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Defeating Abusive Supervision: Training Supervisors to Support Subordinates

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Although much is known about the antecedents and consequences of abusive supervision, scant attention has been paid to investigating procedures to reduce its frequency. We conducted a quasiexperiment to examine the effects of supervisor support training on subordinate perceptions of abusive supervision and supervisor support. Supervisors ($n = 23$) in 4 restaurants were trained in 4 supportive supervision strategies (benevolence, sincerity, fairness, and experiential processing) during 4 2-hr sessions over a period of 2 months. We compared perceived supervisor support and abusive supervision before and 9 months after training for 208 employees whose supervisors received support training and 241 employees in 4 similar control restaurants. Compared to employees in the control restaurants, employees whose supervisors received the support training reported higher levels of perceived supervisor support and less abusive supervision. These findings suggest that a relatively brief training program can help managers become more supportive and less abusive. Theoretical and practical implications for effectively managing abusive supervision are discussed.

Keywords: abusive supervision, supervisor support, perceived supervisor support, training, quasiexperiment

Abusive supervision, involving "subordinates perceptions of the extent to which supervisors engage in the sustained display of hostile verbal and nonverbal behaviors, excluding physical contact" (Tepper, 2000, p. 178), has deleterious consequences for victims and the organizations that employ them (Mackey, Frieder, Brees, & Martinko, 2015; Martinko, Harvey, Brees, & Mackey, 2013; Tepper, 2007). A substantial body of work has shown that abusive supervision is negatively associated with employee attitudes and behaviors, such as job satisfaction (Palanski, Avey, & Jiraporn, 2014; Tepper, 2000), organizational commitment (Duffy, Ganster, & Pagon, 2002), perceptions of organizational support (Kernan, Watson, Chen, & Kim, 2011; Shoss, Eisenberger, Restubog, & Zagenczyk, 2013), in-role job performance (Xu, Huang, Lam, & Miao, 2012), citizenship behaviors (Zellars, Tepper, & Duffy, 2002), and positively associated with employee deviance (Brees, Mackey, Martinko, & Harvey, 2014; Lian, Ferris, & Brown, 2012; Mitchell & Ambrose, 2007; Tepper, Henle, Lambert, Giacalone, & Duffy, 2008) and turnover intentions (Tepper, 2000).

More importantly, empirical evidence also indicates that abusive supervision is a serious psychosocial health risk that needs to be appropriately managed. Meta-analytic evidence reveals negative relationships with psychological well-being and positive associations with stress (Schyns & Schilling, 2013), work-to-family conflict, job tension, emotional exhaustion, and depression (Mackey et al., 2015). Because of its harmfulness, there have been many calls for investigating ways to reduce the occurrence of abusive supervision, including supervisory training and improved organizational socialization techniques (Mawritz, Mayer, Hoobler, Wayne, & Marinova, 2012; Mitchell & Ambrose, 2012; Restubog, Scott, & Zagenczyk, 2011; Shoss et al., 2013; Walter, Lam, van der Vegt, Huang, & Miao, 2015). However, to this point little research has responded to these calls. Although much empirical research has investigated the antecedents of abusive supervision (e.g., Zhang & Bednall, 2015), the implementation of procedures to prevent or reduce abusive supervision in the workplace needs to be empirically examined. To address this need, the present research investigates whether abusive supervision can be modified by training

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supervisors to understand the value of supportive supervision and by providing them with effective techniques for engaging in more supportive supervision.

In this study we apply strategies based on organizational support theory (OST) (Eisenberger & Stinglhamber, 2011) to address the rectification of abusive supervision. OST holds that employees form general beliefs concerning the extent to which the organization and its representatives (e.g., managers and supervisors) value their contributions and care about their well-being (perceived organizational support, or POS). A large number of correlational studies have established that supervisor and organizational support are related to many employee and organizational outcomes (Kurtessis et al., 2015). OST incorporates basic assumptions of social exchange theory with regard to reciprocity and attributions (Eisenberger & Stinglhamber, 2011; Kurtessis et al., 2015). Based on the reciprocity norm, employees are assumed to experience an indebtedness or felt obligation to the organization and its agents, such as supervisors and managers, for favorable treatment. Moreover, in accord with social exchange theory (Gouldner, 1960), favorable treatment leads to greater indebtedness and affective commitment to the organization and its agents when employees attribute such treatment to favorable intent (Eisenberger, Cummings, Armeli, & Lynch, 1997). Among the major antecedents of POS are organizational justice, support by supervisors, and favorable human resource practices (Kurtessis et al., 2015). According to OST, employees should value supportive actions by the supervisor both as indication of valuation by the organization and by a leader who may provide significant material, informational, and socioemotional resources. We extend knowledge and contribute to research on OST by demonstrating that its theoretical principles can be used to design and implement organizational practices to foster healthy workplaces.

