

# Research on the Impact of Abusive Supervision on Informal Field-Based Learning

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**Abstract:** This study examines the impact of abusive supervision on informal field-based learning and the mediating role of knowledge sharing among employees. In this paper, the rapid development of China's high-speed railway industry staff as the main object of investigation, through the issuance of questionnaires, empirical research. The research shows that abusive supervision has a significant negative effect on informal field-based learning and knowledge sharing. Knowledge sharing plays a completely mediating role in the influence of abusive supervision on informal field-based learning. Traditionality positively regulates the relationship between abusive supervision and knowledge sharing significantly. This paper supplements the research on informal field-based learning based on Chinese context, and provides ideas for organizational management.

## 1. Introduction

Organizational environment is complex and changeable, which requires every member of the organization to improve themselves through continuous learning to adapt to the environment, but due to the limitation of funds, venues and other resources; the complexity of problems faced by the organization; the diversity of problems faced by each employee; and the organization can not conduct formal training in an all-round way. Informal field-based learning as a good way to promote employees' autonomous learning and adapt to the organizational environment can effectively complement formal learning<sup>[1]</sup>.

There are many factors affecting informal field-based learning, and leadership behavior is one of the most important factors. As a kind of negative leadership behavior, abusive supervision refers to the linguistic or non-linguistic hostile behavior that subordinates perceived by their supervisors, but does not include physical contact violations; it will have a negative impact on subordinates' psychology, attitude and behavior, thus reducing organizational efficiency (Tepper, 2000). And because of the long-term influence of Chinese traditional culture, abusive supervision is more common in enterprises and organizations<sup>[2]</sup>.

Based on this, this paper studies the influence of abusive supervision on informal field-based learning in the context of China.

## 2. Theoretical Review and Research Hypothesis

### 2.1 Resource Limitation Theory and Impact of Abusive Supervision on Informal Field-Based Learning

Noe et al. (2013) proposed a multi-dimensional concept of informal field-based learning, and proposed that it can be achieved through active or passive behavior, feedback and reflection in context. There are three ways to get it: first, self (such as reflection); second, others (such as interaction with the boss); third, non-interpersonal sources (such as reading related information). Mikhail (2017) defines three dimensions of informal field-based learning more scientifically and completely: first, feedback/reflection-based learning: including actively seeking feedback from others, seeking and receiving coaching or advice from job experts, debriefing or discussing

on-the-job experiences; second, vicarious learning: including intentionally observing someone do his or her job, asking questions of an expert, having someone show you how to do something; third, learning through experiments/new experiences: It includes performing a task in a new and different way, actively seeking and experiencing new assignments, situations, or tasks and “trial and error” to uncover a new or better solution<sup>[3]</sup>.

Abusive supervision represents a continuing emotional and psychological hostility of leaders towards employees (Harvey, Stoner, Hochwarter, & Kacmar, 2007). It is an unfair and undesirable behavior that can strain the relationship between leaders and employees and bring pressure to employees (Bies & Tripp, 1998)<sup>[4]</sup>.

Kahneman put forward the resource limitation theory in his book *Attention and Effort* in 1973. The theoretical hypothesis is that psychological resources are needed to accomplish every task. Operating multiple tasks can share resources, but the total amount of human psychological resources is limited. However, the control of negative emotions and impulsive behavior brought by abusive supervision will consume resources (Ailing Pan et al., 2017). The consumption of these resources will occupy the resources originally used for informal field-based learning and reduce the available resources for informal field-based learning, thus reducing informal field-based learning behavior<sup>[5]</sup>. Based on this, this paper proposes the first hypothesis:

H1: Abusive supervision has a negative impact on informal field-based learning behavior.

## **2.2 Mediating Role of Knowledge Sharing**

Employees' knowledge sharing behavior refers to the sharing of professional knowledge, skills and experience among employees through an effective communication process, which can improve organizational effectiveness (Bartol & Sirvastava, 2002)<sup>[6]</sup>.

