trivial problems like petty crime and graffiti can escalate into widespread serious crime.

There have been critiques of the broken windows theory (e.g., Harcourt, 2001; Sampson & Raudenbush, 1999; Taylor, 2001) which have found that aggressive policing of minor offenses, thus removing disorder, is not significantly able to reduce the amount and severity of the crime. Bratton and Kelling (2006) and Kelling and Coles (1996), however, strongly argue that the criticisms of the broken windows theory are due to the misrepresentation of the theory, in which the effects of disorder on serious crime have been measured as a direct connection instead of the stated indirect link.

Ethical Slippery Slope

Severe ethical transgressions are widely believed to be the result of a gradual transformation process—a slippery slope (cf. Darley, 2005); i.e., people start with minor corrupt transgressions that they view as implicit benchmarks from which to make decisions about new ethical dilemmas (Gino & Bazerman, 2009). Because of several moral disengagement processes such as rationalization (Bandura, 1999), over time, more ethical transgressions can be incorporated into the moral self-concept (Tenbrunsel

& Messick, 2004). Eventually, corruption becomes normalized (Ashforth & Anand, 2003). These lines of reasoning add credence to the widely shared belief that people gradually engage in increasingly severe forms of corruption (Darley, 2005).

Welsh et al. (2015) found that the slippery slope from small unethical conduct to more serious misbehavior could be explained by moral disengagement—a form of moral self-deception that allows individuals to justify unethical behavior and avoid self-censure. Normally, people engage in ethical self-regulation to conform their behavior to moral standards. However, through moral disengagement, individuals rationalize questionable conduct, minimize their responsibility, and dehumanize potential victims (Bandura, 1999). For example, people may rationalize theft from a wealthy company as having a negligible impact, redefine lies to a competitor as “strategic misrepresentation” (Safire, 1979, p. 13), and blame questionable decisions on teammates or superiors. Furthermore, recent research has shown that moral disengagement can facilitate motivated forgetting of ethical standards and can occur even when merely contemplating an unethical act (Shu, Gino, & Bazerman, 2011). In empirical studies, moral disengagement explains the propensity of ordinary individuals to engage in a variety of unethical behaviors including cheating (Detert, Treviño, & Sweitzer, 2008), lying (Moore, Detert, Treviño, Baker, & Mayer, 2012), organizational corruption (Moore, 2008), aggression (Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, & Pastorelli, 1996), and terrorism (Bandura, 2004). As one’s degree of moral disengagement increases, so does one’s sphere of permissible conduct. According to Tenbrunsel and Messick (2004), individuals are prone to “incremental steps down the road of unethical behavior, due to the self-deception that occurs along the way” (p. 229). Indeed, Shu and Gino (2012) found that an important consequence of misconduct is the tendency to forget moral rules. After misbehavior, individuals are motivated to forget principled rules that are inconsistent with their previous behavior and appear to block access to moral concepts and rules meant to guide an individual’s behavior. People tend to sweep misconduct under the rug and leave their wrongdoing behind through forgetfulness.

Pinto, Leana, and Pil (2008) build on Tenbrunsel and Messick’s (2004) work on the “slippery slope” of ethical decision-making to identify why the ethical aspects of managerial decision-making may fade into the background through routinization. Psychological numbing takes place as members of a community become repeatedly exposed to deviant behavior; over time, “repeated exposures to ethical dilemmas may produce a form of ethical numbing in which self-reproof is diminished” (Tenbrunsel & Messick, 2004, p. 228). Induction also contributes to the incremental entrenchment of deviant behavior over time. Using inductive logic, managers are likely to rely on past organizational decisions as a guide to evaluate the ethicality of new forms of behavior. The past success of deviant practices is assumed to validate the process through which initial deviant decisions were made (see also Ashforth & Anand, 2003). The frequent use of a deviant practice, therefore, provides an ethical precedent that encourages its use without a continual reexamination of its acceptability: “Routinization means that when a practice has become routine, it is ordinary, mundane, and acceptable. Any ethical coloration is lost” (Tenbrunsel & Messick, 2004, p. 228). Moreover, Earle, Spicer, and Peter (2010) noted that deviance may develop along a slippery slope where at first, idiosyncratic corrupt practices become institutionalized over time (Ashforth & Anand, 2003), and when such misconduct is allowed to persist unchecked it is likely to become increasingly entrenched and difficult to reverse over time.

