

Chapter 11

The Effects of Organizational Socialization and Leadership Behavior on Burnout: Evidence from Manufacturing Workers in China

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ABSTRACT

The relationship between organizational socialization (Training, Understanding, Coworker Support, and Future Prospects) and leadership behavior (Monitor, Producer, Consideration for Others, and Trust in Others) and burnout (Emotional Exhaustion and Personal Accomplishment) were explored and discussed in this chapter. Data were collected from 341 Chinese manufacturing workers in Southern China. Results revealed that organizational socialization was highly and negatively correlated with Emotional Exhaustion, but highly and positively with Personal Accomplishment. Monitor, Consideration, and Trust were highly and negatively correlated with Emotional Exhaustion, but all the four leadership behaviors were highly and positively correlated with Personal Accomplishment. Regression revealed Training and Monitor to be significant predictors of Emotional Exhaustion, and Understanding, Coworker Support, and Trust explained significant variance of Personal Accomplishment. Management implications are discussed, and future research is indicated.

INTRODUCTION

While most research on burnout has focused on “people” workers (especially nurses), little research has examined employees in other industries. There have been some studies on how to deal with occupational stress (Burke, 2010), only a few investigated manufacturing workers. Despite the large number of people working in the manufacturing industry, most empirical research focused on performance efficiency and effectiveness (Fugate, Mentzer & Stank, 2010; Akhigbe, 2013), revealing a missing gap in research on the psychological characteristics and attitudes of manufacturing workers.

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A few years ago, suicides at Foxconn shocked China and the whole world! News quoted from BBC Aug 6, 2010: A total of 13 Chinese employees have committed suicide at Foxconn or related plants, including 10 in the southern city of Shenzhen. Within a period of fewer than ten months in 2010, 14 Foxconn employees committed suicide, 4 more made failed suicide attempts, and 20 attempts were stopped by company officials. Young victims in their teens and 20s, ended their lives by jumping from the roofs and windows of buildings at Foxconn.

Foxconn, a trading name of Hon Hai Precision Industry Co. Ltd., is a Taiwanese multinational electronics contract manufacturing company established by Terry Guo in 1974. Headquartered in New Taipei, Taiwan, it is now the world's largest electronics manufacturing contractor, and the third-largest information technology company by revenue. Foxconn's first manufacturing plant in mainland China opened in Longhua, Shenzhen, in 1988. It is now Foxconn's largest factory worldwide with about 240,000 employees. The 2.5 square kilometer walled campus is referred by the locals as the "Foxconn City" (The Economics, 2012). Foxconn invests heavily in China. It employs 1.4 million people on 28 campuses.

Even though the company claimed that the deaths were not work-related, families of the deceased blamed the punishing work schedules in China's factories. Foxconn used to give only one or two days off per month, and there was no limit on overtime. Workers also complained that they had been treated unfairly by the management. The mainlanders received the lowest level of pay doing the majority of work, while the Taiwanese enjoyed much higher salary serving in supervisory positions. The mainland workers called themselves "salves" in the factory. The deaths sparked wide concerns about working conditions in Foxconn, and many other manufactures in China. Foxconn faced the most serious communication crisis ever during that period. Journalists, labor activists, and concerned consumers around the globe demanded answers.

In fact, suicides in Chinese organizations are not uncommon. The accumulated number of suicides in Huawei was reported to reach 38 in 2008 since its establishment in Shenzhen in 1987. As a leading global ICT solutions provider, Huawei's products and solutions have been deployed in over 170 countries and regions, serving more than one third of the world's population. What differs Huawei from Foxconn is that suicides in Foxconn were line-level manufacturing workers while those in Huawei were young IT elites produced IT products and solutions. Employees in Huawei complained about heavy work load, enormous pressure, and unsatisfactory working relationships (CNET news).

The purpose of this study is not to assign blame for the suicides to Foxconn, nor is it to offer a better public relations campaign in response to such kind of crisis. It is hoped that lessons could be learnt to reduce employee burnout at work, and to increase their sense of work achievement. This research, therefore, focused on burnout and other organizational factors in relation to manufacturing workers in China. Specially, organizational socialization and leadership behaviors were examined in relation to two facets of burnout, namely: emotional exhaustion and reduced personal accomplishment.

BURNOUT

Defining Burnout. The concept of "Burnout" was introduced in the mid-1970s by Herbert Freudenberger (1974). He observed symptoms of emotional depletion and a loss of motivation and commitment among volunteers who were working in an alternative health care agency. Around the same time, Maslach (1976) was studying emotions in the work place. She interviewed a wide range of human services workers about the emotional stress caused by their jobs. Therefore, burnout research began in care-giving and service occupations.

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