

Being a broker at work leads to burnout and abuse

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Employees who act as brokers, i.e., they sustain communications between coworkers who do not communicate directly, are more likely to burn out and become abusive towards their co-workers, according to new research from ESMT Berlin.

This research, led by Eric Quintane, associate professor of organizational behavior at ESMT Berlin, examines the psychological costs of having to sustain communications with coworkers who do not communicate directly with each other. They could be coworkers who are in different units, regions, or time zones, which makes it hard for them to communicate. They could also be coworkers who have different expertise or focus or are in conflict with each other, and they require someone else as an intermediary to coordinate their activities. Although there are significant benefits to being a broker, such as increased performance, creativity, or faster promotions, brokers who keep intermediating third parties increase their risk of burnout and abuse.

The research project spans three studies using different methodologies, measurements, and cultural contexts. In the first study, the researchers studied employees' email exchange records as well as burnout and abusive behavior data for over 1,500 employees of a large South American university over a five-month period. Study 2 used an online longitudinal survey with employees based in the US, while Study 3 used an experimental design that assigned employees randomly to sustain communications with disconnected coworkers. All three studies point in the same direction: When employees communicate with coworkers who cannot or do not want to communicate directly, they experience increased burnout, which then leads to a higher chance of engaging in abusive behavior.

"Though the benefits of brokering relationships can be consequential, it's a high-risk, high-reward activity," says Prof. Quintane. "The increased chances of burnout are detrimental for the broker or the organization, with the likelihood of that employee needing to take time off after a period of high-stress levels. These high-stress levels are likely to cause brokers to take this out on their co-workers, becoming abusive in their role – this is harmful for the wider organization, especially because brokers typically play an important coordination role between groups or departments."

One way to buffer brokers from burnout, Prof. Quintane suggests, is by providing them with opportunities to periodically disengage from their role so that they can replenish their psychological resources. Organizations should encourage employees to take a break after engaging in brokering and encourage brokers to utilize resources that help them deal with the stress involved in brokering.

The research was published in Organization Science. The manuscript may be found here.

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