Moreover, Garrett, Lazzaro, Ariely, and Sharot (2016) provide empirical evidence for a gradual escalation of self-serving dishonesty and reveal a neural mechanism supporting it. Behaviorally, they showed that the extent to which participants engage in self-serving dishonesty increases with repetition. Using fMRI, they demonstrated that signal reduction in the amygdala is sensitive to the history of dishonest behavior, consistent with adaptation. The findings uncover a biological mechanism that supports a “slippery slope”—what begins as small acts of dishonesty escalates into larger instances. This experimental result is consistent with anecdotal observations of small digressions gradually snowballing into larger ones (Kirchner, 2010; Maremont, 1996; McLean & Elkind, 2003; Schrand & Zechman, 2012; Stapel, 2012).

Workplace Incivilities

A final area where minor misbehavior often leads to more severe misconduct involves workplace incivilities. A certain level of civility is fundamental to the operation of any business. When civility is absent, work relations can become frayed. An organizational climate characterized by rudeness can make workers miserable on the job, resulting in aggressive behavior, higher turnover, lower productivity, and lost customers (Kamp & Brooks, 1991; Neuman & Baron, 1997). Thus, incivility not only makes the office unpleasant but may negatively impact a firm's bottom line.

As organizations have flattened and gone casual, there are fewer obvious cues as to what constitutes "proper" business behavior (Martin, 1996; Morand, 1998). Examples of incivility in the workplace abound: answering the phone with a "yeah;" neglecting to say thank you or please; using voice mail to screen calls; leaving a half cup of coffee behind to avoid having to brew the next pot; gossiping, embarrassing or swearing at one's colleague at work; standing uninvited but impatiently over the desk of someone engaged in a telephone conversation; dropping trash on the floor and leaving it for the maintenance crew to clean up; and talking loudly on the phone about personal matters (Martin, 1996).

Workplace incivilities are defined as low-intensity behaviors with ambiguous intent to harm (Andersson & Pearson, 1999), which include incidents perceived as a slight to general rudeness or disrespect (Beattie & Griffin, 2014; Cortina & Magley, 2003). Incivility implies impoliteness and disregard for others, in violation of norms for respect in interpersonal relations (Brown & Levinson, 1987). LaGrange, Ferraro, and Supancic (1992) defined incivilities as "low-level breaches of community standards that signal an erosion of conventionally accepted norms and values" (pp. 311-312). It has been thought of as a daily hassle or interpersonal work stressor (Lim, Cortina, & Magley, 2008; Penney & Spector, 2005) and associated with many adverse consequences, including psychological distress, depression, and anxiety (Caza & Cortina, 2007; Cortina, Magley, Williams, & Langhout, 2001), increased physical health problems (Lim & Cortina, 2005; Lim et al., 2008), greater job stress (Cortina, 2008), reduced task performance and creativity (Pearson, Andersson, & Porath, 2000; Porath & Erez, 2007), lower job satisfaction, increased job withdrawal, and higher turnover (Lim & Cortina, 2005; Lim et al., 2008; Pearson, Andersson, & Porath, 2005).