Employees' knowledge sharing behavior is a typical organizational citizenship behavior (Podsakof, 2000). There is a significant positive correlation between leader-member exchange and employees' organizational citizenship behavior (Hackett et al., 2003; Wang et al., 2005). As an important part of informal learning in the workplace (Neo, 2013), communication and feedback from others is also one of the typical behaviors of knowledge sharing. Therefore, this paper makes a bold speculation that abusive supervision will occupy the psychological resources of knowledge sharing, reduce the available resources of knowledge sharing and knowledge sharing, leading to the reduction of informal field-based learning<sup>[7]</sup>. Based on this, this paper proposes the second hypothesis:

H2: Knowledge sharing plays a mediating role between abusive supervision and informal field-based learning.

## **2.3 Regulatory Role of Traditionality**

The concept of Chinese traditionality emphasizes the degree of personal recognition of the hierarchical role relationship defined by Confucian Wulun Thought (Yang Guoshu et al., 1989). In traditional Chinese society, the role relationship and obligation between superiors and subordinates are emphasized, and there is a great distance between rights. Therefore, highly traditional employees are more likely to accept and understand abusive supervision. However, the respect and obedience of low-tradition employees to leaders have weakened (Zheng Boxuan and Fan Jingli, 2001). Farh et al. (1997) found that the difference in Chinese tradition is a moderating variable between leadership behavior and employee performance. Therefore, we hypothesize that the effect of abusive supervision on employees' knowledge sharing behavior is different among employees with different traditions. Highly traditional employees are more likely to accept a higher power distance and better understand the abusive supervision of leadership, thus reducing the psychological resources used to dispel negative emotions and control impulsive behavior, and will not significantly reduce knowledge-sharing behavior; while low-traditional employees are more likely to recognize the equal relationship with their superiors (Farh et al., 1997), which will be further enhanced by abusive supervision of leadership. Less knowledge sharing<sup>[8]</sup>. Based on this, the third hypothesis of this paper is put forward:

H3: Traditionality plays a moderating role in the relationship between abusive supervision and

employee knowledge sharing.

The theoretical model is shown in Figure 1.

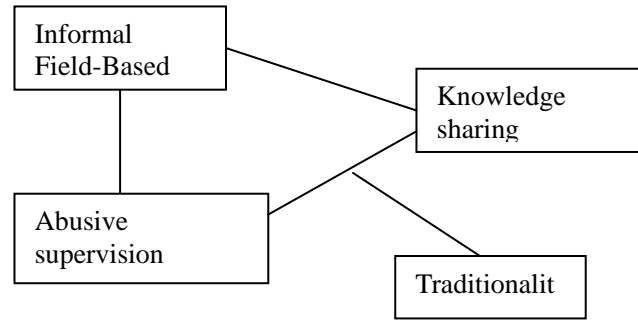


Figure 1: Theoretical model

### 3. Questionnaire design and data collection

#### 3.1 Questionnaire design

The questionnaire of this study consists of five parts. First, basic information, including the age of railway employees, working years, and the length of leadership work, etc; second, measuring informal field-based learning, using Wolfson's informal field-based learning scale; and then measuring abusive supervision, knowledge sharing and traditionality. Except for the first part, the rest were measured by 5-point Likert scale<sup>[9]</sup>.

#### 3.2 Data collection

The data of this questionnaire survey come from railway staff in 14 regions. The reason for selecting railway staff for the survey is that the speed of technical iteration in the railway industry and the experience of driving and maintenance are very important, which means that the formal training of railway personnel would be very frequent, and some contents can not be covered by formal training. So informal field-based learning, as a supplement to formal training and even as the main body of job training, is very important. A total of 249 questionnaires were collected, of which 21 were invalid and 228 were valid. The effective recovery rate was 91.57%<sup>[10]</sup>. The statistical results of the basic data of the survey sample are shown in Table 1.