Overcoming Abusive Supervision

Research that has examined the antecedents of abusive supervision suggests that attempts to lessen its frequency may be impeded by leaders' familial and dispositional tendencies to be abusive and by stable characteristics of followers that elicit abuse. For example, supervisors' history of family aggression and undermining (Garcia, Restubog, Kiewitz, Scott, & Tang, 2014; Kiewitz et al., 2012), level of anxiety (Byrne et al., 2014), hostility-related affect (Garcia et al., 2014), and depression (Byrne et al., 2014; Tepper, Duffy, Henle, & Lambert, 2006) are positively associated with abuse. Further, subordinates' high levels of negative affectivity (Aquino, Grover, Bradfield, & Allen, 1999) and low levels of core self-evaluations (Wu & Hu, 2009), self-esteem (Kiazad, Restubog, Zagenczyk, Kiewitz, & Tang, 2010) and conscientiousness (Henle & Gross, 2014), and a predisposition toward paranoid tendencies are associated with greater reports of abuse (Chan & McAllister, 2014; Martinko, Harvey, Sikora, & Douglas, 2011). Zhang and Bednall's (2015) meta-analysis provides further evidence that supervisors' and subordinates' demographic and dispositional characteristics affect abusive supervision.

Although overcoming the effects of these individual and dispositional characteristics may seem difficult, finding ways to encourage supervisors to act more favorably toward subordinates provides a more hopeful perspective. This is especially true if we consider that contextual features of the work environment, such as supervisors' attempts to cope with overly stressful environments (Burton, Hoobler, & Scheuer, 2012) or inadequate subordinate performance (Li, Zhang, Law, & Yan, 2015; Tepper, Moss, & Duffy, 2011; Walter et al., 2015), can also impact abusive supervision. Further, combating abusive supervision by training supervisors to engage in supportive behaviors is consistent with a large body of work in the leadership domain that has demonstrated that effective leadership behaviors can be learned (cf. Brungardt, 1997; DeRue, Nahrgang, Hollenbeck, & Workman, 2012; Packard & Jones, 2015; Santos, Caetano, & Tavares, 2015).

Supportive Supervision

Supportive supervision involves an orientation by the supervisor to be helpful and considerate to subordinates (House, 1996). Supportive supervisors and managers have been characterized as being friendly and approachable, receptive to followers' new ideas and dissenting opinions, and expressing appreciation and support to followers (Bass, 1990; DeRue, Nahrgang, Wellman, & Humphrey, 2011; Judge, Piccolo, & Ilies, 2004; Lambert, Tepper, Carr, Holt, & Barelka, 2012; Oldham & Cummings, 1996). OST (Eisenberger, Huntington, Hutchison, & Sowa, 1986; Eisenberger & Stinglhamber, 2011; Shore & Shore, 1995) suggests that employees should respond to the receipt of supportive behaviors with a general perception of positive valuation by their supervisor. Although most research relevant to this theory has focused on POS, organization members also form perceptions of support about individuals and collectives within the organization that may provide important material, informational, and socioemotional resources (Eisenberger & Stinglhamber, 2011). Perceived supervisor support (PSS) refers to a general perception about the extent to which employees feel their supervisor values their contributions and cares about their well-being. We suggest that inducing supervisors to engage in supportive supervision behaviors will displace supervisor's orientation toward abusive behaviors, leading to higher PSS and lower reports of abusive supervision.

Training would involve explaining the utility of supportive supervision and providing supervisors with the necessary skills and strategies to enact such behavior. There are several reasons why supportive supervision training may increase positive perceptions about supervisors and reduce abusive supervision. First, according to OST, and based on the reciprocity norm, employees should reciprocate supportive supervision by increasing their performance. In return, and responding favorably to such enhanced performance, supervisors would be less likely to engage in abusive supervision. Second, abusive supervision has been linked to aggression norms in organizations. For example, Restubog et al. (2011) found that supervisors who perceived stronger norms toward aggressive behavior in their organization were perceived as more abusive by their subordinates. Moreover, researchers in the broader workplace victimization area have theorized that employees often learn aggressive behavior from their peers or other valued organizational members as the normative way of behaving "around here" (Aquino, Douglas, & Martinko, 2004; Einarsen, 1999; Glomb & Liao, 2003; Langan-Fox & Sankey, 2007). Supervisors trained in supportive supervision can help establish a new norm regarding how to appropriately respond to subordinates in stressful situations. This norm would encourage caring and consideration as responses to subordinates, and discourage impulsive

and potentially abusive behaviors. Therefore, we expect supervisor support training to increase the frequency of perceived supportive behaviors and decrease the frequency of perceived abusive behavior.

