

# Supervisor Gossip: Developing A Cross-level Research Framework

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This study focuses on the supervisor as the transmitter of workplace gossip, and constructs the type of supervisor gossip based on the valence and scope of gossip for developing a cross-level research framework. First, this study distinguishes four types of supervisory gossip, namely motivational gossip, normative gossip, relational gossip, and malicious gossip. Second, this study explores how the four types of supervisory gossip affect group outcomes through group process, and illustrate group status and group diversity as the group-level boundary conditions for group outcomes. Finally, supervisor gossip can also affect subordinates' leadership perception and personal outcomes, and the effects are affected by the approach-avoidance temperament and developmental job experience which are as the individual-level boundary conditions. Overall, this study argues that leaders' informal communication behaviors are significantly related to their leadership effectiveness.

**Keywords:** *workplace gossip, supervisor gossip, organizational leadership, cross-level framework*

## Extended Abstract

After more than 20 years of research, workplace gossip is a prominent topic in various important organizational management and human resource management journals. As scholars continue to delve into workplace gossip, some research areas have gradually emerged, specifically research subjects (such as supervisors), valence of gossip (such as positive gossip), domains (such as personal life), levels (such as cross-level), and contextual factors (such as group characteristics). Therefore, recent research on workplace gossip has shifted its focus from general workers to supervisors (Chang & Kuo, 2021) and from the individual level to the group level to explain the mechanisms and effects of workplace gossip from a more holistic scope. Building on these research trends, this study focuses on supervisors as gossip disseminators and constructs different supervisor gossip types. We propose

a conceptual framework for studying supervisor gossip, suggesting that supervisor gossip can influence group outcomes via group processes, and that group processes and outcomes may vary under different group-level contexts. Furthermore, supervisor gossip can have cross-level effects on subordinates' perception of leadership, thereby influencing their personal effectiveness, and this process is also influenced by the contextual situations at the individual level.

## Types of Supervisor Gossip

Considering all of the attributes and domains of workplace gossip (Kurland & Pelled, 2000), this study develops a typology to capture the complex construct of supervisor gossip, and uses this typology to interpret the effects of supervisor gossip on groups and individuals.

By constructing supervisor gossip types, we can represent the multiple configurations of supervisor gossip. Our typology helps us to understand the importance and influence of this emerging concept on organizational management. First, in terms of the attributes of supervisor gossip, researchers often adopt a positive and negative perspective, distinguishing between positive gossip and negative gossip (Kuo et al., 2018). Positive gossip refers to the dissemination of good news about third parties, such as colleague promotions or high-level job performance. In contrast, negative gossip refers to spreading bad news about third parties, such as poor performance or sloppy work. Second, the domains of supervisor gossip can be divided into work-related and life-related gossip. Work-related gossip refers to gossip focused on the work context, such as work performance or promotions. Life-related gossip refers to gossip about issues outside the work context, such as marriages or family. The content of life-related gossip is unrelated to the roles and tasks assigned by the organization, but rather concerns the transmission of information about daily life. Therefore, based on these attributes and categories of supervisor gossip, this study distinguishes four types of gossip: inspiring supervisor gossip (spreading positive work-related gossip), normative supervisor gossip (spreading negative work-related gossip), relational supervisor gossip (spreading positive life-related gossip), and malicious supervisor gossip (spreading negative life-related gossip).

### **Types of Supervisor Gossip and Subordinates' Perception of Leadership and Outcomes**

This study argues that subordinates' interpretation, attribution, and sensemaking of supervisor gossip can influence their perception of leadership (i.e., benevolent leadership, virtue leadership, dominance-focused authoritarian leadership, discipline-focused authoritarian leadership, transformational leadership,

and abusive supervision) and their individual outcomes (i.e., emotional dependence, psychological well-being, organizational citizenship behavior, and job performance). First, inspiring supervisor gossip conveys positive evaluations related to work, which can create a sense of expectation and personal attention among subordinates. They may perceive the supervisor as honest, fair, and trustworthy, which aligns with the key concepts of transformational leadership (Bass & Riggio, 2006). Therefore, this study postulates that there is a significant positive relationship between inspiring supervisor gossip and subordinates' perception of transformational leadership. Second, normative supervisor gossip transmits negative evaluations within the work context, reminding subordinates of deviations from norms or standards. As a result, subordinates perceive a supervisor engaging in normative gossip as an authority figure and a performance-oriented leader. Therefore, this study proposes a significant positive relationship between normative supervisor gossip and subordinates' perception of strict leadership. Relational supervisor gossip transmits positive information about individuals' personal lives. This exchange of positive personal life information conveys care and attention, contributing to the maintenance of interpersonal relationships. Therefore, this study suggests a significant positive relationship between relational supervisor gossip and subordinates' perception of benevolent leadership. Lastly, malicious supervisor gossip transmits negative evaluations of individuals' personal lives, which can harm their reputation. As a result, subordinates may perceive a supervisor engaged in malicious gossip as hostile, unfair, and unethical. Therefore, this study argues that malicious supervisor gossip is positively associated with subordinates' perception of abusive supervision and dominance-focused authoritarian leadership, and negatively associated with virtue leadership. In addition, subordinates' perception of leadership will have corresponding reactions and outcomes related to emotional dependence on the supervisor, psychological well-being, organizational citizenship behavior, and job performance.