Pearson and Porath (2005) proposed a spiraling effect of incivility in the workplace suggesting that at first low-intensity mistreatment by coworkers can quickly escalate into an exchange of corrosive actions. Little acts of incivility (microaggressions) that go unchecked by authority figures can spiral into bullying and even workplace violence. Workplace incivility can spiral, beginning with one party's perception of incivility and reciprocation with counter incivility, which can potentially escalate to an exchange of coercive actions when one party reaches a tipping point (i.e., perceives an identity threat). Further, Andersson and Pearson (1999) argued that involved parties with a hot temperament, and an organizational climate of informality may facilitate the formation and escalation of such spirals and that these spirals may spawn secondary spirals, which can pervade an organization. Correspondingly, Olson-Buchanan and Boswell (2008) developed a dynamic model of perceived mistreatment and subsequent responses to such mistreatment, suggesting that negative responses by one party often lead to downward spirals like those described by Andersson and Pearson (1999). Lindsley, Brass, and Thomas (1995) also define a negative spiral as a pattern of consecutive increases in problematic behavioral and affective reactions due to workplace incivilities. Masuch (1985), likewise, describes the escalation from minor workplace incivilities to more corrosive organizational actions in his description of vicious circles in organizations.

When incivility occurs, leaders must step forward to correct it and not ignore it. This event can best be accomplished when leaders reinforce cooperative behavior and model the ethical use of power among staff. For example, workplaces have adopted explicit practices whereby leaders can acknowledge acts of cooperation between employees or have sponsored programs that allow coworkers to reward each other for positive and supportive actions.

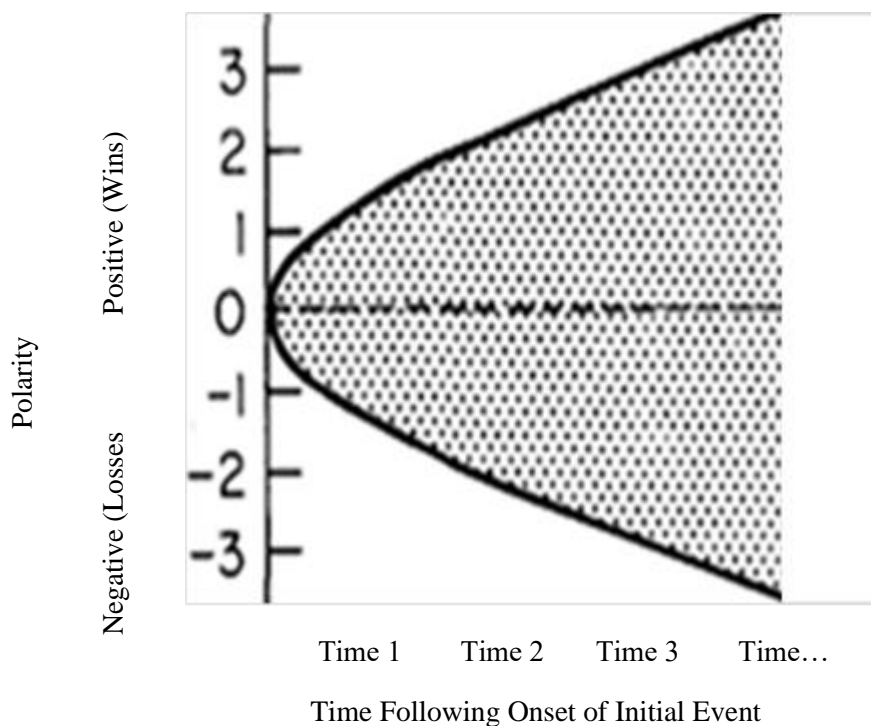
Deviation-Amplifying Processes

As we can see, trivial, oftentimes inconsequential wrongdoing regularly escalates into a major negative more corrosive workplace behavior. The deviation amplification model of Maruyama (1963)

provides the theoretical framework for explaining the loss spiral or slippery slope as a gradual, incremental progression of minor misdeeds to major ones. Meadows (2008) and Weick (1979) support this view.