Third, supportive supervision produces favorable reactions among subordinates (DeRue et al., 2011; Judge et al., 2004; Lambert et al., 2012; Oldham & Cummings, 1996) and, more generally, destructive leadership-subordinate outcome correlations are largely negative and opposite in direction to constructive leadership-outcome correlations (Schyns & Schilling, 2013). We thus propose that enhancing supportive supervision, a constructive leadership behavior, should make supportive supervisory behaviors more salient, increasing perceptions of supportive supervision and decreasing perceptions of abusive supervision. As supervisors notice the effectiveness of supportive supervision in dealing with subordinates, such behavior should become preferable to abuse. Further, as supervisors engage in more supportive and less abusive behaviors, subordinates should perceive this change and come to see their supervisors as generally supportive. We would not expect that perceptions of abuse would be totally eradicated because negative and unfavorable perceptions are stronger and more salient than positive ones (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer, & Vohs, 2001). However, even if isolated instances of mistreatment occur they may not be interpreted as abusive, especially if subordinates believe the supervisor did not intend to be harmful.

Feeling victimized by an abusive behavior is a subjective experience (Aquino & Thau, 2009). Thus, like most research in the mistreatment literature, our focus is on subordinate perceptions of abusive supervision. By definition supervisory abuse lies in the eye of the beholder and requires the employee's perception that the perpetrator intended to commit harm. If employees experience frequent supportive behaviors they may not attribute intent to harm when isolated abusive supervisory behaviors are enacted, especially in the context of a generally supportive relationship. In these instances subordinates may be more likely to absolve the supervisor of blame and attribute the behavior to external, situational causes, such as an unusually busy or understaffed day.

Training Supportive Supervisor Strategies

According to OST (Eisenberger & Stinglhamber, 2011), there are a number of supervisory behaviors that should contribute to subordinates' PSS. We organized these behaviors around four general strategies: benevolence, sincerity, fairness, and experiential processing. These strategies, along with relevant behaviors, are presented in Table 1 and are explained in more detail below.

Benevolence refers to supervisors' discretionary behaviors that provide subordinates with helpful information and tangible and emotional support beyond the supervisor's general role requirements. PSS is enhanced when employees believe that organizational representatives have a genuine concern for their welfare, as demonstrated by their actions beyond the call of duty (Eisenberger & Stinglhamber, 2011). This concern is more strongly communicated when supervisors' favorable actions appear to be voluntary and reflect genuine caring on their part as opposed to being forced by external constraints, such as contractual obligations, government regulations, or a tight job market (Eisenberger et al., 1997).

Sincerity refers to authenticity in expression and deed (Eisenberger & Stinglhamber, 2011). Employees believe supervisors are being sincere in judgments of their performance when these judgments reflect careful evaluation rather than other motives such as bias toward favored employees or a disingenuous desire to please. Attributions of sincerity are also enhanced, according to OST, when supervisors follow through on their promises. In addition, being treated with dignity and respect by those in positions of authority is an important aspect of interactional justice and is reflected in the sincerity strategy.

Procedural and informational justice are also important. Both have been consistently found to be positively associated with perceived support (DeConinck, 2010; Kurtessis et al., 2015; Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002; Wayne, Shore, Bommer, & Tetrick, 2002). Procedural justice refers to fairness in the processes used to determine valued outcomes (Colquitt, 2001). For example, social accounts as a dimension of procedural justice have been shown to reduce blame employees place on the decision maker (Bobocel &

Table 1
Summary of Supportive Behavior Strategies

BENEVOLENCE	SINCERITY
■ Recognize employee efforts, especially when they go beyond the call of duty (perform beyond expectations). ■ Whenever possible, accept mistakes and use them as learning opportunities. ■ Support employees with necessary back-up and training to do their jobs. ■ Make amends for poor treatment from customers.	■ Follow through on promises made to employees. ■ Be honest and timely when communicating positive and negative information about performance. ■ Treat employees with respect. ■ Employ constructive feedback skills: ○ Impersonal/Focus on behavior ○ Offer encouragement ○ Suggest corrective actions/behaviors ○ Provide clear direction
FAIRNESS	**MINDFULNESS**
■ Procedures based on accurate information. ■ Rules and policies applied uniformly. ■ Procedures neutral and unbiased. ■ Opportunity for employee voice. ■ Opportunity for Correction/Appeal. ■ Explain reasons for decisions using social accounts.	■ Gather all relevant information regarding performance. ■ Decide private or public discussion and appropriate place and time. ■ Employ active listening skills: ○ Avoid interruption and defer judgment ○ Pay attention/ Organize information ○ Maintain/Show interest ○ Obtain feedback to check understanding

Zdaniuk, 2005; Shaw, Wild, & Colquitt, 2003). Informational justice provides explanations for why procedures were used or outcomes were distributed in a particular way (Colquitt, Conlon, Wesson, Porter, & Ng, 2001). Both procedural and informational fairness communicate concern for employees' opinions and well-being, leading to enhanced perceptions of support (DeConinck, 2010; Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002; Roch & Shanock, 2006).