Table 1 Basic Characteristics of Samples

Statistical indicators	Option	Indicator number	Total number	Proportion /%
Age	<30	72	228	31.6
	30~40	127		55.7
	≥ 40	29		12.7
Working life	<10	139	228	61.0
	10~20	75		32.9
	≥ 20	14		6.1
Marital status	Unmarried	35	228	15.4
	Married	193		84.6
Educational background	Junior high school and below	1	228	0.4
	High school or technical secondary school	61		26.8
	Junior College	131		57.5
	Bachelor degree or above	35		15.4
Technical Level	Primary	8	228	3.5
	Intermediate	9		3.9
	Senior	186		81.6
	Technician	19		8.3
	Senior Technician	6		2.6
Years of leadership	<10	169	228	74.1
	10~20	45		19.7
	≥ 20	14		6.1

## 4. Statistics and analysis

### 4.1 Common Method Deviation Test

Because all variables involved in this study are measured by employee self-evaluation, Harman single factor test is carried out in order to make model fitting and hypothesis testing effective and avoid possible common methodological bias. The results showed that the explanatory value of variance of the first factor washed out was less than 40%. It can be concluded that the samples used in this study are not affected by serious common method deviations, and the follow-up analysis results are reliable<sup>[11]</sup>.

### 4.2 Confirmatory factor analysis

The confirmatory factor analysis was used to test the discrimination of the four variables designed in this study. Results As shown in Table 2, the fitness of the four-factor model was better than other models (2/Df < 3; TLI > 0.9; CFI > 0.9; SRMR < 0.08; RMSEA < 0.08), which could be used for subsequent statistical analysis<sup>[12]</sup>.

Table 2 Confirmative factor analysis

Model	$\chi^2$	Df	$\chi^2/Df$	TLI	CFI	SRMR	RMSEA
Four-factor model(AB,IFL,TRA,KS)	147.941	71	2.084	0.940	0.953	0.040	0.069
Three-factor model(AB+IFL,TRA,KS)	429.907	74	5.809	0.732	0.782	0.1163	0.145
Three-factor model(AB,IFL+TRA,KS)	310.089	74	4.190	0.822	0.855	0.066	0.118
Two-factor model(AB+IFL,TRA+KS)	339.354	71	4.779	0.789	0.836	0.063	0.129
Single factor model(AB+IFL,TRA+KS)	600.675	77	7.797	0.621	0.679	0.122	0.173

Note: AB: abusive supervision; IFL: informal field-based learning; TRA: traditionality; KS: knowledge sharing

### 4.3 Correlation analysis

In order to understand the correlation among variables, the correlation tests of the three variables involved in this paper are carried out. As shown in Table 3, abusive supervision has a significant negative impact on knowledge sharing and informal field-based learning, while knowledge sharing has a significant positive impact on informal field-based learning. In addition, there is a significant positive correlation between traditionality and knowledge sharing, which indicates that there is a certain relationship between traditionality and knowledge sharing<sup>[13]</sup>.

Table 3 Test of correlation among variables

Variable	1	2	3	4
1 Abusive supervision	1.000			
2 Knowledge sharing	-0.312**	1.000		
3 Informal Field-Based Learning	-0.150*	0.661**	1.000	
4 Traditionality	-0.252**	0.784**	0.651**	1.000

Note: \*\* Represents at 0.01 level (bilateral), with significant correlation.

\* At 0.05 level (bilateral), the correlation was significant.

### 4.4 Regression analysis

In order to further study the specific impact of the situation and verify the relevant conclusions, the next regression analysis. After introducing the control variables into the model, the test is carried out according to the order of main effect, mediation effect and regulation effect. Firstly, the regression of informal field-based learning to abusive supervision (beta=-0.150, P < 0.05), hypothesis 1 was validated<sup>[14]</sup>.