In Figure 1, we have adapted Aldwin and Stokols' pictorial representation (1988, p. 66) of Maruyama's (1963) deviation-amplification model to illustrate how this model operates. Deviation-amplifying feedback occurs when causal relationships productively amplify an initial alteration from an original condition. In what has come to be known as "second cybernetics" Maruyama (1963) focuses on the positive feedback that amplifies deviations and moves systems away from a stable state. Maruyama (1963) describes such a process in the weathering of a rock: "A small crack in a rock collects some water. The water freezes and makes the crack larger. A larger crack collects more water, which makes the crack still larger. Enough water then makes it possible for some small organisms to live in it. Accumulation of organic matter then makes it possible for a tree to start growing in the crack. The roots of the tree will then make the crack still larger" (p. 167). "All processes of mutual causal relationships that amplify an insignificant or accidental initial kick, build up deviation and diverge from the initial condition" (Maruyama, 1963, p. 163). He suggests that once a triggering event starts the process deviation amplifying mutual positive feedback takes over the process, resulting in outcomes that are disproportionately large vis-a-vis the initial triggering condition. Simply put, feedback indicates the dependence of a future state of a system upon an earlier condition or, more technically, the iteration of a function upon itself (Tsoukas, 2005). The triggering event causes more severe deviations and builds on itself. Wender (1968) states that "small perturbations can generate chains of events that can result in gross alterations" (p. 309). Positive feedback amplifies small adaptations and explains, in part, how a single small adaptation can lead to radically new order (Plowman, Baker, Beck, Kulkarni, Solansky, & Travis, 2007). Triggering events may deviate in a positive course resulting in a virtuous cycle while some actuating occurrences turn in a negative direction which leads to a vicious cycle.

FIGURE 1
DEVIATION-AMPLIFICATION MODEL.
(ADAPTED FROM ALDWIN & STOKOL, 1988, P. 66)



This concept arose out of the study of cybernetics, the science of self-regulating and equilibrating systems (e.g., thermostats or physiologic regulation of body temperature). A positive deviation-amplifying system is a deviation-amplifying loop or spiral whereby a deviation in one variable results in a similar deviation in another variable which, in turn, continues to amplify. Myrdal (1957) pointed out the importance of the direction of the initial kick, which then determines the direction of the subsequent deviation-amplification. In systems thinking, it is an axiom that every influence is both cause and effect. Nothing is ever influenced in one direction. For example, the downward spiral in Figure 1 below the dotted line indicates a self-perpetuating and damaging cycle that can be triggered by minor negative workplace behaviors that turn an unpleasant situation into a worse one.

A downward spiral is defined as a situation where a series of negative actions continuously feed back into themselves, causing the situation to become progressively worse. “Once a variable begins to move in a particular direction, either up or down, the variable will continue to move in that same direction until the system is destroyed or until some dramatic change occurs” (Weick, 1979, p. 72). Changes for the worse can trigger maladaptive spirals. In other words, minor adverse disturbances are amplified and may have major negative consequences (Meadows, 2008; Plowman, Solansky, Beck, Baker, Kulkarni, & Travis, 2007; Tsoukas & Cunha, 2017; Weick, 1979).

Minor negative workplace behavior often acts as an initiating event that triggers a dynamic, exponential magnifying process that produces greater maladaptive, undesirable outcomes, and which once started, can be enduring resulting in a downward spiral. The horizontal axis in Figure 1 is time. Minor negative events (below the dashed line) result in exponentially expanded levels of counterproductive behavior. A vicious circle (also called a slippery slope) starts with a change (small loss) that causes negative-amplifying feedback. In our view, the triggering event is a manager or supervisor’s failure to correct or address an employee’s minor negative workplace behavior. Minor workplace misconduct may be the beginning of a self-perpetuating downward spiral (Lindsley et al., 1995). Once caught in such a spiral, it may be hard to stop or reverse (Kanter, 2003).