## **Types of Supervisor Gossip, Group Processes, and Outcomes**

Supervisor gossip certainly has an impact at the group level (Kuo, 2019), as group members shape the group process (i.e., group empowerment, group reflection, and group emotional tone) and outcomes (i.e., group cohesion, group creativity, group cooperative behavior, and group performance) through the collective cultural learning arising from gossip content. First, inspiring supervisor gossip should enhance group empowerment and create a positive emotional tone because it is seen as supervisors acknowledging the superior work attitudes, behaviors, and performance of group members. Continuous exposure to positive work-related gossip messages helps foster positive perceptions of the group's capability, meaning, autonomy, and influence, leading to group empowerment (Kirkman & Rosen, 1999) and a positive group emotional tone. Second, normative supervisor gossip is significantly related to group reflection because it conveys information related to immediate harm or potential threats that the group faces and highlights the standards expected or set by the organization. It serves as a warning of the need for improvement, thus facilitating group reflection. Relational supervisor gossip consolidates the positive emotional tone of the group. It conveys the supervisor's care and attention, leading subordinates to feel the supervisor's care and personalized consideration, thus enhancing the positive emotional tone of the group. Finally, malicious supervisor gossip is positively related to a negative emotional tone. Group members tend to perceive malicious gossip as unethical and driven by the supervisor's self-interest, resulting in negative feelings and a negative emotional tone in the group. To conclude, this study posits that supervisor gossip can influence group outcomes, such as group cohesion, creativity, cooperative behavior, and performance, through the group processes discussed above.

## **Moderators of Supervisor Gossip**

### ***Individual-level Moderators***

This study argues that subordinates' approach-avoidance temperament and developmental job experience moderate the relationship between subordinates' perception of supervisor gossip and of leadership. First, based on the approach-avoidance characteristics defined in the social information processing framework, an approach temperament, which is characterized by extraversion, positive emotions, and promotive behavioral tendencies, strengthens the relationship between inspiring supervisor gossip and subordinates' perception of transformational leadership. In contrast, an avoidance temperament, which is characterized by neuroticism, negative emotions, and inhibitive behavioral tendencies, reinforces the relationship between normative supervisor gossip and subordinates' perception of discipline-focused authoritarian leadership. Second, subordinates' developmental job experience also moderates the relationship between supervisor gossip and subordinate leadership perception. Subordinates with high developmental job experience, when facing supervisor gossip, tend to reflect on the reasons behind the positive reputation or negative evaluations of the targets of the gossip and to learn from their success or failure. In contrast, subordinates with low developmental job experience find it difficult to reflect and learn from experiences of success or failure transmitted through supervisor gossip and to transform them into motivation. Therefore, this study argues that developmental job experience positively moderates the relationships between inspiring supervisor gossip and subordinates' perception of transformational leadership and the relationship between normative supervisor gossip and subordinates' perception of discipline-focused authoritarian leadership.

### ***Group-level Moderators***

This study argues that group status and group diversity moderate the relationship between supervisor gossip and group processes. First, in terms of group status, when high-status groups hear positive gossip from managers, especially work-related gossip that involves

praise or recognition, it aligns with their cognitive schemas of group status. In contrast, negative gossip from supervisors, especially work-related gossip that discusses deviations from performance expectations or group norms, serves as salient information that prompts group members to reflect, adjust, or revise their actions or take on new strategies to meet the expectations and goals to maintain their current group status. Therefore, this study suggests that group status positively moderates the relationship between normative supervisor gossip and group reflection. Second, in terms of group diversity, for highly diverse groups, the ability to interpret the underlying meanings behind gossip from multiple perspectives and exchange opinions expands the breadth and depth of the interpretation of both positive and negative gossip messages from supervisors, especially work-related gossip cues. Thus, group diversity should have a strong effect on group reflection. However, group diversity may hinder emotional sharing and communication among members, making it difficult to form a cohesive group emotion. Thus, group diversity may impede the development of a shared emotional tone, whether the tone is positive or negative. To conclude, this study suggests that group diversity positively moderates the relationship between normative supervisor gossip and group reflection and negatively moderates the relationships between inspiring supervisor gossip and a positive emotional tone, relational supervisor gossip and a positive emotional tone, and malicious supervisor gossip and a negative emotional tone.

## Conclusion

This study examines the bright side of workplace gossip. We adopt the perspectives of social information processing and cultural learning and develop a cross-

level process framework for understanding supervisor gossip that explains the effects of supervisor gossip on individuals and groups across different contexts. As gossip is the transmission and sharing of evaluative social information, how individuals or groups process such information offers a guide to complicated and ambiguous organizational contexts (Baumeister et al., 2004). Thus, one of the core arguments of this study is that the social cues from supervisor gossip trigger interpretations, attributions, and meaning-making among subordinates. Subordinates might regard gossip as an external manifestation of the supervisor's personal characteristics or leadership style, thereby influencing the subordinates' personal efficacy. Furthermore, the knowledge and information obtained by individuals' interpretations, attributions, and meaning-making can be collectively stored in a shared database. Members can extract and apply the knowledge in the shared database autonomously, engaging in "culture learning" within the organization. To conclude, this study argues that the cultural learning processes based on supervisor gossip are simple, low cost, and highly efficient and effective. Such learning processes not only influence group outcomes (i.e., group cohesion, group creativity, cooperative behavior, and group performance) through group processes (group efficacy, group reflexivity, and group affective tone) but also influence individual outcomes (i.e., emotional dependence, psychological well-being, organizational citizenship behavior, and individual performance) through individuals' perception of leadership (i.e., benevolent leadership, virtue leadership, authoritarian leadership, transformational leadership, and abusive supervision). Therefore, supervisor gossip can serve as an important research and practical issue in future studies of organizational leadership.