The fourth strategy, experiential processing (Good et al., 2016), involves attending to stimuli without immediate judgment or evaluation since such interpretations often tend to be habitual in nature or biased toward self-concerns. Thus, experiential processing permits a more nonautomatic and careful evaluation of events. Having supervisors stop and listen carefully to subordinate concerns or explanations, as opposed to responding impulsively, provides an opportunity for greater awareness and more flexible responses, essentially minimizing automatic reactions. Experiential processing may be particularly important during stressful periods when supervisors may impulsively react to their own mistakes or those of their subordinates with abusive behavior. Thoughtful reflection and awareness of interactions with subordinates during stressful periods may help enable more supportive supervision, leading to greater PSS and fewer instances of abuse.

In sum, OST points to several specific strategies for treating subordinates supportively and, as illustrated in Table 1, these strategies suggest concrete behaviors that can serve as training targets. We believe such training has the potential to increase perceived supervisor support and decrease abusive supervision. We conducted a quasiexperiment in a midsized restaurant chain, with supervisors in experimental restaurants receiving supportive supervision training. Supervisors in the remaining restaurants served as the control group. We hypothesized that supervisor support training would enhance PSS and lessen abusive supervision:

Hypothesis 1: Subordinates of supervisors in the supervisor support training condition, in comparison to the control condition, will report higher perceived supervisor support.

Hypothesis 2: Subordinates of supervisors in the supervisor support training condition, in comparison to the control condition, will report lower abusive supervision.

Method

Participants and Procedure

We conducted a quasiexperimental field study, using a comparison group before–after design, in eight restaurants, with four restaurants assigned to the training condition and four assigned to a nontraining control condition. These eight locations are members of a small chain of locally based, upscale casual restaurants. They are located within a 90-mile radius in various medium-sized towns and cities, with similar economic climates, in two adjacent Northeast states in the United States.

The hospitality setting is useful for investigating ways to reduce abuse because it is an environment characterized by frequent customer and supervisor interactions, heavy work demands during peak periods, and significant time pressures. Pretraining equivalence between conditions was obtained by using a matched-group design to guarantee that the mean scores on PSS in the experimental and control restaurants were comparable (see Table 2).

Supervisors were trained in four 2-hr sessions over a 2-month period. The first three sessions took place over 3 consecutive weeks and the fourth took place a month later in order to refresh the content of the training and to keep participants on track with the transfer process. Trainees included a balanced composition of restaurant general managers, floor managers, chefs, and sous chefs. Management teams in each location are composed of managers in the two areas of the restaurant. The back of the house refers to the kitchen area and the front of the house refers to the area where customers are served. The back of the house management team is composed of an executive chef and two sous chefs. The front of the house management team is composed of one general store manager and two floor managers. In a given shift, there is a least one manager in the front and one manager in the back of the house. Busier shifts, such as dinners on Fridays and Saturdays, require at least two managers in each part of the house. A total of 23 supervisors (4 women, 19 men) from the four experimental locations started the training: six from three restaurants (1 general manager, 2 floor managers, 1 executive chef and 2 sous chefs) and five from the fourth (i.e., one general manager, two floor managers, one executive chef and one sous chef). To enhance interpersonal interaction and foster learning, the initial group of 23 was split into two training groups, 13 in one and 10 in the other. All supervisors but three (two floor managers from two different restaurants, and one sous chef from a third restaurant) completed the program.

Training was conducted off-site at the company's headquarters. Employees from all of the restaurants (experimental and control) knew that the company was collaborating with our research team, but were unaware of specific interventions, including the supervisory support training program. Our primary means of communication with employees was the presentation and explanation of the consent form for collecting the critical incident data (discussed below). The consent form also explained the general goals of our collaboration (helping to increase organizational effectiveness), that we would be asking questions about their work attitudes on the company's biannual employee survey, and emphasized the voluntary nature of participation.