As an illustration of this phenomenon, consider Smith and Lewis’s (2011) account in which the more a firm emphasizes control, the more distrust it begets, which drives defensiveness and turf wars, which, in turn, results in the need for more controls. Evidence from other areas seems to support this escalating or spiraling effect. For example, Groth and Grandey (2012) reviewed the literature on employee well-being and customer satisfaction and suggested that a negative exchange spiral occurs when negative service encounters create a negative spillover in the experience of customers and other employees. Further, Glomb and Liao (2003) found empirical evidence to support the escalation of aggression. They based their hypotheses on social exchange and the idea of reciprocal aggression, which says that people who engage in acts of aggression toward others are likely to become the target of aggressive acts from those same others (e.g., Bandura, 1973). Glomb and Liao’s (2003) data supported the hypothesis that being the target of aggressive behaviors predicted employees’ subsequent aggressive behavior. They mention that this finding is consistent with findings from the justice literature because employees who have been treated unfairly often reciprocate to restore justice (e.g., Aquino, Tripp & Bies, 2006).

More examples of deviation-amplification mechanisms include Myrdal’s (1957) “vicious circle” model of economics and poverty, Smith’s (1968) spiral model of development and adaptation, and extreme weight loss or gain. In a study of financial strains and stress, Aldwin and Revenson (1986) found that people with poorer mental health are more likely to report negative economic events during times of economic downturns. Economic stress, in turn, further increases the severity of emotional distress and can precipitate a downward adaptational spin. Correspondingly, emotionally troubled individuals are likely to engage in maladaptive coping strategies that may intensify their troubles (Aldwin & Revenson, 1987; Coyne, Aldwin, & Lazarus, 1981; Felton & Revenson, 1984). Downward spirals have also been related to many organizational phenomena such as corporate failures (Hambrick & D’Aveni, 1988), efficiency and performance (Lindsley et al., 1995), corporate governance (Sundaramurthy & Lewis, 2003), public opinion (Perry & Gonzenbach, 2000), enterprise resource planning systems (Akkermans & van Helden, 2002), creativity (Perry-Smith & Shalley, 2003), and petty tyranny (Ashforth, 1994).

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

“Does the flap of a butterfly’s wings in Brazil set off a tornado in Texas?” Meteorologist Edward Lorenz (1963) asked this famous question 60 years ago. The question was not to be taken literally but was simply a metaphor meant to demonstrate that little inconsequential events may lead to meaningful results over time. To put it another way, small variances in initial conditions can have profound and widely divergent effects on a system. Lorenz’s celebrated story of the flap of a butterfly’s wings in one part of the world creating a storm somewhere else made popular in the physical science community something that mathematicians already knew—that small fluctuations in variables can have monumental consequences (Thiéart & Forgues, 1995).

Deviation amplification is what leads to Lorenz’s (1963) butterfly effect, and it is what fuels the ongoing disturbance that exists at far from-equilibrium states of complex systems. Because of nonlinearities that reflect interactions and feedback effects, tiny changes in inputs can make enormous differences in outputs—sensitive dependence on initial conditions or the so-called butterfly effect in which, for example, the proverbial moth flapping its wings in South America can cause a storm in the United States.

The notion of positive feedback and its amplifying effects can lead to either “virtuous” or “vicious circles” in organizations (Masuch, 1985; Sastry, 1997; Weick, 1979). Here, we focused on small losses and how such slight transgressions often snowball into major violations over time if not addressed promptly. Our analysis confirms that minor indiscretions or losses often result in more serious negative workplace conduct and how Maruyama’s (1963) cybernetic deviation-amplifying processes can explain this vicious downward spiral who notice and address minor negative employee conduct are likely to reduce the likelihood that minor indiscretions will escalate over time. Quickly addressing minor instances of negative workplace behavior by a specific worker may also help curtail the wrongdoings of their colleagues because employees who see their coworkers being called out for minor offenses may be less likely to rationalize their potential misconduct. Doing so may also induce a focus in which employees seek to avoid the types of negative workplace behaviors that have been made salient. In sum, managers may want to consider steps they can take to quickly address small instances of negative workplace behavior and thereby create an environment in which employees are less likely to go through spiraling vicious effects.