Knowledge sharing with intermediary variables is added. From Table 3, we can see that abusive supervision shares knowledge with employees (beta=-0.312, P < 0.01); employees share knowledge with informal field-based learning (beta = 0.618, P < 0.01); and after joining employees' knowledge

sharing, abusive supervision shares knowledge with informal field-based learning ( $\beta = 0.063$ ,  $P > 0.05$ ). It can be seen that the influence of abusive supervision on informal field-based learning becomes insignificant after employee knowledge sharing with intermediary variable is added. Therefore, employee knowledge sharing plays a full mediating role between abusive supervision and informal field-based learning, and hypothesis 2 is verified<sup>[15]</sup>.

As for the traditional moderating role of employees, we can see from Table 4 that the interaction between abusive supervision and traditionality will have a positive impact on knowledge sharing ( $\beta = 0.516$ ,  $P < 0.05$ ). Hypothesis 3 is validated<sup>[16]</sup>.

Table 4 Regression analysis results

Dependent variable	Independent variable	Non-standardization coefficient		Standard coefficient Beta	t	Sig.value	R <sup>2</sup>	Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>
		B	Standard error					
Informal Field-Based Learning	(Constant)	40.655	0.862		47.184	0.000	0.022	0.018
	Abusive supervision	-0.148	0.065	-0.150	-2.280	0.024		
Knowledge share	(Constant)	19.198	0.048		39.469	0.000	0.098	0.094
	Abusive supervision	-0.182	0.037	-0.312	-4.946	0.000		
Informal Field-Based Learning	(Constant)	18.412	1.183		10.033	0.000	0.441	0.436
	Abusive supervision	0.062	0.052	0.063	1.196	0.233		
	Knowledge sharing	1.158	0.089	0.681	12.969	0.000		
Knowledge share	(Constant)	8.933	2.090		4.275	0.000	0.618	0.612
	Abusive supervision	-0.381	0.142	-0.655	-2.678	0.008		
	Traditionality	0.290	0.061	0.521	4.773	0.000		
	Abusive Supervision * Traditionality	0.009	0.004	0.516	2.131	0.034		

## 5. Conclusion and discussion

### 5.1 Research conclusion

Firstly, abusive supervision can significantly reduce the informal field-based learning behavior of employees. Leaders' arbitrary criticism of employees will reduce their informal field-based learning behavior<sup>[17]</sup>.

Secondly, employee knowledge sharing plays a full mediating role in the relationship between abusive supervision and informal field-based learning. Although there are three main ways for employees' informal field-based learning behavior, the abusive supervision has a great impact on this channel, and it will affect informal field-based learning through knowledge sharing<sup>[18]</sup>.

Thirdly, traditionality has a positive moderating effect on the negative impact between abusive supervision and employee knowledge sharing. This shows that the more traditional employees are, the more abusive supervision behaviors they accept from leaders<sup>[19]</sup>.

### 5.2 Theoretical contribution

Firstly, the study finds out the factors affecting informal field-based learning, explores other aspects of the influence of abusive supervision on employees in the organization, enriches the domestic research on informal field-based learning, and fills in the blank of the influence of abusive supervision on informal field-based learning.

Secondly, because of the traditional concept, Chinese employees are more tolerant of abusive

supervision behavior by leaders, thus reducing the impact on informal field-based learning. This influence is also a supplement to the contingency theory of leaders<sup>[20]</sup>.

### 5.3 Practical Significance

Firstly, this study aims to make enterprises and organizations pay attention to and restrain Leaders' abusive supervision behavior, form an equal and healthy corporate culture, establish an effective feedback mechanism, improve the relationship between employees and leaders, and improve organizational efficiency.

Secondly, enterprises and organizations should pay more attention to informal field-based learning, create a better self-learning and lifelong learning environment for employees, improve the speed and breadth of personal knowledge acquisition in the information age, maximize the value of each employee, and improve the operational efficiency of the organization<sup>[21]</sup>.

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