Employee (subordinate) measures of PSS and abusive supervision, included in the organization's online employee attitude survey, were assessed 2 months prior to training (Time 1) and 9 months after the training was completed (Time 2). Because of frequently shifting employee and manager schedules, most em-

Table 2
Means and Standard Deviations for Employee Variables

	Control		Experimental	
	Pretest	Posttest	Pretest	Posttest
	M (*SD*)	*M* (*SD*)	*M* (*SD*)	*M* (*SD*)
PSS	5.51 (1.16)	5.32 (1.12)	5.52 (1.28)	5.67 (1.13)
AS	1.20 (.44)	1.27 (.68)	1.29 (.59)	1.13 (.44)

Note. PSS = Perceived supervisor support; AS = Abusive supervision. *N*s for experimental group at pre- and posttest were 227 and 208, respectively. *N*s for control group at pre- and posttest were 216 and 241, respectively.

ployees worked under several supervisors. For example, in a single shift, a server may be responding to both the floor manager and the store manager (2 supervisors in 1 shift). This is the norm in many restaurants, which is why we trained all supervisors in the experimental restaurants. When responding to survey questions, employees were asked to think of the supervisors they most frequently reported to.

In keeping with the organization's survey policy of guaranteed employee anonymity, we were not allowed to collect demographic information. However, based on organizational records we can report the following characteristics of the nonmanagerial employees: 44% of employees in the experimental restaurants were female, compared to 39% in control restaurants (we did not have information on gender identity for 7% and 6%, respectively), and 17% in the experimental and 15.5% in the control restaurants were of Hispanic origin. In both experimental and control restaurants, the job title distribution was similar: 27% were kitchen staff (most of them male); 45% were wait staff, and 15% were hosts (the majority were female). Finally, bar and bus staff comprised 12% of the nonmanagerial employees.

Participants completed surveys during work hours on laptop computers installed in the restaurants. Response rates for both time periods were approximately 95%. Participants at Time 1 included 443 employees, 227 from experimental locations and 216 from control locations. At Time 2, 449 employees were surveyed; 208 worked at experimental locations and 241 worked at control locations.

Training Procedure

Needs analysis. Needs analysis is an essential element of training design (e.g., Dessler, 2011; Ford, Kozlowski, Kraiger, Salas, & Teachout, 1997). In our analysis, we explored the current levels of perceived support provided by supervisors to subordinates. The main purpose was to identify key situations in which subordinates regularly felt supported and unsupported, so that we could design training content that was relevant to their particular work environment. We interviewed 33 top and mid-level managers from the eight restaurants concerning the relationships between supervisors and subordinates. In addition, we administered a brief critical-incident questionnaire to the employees before the dinner shift in each of the eight locations (mean number of respondents per location was 17.12, $SD = 3.83$). We collected and analyzed a total of 298 positive and negative critical incidents from 137 employees. Employees were asked to describe an incident where they felt they had been well treated by a supervisor and an incident where they felt poorly treated by a supervisor. Many cases of positive treatment described interactions in which employees reported being treated with respect, having work efforts recognized and rewarded, receiving emotional support for personal problems and mistakes, and obtaining constructive feedback about performance. Instances of poor treatment included situations in which supervisors showed a lack of support or understanding, became quickly frustrated by mistakes, failed to treat employees with respect, or consistently provided little recognition for good performance. Many instances of poor treatment revealed abusive behaviors such as being yelled at, unfairly disciplined, ridiculed and ignored, often made more humiliating when carried out in front of customers or coworkers.

Training objective and content. The objective of the training program was to provide supervisors with strategies to treat subordinates more supportively. Supervisors received instruction in the benefits of supervisor support and in four basic supervisor support strategies (benevolence, sincerity, fairness, and experiential processing). In discussing benevolence, we emphasized to supervisors that instrumental support (e.g., assistance with work-related problems and providing recognition for extraordinary efforts) and emotional support (e.g., providing understanding and encouragement when mistakes are made) should be presented as volitional and concerned with the best interests of employees. With respect to sincerity, we urged supervisors to provide honest, constructive feedback when evaluating positive and negative instances of performance, to follow through on promises made to employees and to treat employees with respect. We incorporated this last element, interactional justice, into the sincerity principle without explicitly using the interactional fairness term with trainees. If supervisors behave in an honest, timely and respectful manner (behaviors included under the sincerity principle), perceptions of interactional fairness perceptions should follow. When discussing fairness, we urged supervisors to apply basic elements of procedural justice, including using accurate information, uniform and unbiased application of rules and procedures, and allowing for employee voice and opportunity for appeal. We trained supervisors to provide social accounts so that they would be perceived as fair even when their actions were seen as unfavorable by subordinates (e.g., an employee who receives an unpopular shift assignment). Finally, we presented the experiential processing principle to trainees using the label of *mindfulness*. The particular behaviors trained for this and the other strategies are identified in Table 1.