Such guidance appears to conflict with two management approaches that tend to endorse a focus on major or large misbehaviors. One approach encompasses the popular management maxim of not sweating the small stuff. Management writer, Richard Carlson promoted this belief in his widely popular book, “Don’t Sweat the Small Stuff . . . and It’s All Small Stuff” (1997). His idea was that it is not worth getting upset or stressed about minor issues and one should not let a small difficulty seem like a major problem. We believe, however, as Gandossy and Effron (2004) and McNulty, O’Mara, and Karney (2008) that in many areas, and specifically about negative workplace behavior, it is important to pay attention to trivial things to avoid minor transgressions from worsening over time.

Another suggested approach involves a practice referred to as “management by exception” (Dekker & Woods, 1999) which Wiener (1988) described as “... as long as things are going well or according to plan leave the managers [or employees] alone. Do not clutter their world with reports, warnings, and messages of normal conditions” (p. 456). The idea is that supervisors who manage by exception should intervene only when the information reaches their demands so. Such an approach implies that managers address low performers, however, we believe that it is also important to focus supervisory attention on high performers as well. Just as a teacher might check up on a student with a perfect score on an exam to find evidence of cheating, so too should managers scrutinize high performers.

Moreover, it is important to pay attention to not only worker results but how they behave.

Supervisory feedback should include behavioral indicators of performance in addition to outcome indicators for both the supervisor and the subordinate. If only outcomes are used as a basis for evaluating subordinate performance, then supplemental behavioral indicators of performance should also be required and linked to performance outcomes. The balanced scorecard (Kaplan & Norton, 2001) provides

examples of firms that attempt to integrate both outcome and behavioral indicators of performance. In the balanced scorecard, behaviors are first assessed. Next, quantitative performance results such as financial success are collected later. Pay incentives are provided based on a composite assessment of the behavioral and performance outcomes.

An implication of “management by exception” is that supervisors passively wait for problems and difficulties to reach them, yet effective supervisory behavior involves proactively searching for information and data in the work environment that enhance its efficiency and effectiveness. Proactive behavior on the other hand is self-starting, challenging, future-focused, and persistent in the face of setbacks (Frese, Kring, Soose, & Zempel, 1996; Parker, Williams, & Turner, 2006) and is associated with numerous positive outcomes ranging from individual performance and well-being to group effectiveness and innovation (Crant, 2000; Tims, Bakker, & Derks, 2013; Tornau & Frese, 2013).

It has been widely demonstrated that initiative-taking can make a positive difference for individuals and organizations. Fuller & Marler (2009) reported a meta-analysis, which showed people with an initiative-taking personality reported higher career success and job performance. Other reviews (e.g., Bindl & Parker, 2011) have similarly identified positive consequences of proactivity for several outcomes, albeit with some evidence that these positive outcomes depend on attributes such as situational judgment (Chan, 2006) or negative affect and prosocial motivation (Grant, Parker, & Collins, 2009). It is thus clear that initiative-taking action can make a positive difference, both for individuals and organizations (Bindl & Parker, 2011; Fuller & Marler, 2009).

Addressing small instances of negative workplace conduct requires increasing managerial monitoring and control processes. Monitoring involves supervisors observing employee behavior and outcomes, looking for signals of abnormal behavior, and adjusting (Sheridan, 1976). While such increased levels of control appear to be in opposition to current recommended managerial practices that for the last several decades have tended to emphasize the understanding and application of positive interventions to enhance human virtues (Turner, Barling, & Anthea, 2002), researchers believe that the best way to deal with vicious or downward spirals often created by the deviation-amplifying process of minor negative workplace behavior is to prevent them (Tsoukas & Cunha, 2017).

Feedback draws attention to the “matching-to-standard process” (Ashford, 1989, p. 161) thereby enabling individuals to re-evaluate their belief in their ability to perform the task. By providing high-quality feedback, the probability of occurrence of self-correction is expected to be higher because of the increased availability of information about the performance or increased efforts on the part of individuals to perform. According to Lindsley et al. (1995), self-corrections are expected to interrupt either upward or downward efficiency-performance spirals when accurate and specific feedback is provided since it results in an improved understanding of task intricacies and the gaps between actual performance and specifications. If individuals are provided with information about how the product of their efforts diverged from specification, then they are more likely to understand task requirements and what they must do differently to achieve improved performance. Hence, when individuals receive accurate, timely, and specific task feedback, self-efficacy is expected to either increase because of improved knowledge about what to do or decrease due to the discrepancy between task specifications and the actual result. In the absence of task feedback, self-efficacy judgments are more likely to proceed in an uninterrupted upward or downward spiral. Shea and Howell (2000), qualified such an assessment by showing that people who generate the feedback themselves are not as likely to avoid deviation-amplifying spirals, suggesting that it may be easier to ignore or filter disconfirming feedback when it is self-generated than when someone else has generated it and is also thus aware of it.

Unfortunately, managers often neglect and avoid delivering negative information (Margolis & Molinsky, 2008; Molinsky & Margolis, 2005). Difficult conversations that require the delivery of negative information from communicators to targets frequently rely on the perceived moral conflict between honesty and benevolence. We suggest that communicators exaggerate this conflict. By focusing on the short-term harm and unpleasantness associated with difficult conversations, communicators fail to realize that honesty and benevolence are compatible in many cases. Providing honest feedback can help a target to learn and grow, thereby improving the target’s overall welfare. Rather than attempting to resolve

the honesty-benevolence problem via communication strategies that focus narrowly on the short-term conflict between honesty and emotional harm, we recommend that communicators instead invoke communication strategies that integrate and maximize both honesty and benevolence to ensure that difficult conversations lead to long-term welfare improvements for targets. If a communicator only considers the immediate impact of their words, they are likely to conclude that honesty and benevolence are fundamentally at odds. However, if a communicator considers the long-term consequences of their words, they are more likely to recognize that honesty and benevolence are compatible. Our view is that communicators should, but often do not, take a long-term perspective and significantly overestimate how painful honest conversations will be and underestimate how beneficial they will be for their social relationships. If a manager considers the long-term consequences of their words, they are more likely to recognize that honesty and benevolence are compatible. Our view is that communicators should, but often do not, take a long-term perspective. Furthermore, in an interesting study Yeager et al. (2014) found that performance feedback was 40% more effective when the person giving it prefaced it with the simple statement, “I’m giving you these comments because I have very high expectations and I know that you can reach them” (p. 809). These nineteen words are powerful because they created a sense of belonging, connection, and benevolence even as problematic behavior was confronted.

Such language may be particularly important since jobs in which workers are physically distant from their employers are becoming increasingly prevalent. Remote work more generally increased by 159% in the U.S. between 2005 and 2017 and is expected to become a prominent feature of a future “new normal” workplace (Burbano & Chiles, 2022). This physical separation is likely to lead to increased employee misconduct because remote workers are less likely to feel connected to their firms, thus exacerbating the misalignment of interests between workers and their organizations. Moreover, in response to such remote work firms are increasingly using monitoring protocols that tend to erode the trust needed to set up a sense of shared values between workers and the firm. Empirical results show that the threat of monitoring reduces workers’ perceptions of employer trust. And the communication of moral and social/environmental values maximizes workers’ perceptions of shared values with the firm—but only when monitoring is not also in effect (Burbano & Chiles, 2022).

Regrettably, monitoring employees can have an ill effect on workers since it injects an air of suspicion and hostility into the workplace (Smith & Amick, 1989). While it can deter misconduct, it can also cause resentment as employees might feel they are being treated like children (Lim, 2002). This response could be counterproductive and affect employees’ productivity, commitment, and attendance. It can also cause an atmosphere of mistrust and hostility. According to Kizza and Ssanyu (2005), it also creates an atmosphere of fear since the most devastating effect of employee monitoring is the fear of losing one’s job. The other effects of employee monitoring include a lack of trust, a view shared by Mujtaba (2003). Kizza and Ssanyu (2005) have also cited stress, repetitive strain injury, lack of individual creativity, reduced or no peer support, lack of self-esteem, worker alienation, lack of communication, and adverse psychological effects on employees as the effects of monitoring. Monitoring can also constrain the right to autonomy and freedom of expression (Hoffman et al., 2003).