Training format and techniques. We incorporated several pedagogical techniques (lectures, group discussion, role plays) and recommendations suggested by training researchers for maximizing trainee learning and transfer: meaningfulness, active participation, and distributed practice (Noe & Colquitt, 2002; Skarlicki & Latham, 2005). Meaningfulness of the training content was achieved in two ways. First, we stressed the relevance of the training to work dimensions important to supervisors (e.g., leadership development, subordinate attitudes) and the organization's bottom line (e.g., sales). Second, we developed training vignettes specifically for the focal organization depicting various interactions between customers and/or supervisors and employees. Each vignette was written to highlight one or two of the support strategies and were used as discussion starters and role-playing vehicles. Third, we reviewed relevant organizational documentation with the human resources manager in order to acquire knowledge on organizational policies, procedures, and rules that would give meaning to the training content.

Active participation was accomplished by asking trainees to role-play supervisor–subordinate interactions (via the organizationally relevant vignettes), and by soliciting examples of successful and unsuccessful applications of the four training strategies (via weekly logs maintained by the trainees in between training sessions, discussed below). Active participation was also encouraged through group discussions and by having trainees provide feedback to one another after role-playing sessions. Finally, distributive practice was accomplished by holding three primary training sessions, separated by a week, and a refresher session, scheduled 1 month later. Trainees were encouraged to practice the principles

and skills they learned during training with their employees between each session.

The training vignettes were created from incidents reported in the employee critical-incident questionnaire and were intended to map onto one or more of the training strategies. Examples of situations depicted in the vignettes included: (a) employees performing less well than supervisors would have liked, and the supervisors reacting abusively (low experiential processing and benevolence), (b) employees performing well under very difficult conditions and supervisors failing to provide praise or recognition (low benevolence), (c) employees feeling that supervisors did not consistently apply company policies and instead played "favorites" (low fairness), and (d) supervisors failing to provide accurate and timely feedback about employee performance (low sincerity).

Ensuring that learning is transferred back to the organization is critical to effective training (Kirkpatrick, 1998; Saks & Belcourt, 2006; Skarlicki & Latham, 2005). We designed a number of elements into the training program to enhance the transfer process. At the end of each training session we distributed business-card-sized flashcards summarizing each strategy. Trainees took these cards with them to work to remind them of supportive behaviors in daily interactions with subordinates. Weekly trainee logs were provided to participants so that they could document their progress, review examples of the training strategies and applications, and identify questions for the trainers. Trainees were instructed to record their applications of the strategies and skills during the following week using the flashcards as support. Thus, this "transfer log" was intended to motivate and enhance the transfer of the training back to the job.

Measures

The PSS and abusive supervision items were consistent with the issues identified by the needs analysis and with the training design. We modified four items from the Survey of Perceived Organizational Support developed by Eisenberger et al. (1986) to measure PSS. Scale items were as follows: My supervisor: "strongly considers my goals and values," "would forgive an honest mistake on my part," "disregards my best interests when he/she makes decisions that affect me," "is willing to extend herself/himself in order to help me perform my job to the best of my ability." Subordinates indicated their agreement with each item on a scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). Several studies have used similar adaptations of this scale, which has been shown to have good discriminant and predictive validity (T1 $\alpha = .78$; T2 $\alpha = .73$; Kurtessis et al., 2015; Ng & Sorensen, 2008).

Abusive supervision was assessed with six items from the Negative Acts Questionnaire–Revised (NAQ-R; Einarsen, Hoel, & Notelaers, 2009). Adaptions of this scale have been used in prior research with acceptable levels of reliability (Baillien, Bollen, Euwema, & De Witte, 2014; Spence Laschinger & Nosko, 2015). Scale items were as follows: My supervisor: "subjects me to excessive teasing and sarcasm," "humiliates or ridicules me in connection with my work," "reminds me repeatedly of my past errors and mistakes," "makes insulting/offensive comments about me to others," "has shouted at or targeted me with spontaneous rage or anger," and "ignores me or makes hostile comments when I approach him/her." The response scale was 1 (*never*), 2 (*occasionally*), 3(*monthly*), 4 (*weekly),* and 5 (*daily*); (T1 $\alpha = .82$; T2 $\alpha = .93$).

Results

Given that employees are nested within restaurants we checked to see if the nested nature of the data made the observations nonindependent. Using the "multilevel" package (Bliese, 2013) for R (R Core Team, 2014), we calculated ICC(1)S for PSS and abusive supervision in both pre and posttest periods. The very low ICC(s) indicate that subordinate data is independent for both abusive supervision (pretest ICC(1) = 0.04; posttest ICC(1) = 0.02) and PSS (pretest ICC(1) = 0.08; posttest ICC(1) = 0.03). These figures indicate that on average, only 4% of variance in the dependent variables can be attributed to the restaurant where employees work.

Correlations between PSS and abusive supervision were: $r = -.457$, $p \leq .001$ at pretest, and $r = -.363$, $p \leq .001$ at posttest. Table 2 shows the means by pre/posttest and condition (experimental vs. control). As noted by Tepper (2007), abusive supervision is a low base rate phenomenon. Mackey et al.'s (2015) meta-analysis reports a mean of 1.78, $SD = .46$. The lowest mean across studies was 1.18 and the highest was 3.88. Thus, our means are low but in line with previous research. In relation to the distribution of the scores, Table 3 shows the distribution of mean scores, segmented by pre/posttest and condition (experimental vs. control). The percentages shown in each cell suggest that instances of abusive supervision are reported less frequently by employees of the experimental restaurants after the intervention.

Because employee surveys were anonymous we were not able to pair employees on pretest and posttest measures. Instead, to assess the influence of training on subordinates' PSS and abusive supervision, using IBM SPSS 22, we ran a 2×2 multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) with experimental versus control condition as one factor and pretest versus posttest period as the second factor. A training effect would be demonstrated by an interaction between the two factors (condition and pre/posttest). Consistent with our hypotheses, the MANOVA analysis revealed a significant interaction effect on employees' perceptions of PSS and abusive supervision ($\Lambda_{Roy} = 0.012$, $F(2, 887) = 5.18$, $p < .01$, $\eta_p^2 = .012$, $1 - \beta = .83$). The univariate analyses for the interaction between training conditions and pretest–posttest periods were significant for PSS, $F(1, 888) = 4.69$, $p = .031$, $\eta_p^2 = .005$, $1 - \beta = .58$ and

Table 3
Percentage Distribution of Abusive Supervision Scores

	Control		Experimental	
	Pretest	Posttest	Pretest	Posttest
Never	71.1%	69.0%	64.6%	78.2%
Occasionally	22.0%	25.2%	26.6%	19.0%
Monthly	6.0%	2.1%	5.7%	1.9%
Weekly or more	.9%	3.7%	3.1%	.9%

Note. The distribution of responses on the average abusive supervision scores has been segmented as follows: *Never* refers to average scores below 1; *Occasionally* refers to average scores between 1 and 2; *Monthly* refers to average scores between 2 and 3; *Weekly or more* refers to reported mean scores higher than 3 (weekly and daily).

for abusive supervision, $F(1, 888) = 9.37$, $p < .002$, &$\eta_p^2 = .010$, $1 - \beta = .86$.

Simple effects analyses were run using IBM SPPS 22 within contrast MANOVA syntax to test differences between the means in Table 2. There were no statistically significant differences between conditions at pretest for both dependent variables, for PSS, $F(1, 889) = 0.01$, $p = .929$ and for abusive supervision, $F(1, 889) = 2.85$, $p = .092$. The differences were significant at posttest for PSS, $F(1, 889) = 10.1$, $p < .01$ and for abusive supervision, $F(1, 889) = 6.80$, $p < .01$. These results indicate that employees whose supervisors received support training reported higher levels of PSS and less abusive supervision relative to employees in the control condition.

Discussion

Despite the considerable progress made in understanding the predictors and consequences of abusive supervision, there has been little empirical research on the effectiveness of interventions or strategies for reducing its occurrence. We addressed this need by conducting a quasiexperiment to examine the effects of supervisor support training on abusive supervision and perceived supervisor support. We found that, compared to employees in control restaurants, employees in restaurants whose supervisors received support training reported less abusive supervision and greater supervisor support a full 9 months following the completion of training.

Many personal and dispositional factors have been found to be associated with abusive supervision, ranging from a history of family aggression and undermining (Garcia et al., 2014; Restubog et al., 2011) to various personality characteristics such as hostility related affect (Garcia et al., 2014) and paranoid tendencies (Chan & McAllister, 2014; Martinko et al., 2011). These factors may make it difficult to eliminate abusive supervision. Yet, abusive behaviors have also been found to be associated with various contextual factors, such as subordinate performance (Walter et al., 2015), organizational norms (Restubog et al., 2011), and perceived abuse from higher-level managers (Liu, Liao, & Loi, 2012; Mawritz et al., 2012), suggesting that organizations can take steps to lessen abusive supervision and its deleterious influence on employee well-being.