Finally, supervisors who do not address minor worker problem behavior may also be jeopardizing their careers. For example, supervisors who do not hold their employees accountable for exhibiting minor unsafe behavior may be censured by their managers and the organization. Organizations may also be liable for accidents committed by their employees based on negligence. Employers are vicariously liable under the doctrine of “respondeat superior” (FindLaw Legal Dictionary, n. d.) for negligent acts or omissions by their employees in the course of employment. Typically, this response means that the organization has failed to take sufficient measures to avoid harm; for example, it has failed to implement training programs, disciplinary protocols, or other internal compliance structures, or to observe industry standards of operating methods.

In addition, negligence-based organizational liability regimes are criticized for, at least in practice, failing to provide incentives for the adoption of the optimal level and type of internal compliance structures. If it is assumed that wrongdoing results from the actions or decisions of individuals, then the imposition of organizational liability can be explained by the principal-agent framework. That is, the

agent (the individual) commits wrongdoing when s/he is improperly controlled or inadequately incentivized by the principal (the organization). From this perspective, organizational wrongdoing is the result of a flawed agency setting, in which agents receive insufficient incentives from the principal to behave with a due level of care (Investopedia, 2021). Thus, wrongdoing, whether it is intentional or not, is the fault of the principal, even if wrongdoing is not authorized by the latter. Therefore, liability is imposed on the organization because according to the common law concept of vicarious liability, a master can be held liable for a negligent act of their agent. These master-servant relationships are typically found between parents and children, employers and employees, or contractors and subcontractors. Employers, and not the employees themselves, will often be held liable for the conduct of their employees. This fact is true even if the employer had no intention to cause harm and played no physical role in the harm. Two basic concepts underlie employer liability: 1) employers are seen as directing the behavior of their employees and thus must share in the good as well as the bad results of that behavior. By the same token that an employer is legally entitled to the rewards of an employee's labor (profit), an employer also has the legal liability if that same behavior results in harm; and 2) when someone is injured or harmed and needs to be compensated employers are most likely to pay to make the victim whole and assigning liability to the employer rather than the employee has the best chance of meeting that goal.

The deviation-amplification process explains how small transgressions can become a gateway to larger, more severe wrongdoing. An interesting question is whether minor misconduct in one area spills over or extends to other spheres leading to more severe misbehavior in other contexts. For example, does an employee who gradually begins to overreport his or her work hours have a propensity to become increasingly likely to commit unrelated misconduct such as theft or sexual harassment? Future research could explore whether growing improprieties in a worker's personal life may extend to negative workplace behaviors.

In closing, let us remember the words of Mackay (1988): "Little things are not little things, little things are everything" (p. 26).

[1] Negative workplace behaviors embrace bent rules, cut corners, violations of societal values, norms, laws, and standards of proper conduct to include: deviance, interpersonal deviance, organizational deviance, production deviance, property deviance, deviant behavior, counterproductive work behavior, antisocial behavior, misbehavior, illegal behavior, employee vice, rule-breaking, norm violations, offenses, bad behavior, immoral behavior, unethical behavior, unethical pro-organizational behavior, dishonesty, dishonest behavior, transgression, cheating, lying, deception, victimization, aggression, mistreatment, hostility, hostile behavior, violence, mobbing, theft, stealing, sabotage, ostracism, rejection, gossip, social exclusion, abusive supervision, petty tyranny, supervisor undermining, social undermining, harassment, sexual harassment, bullying, incivility, rudeness, discriminatory behavior, withdrawal, absenteeism, lateness, social loafing, negligence, withholding effort, corruption, bribe, abuse, alcohol use, drug use, noncompliant behavior, revenge, and retaliation.

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