The present research procedures provide a practical first step toward actions that organizations can take to reduce abusive supervision. Based on OST (Eisenberger et al., 1986; Eisenberger & Stinglhamber, 2011; Shore & Shore, 1995), which maintains that supportive supervision leads to a general positive perception of the supervisor as an organizational agent, we used supportive supervision as an alternative for supervisors to employ in place of abusive supervision. The supportive supervision training was designed to convince supervisors of the benefits to themselves and the organization of substituting supportive supervision for abuse and to provide them with the skills needed to provide such treatment. Training sessions provided supervisors with four basic supervisor-support strategies (benevolence, sincerity, fairness, and experiential processing) which they practiced in scenarios and in their supervisory roles at work.

Our findings also contribute to OST's view that the supervisor, as an organizational agent, plays an important role in the psychological well-being of subordinates. Support by supervisors is assumed to fulfill socioemotional needs (e.g., approval, esteem, affiliation), leading to increased job satisfaction and positive affect (Cole, Bruch, & Vogel, 2006; Giumetti et al., 2013; Griffin, Patterson, & West, 2001). Conversely, aversive treatment by the organization and its representatives, such as abusive supervision, should lead to dissatisfaction and stress (Palanski et al., 2014; Schyns & Schilling, 2013; Tepper, 2000). The present findings go beyond cross-sectional and cross-lagged findings to suggest that supervisor support training can be used to lessen an important determinant of employee dissatisfaction and discomfort. The reduced abusive supervision perceived by employees in the experimental restaurants, as compared to the control restaurants, indicates the promise of such training for countering abusive supervision.

Future Research

In the present study, the changes in abusive supervision and PSS reflected a decrease in PSS and an increase in abuse for the control restaurants as much as an increase in PSS and decrease in abuse for the experimental restaurants. These results may be due, in part, to pressures associated with the general economic decline that occurred during the study period. Discussions with senior managers and subsequent documentation based on sales reports indicated that the restaurant chain suffered sales losses coincident with the U.S. financial crisis that began in 2008. Supervisors in both the experimental and control conditions were rewarded, in part, for meeting revenue goals, and this was especially challenging in the depressed economy. This situation may have increased performance demands on supervisors, leading to greater stress and impatience with subordinates, including increasing abusive supervision in the control condition. While the same demands confronted supervisors in the experimental condition, it is possible that support training exerted a protective effect against the situational factors working to suppress supportive supervisory behaviors. In fact, restaurant sales reports suggest cautious support for this line of reasoning. Three of the four restaurants in the training condition had lower revenues during the study than the restaurants in the control condition. Even though this situation should have led to increased pressure on these supervisors and a concomitant increase in abuse, employee perceptions of abusive supervision in the training group decreased. We note that revenue differences between experimental and control restaurants are less than ideal from a design perspective. However, we do not believe these differences compromise our findings, because, if anything, they would have increased Type II error and therefore prevented us from finding training effects. Further research is needed to determine if and when support training is capable of ameliorating the adverse effects of situational pressures that typically contribute to elevated levels of abuse.

Future work should also study ways to strengthen the effects of support training. For instance, training sessions may be increased and more refresher sessions provided to discuss problems in implementing the supervision strategies. In addition, managers of the supervisors involved in training and the HR system as a whole may take a greater role in endorsing and emphasizing the training to help instill a stronger norm for supportive supervision. Further, supportive supervision might be included as part of the reward system to give supervisors an added inducement to maintain the supportive behaviors learned in training. Holding supervisors ac-

countable for supportive treatment of subordinates via regular performance appraisals would necessarily entail proper alignment between the organization's performance management and compensation systems. Tying personnel decisions to supervisor performance appraisals and rewards could also aid in making better promotion decisions or providing counseling or remedial help to supervisors who are unable or unwilling to forego abusive behavior.

In future research, the mechanisms by which support training influences abusive supervision should also receive greater attention. As noted in the introduction, the relationship between supervisor support training and lessened abusive supervision was predicted, in part, on the basis that employees would reciprocate supportive supervision with increased performance which, in turn, would lead supervisors to abuse them less. This is consistent with organization support theory's emphasis on the reciprocity norm but this should be investigated more thoroughly with additional training studies that are able to track employee performance. We also suggested that supervisor support training should reduce abusive supervision on the basis of the development of a norm for supportive treatment of subordinates. Evidence for such an organizational support climate, involving agreement across employees, has been reported by Li, Chiaburu, and Kirkman (2014). A third factor predicted to influence the outcomes, the salience of more frequent supportive behaviors over less frequent instances of abusive supervision, suggests an extension of OST. Trained supportive behaviors may become more frequent than aversive treatment, making it more difficult for subordinates to interpret isolated instances of mistreatment as abusive in terms of intent to harm, and easier to attribute the behavior to situational or external circumstances. OST might take into account these attribution effects for explaining how support training overcomes aversive treatment of subordinates and thereby enhances psychological well-being and health.

Experience sampling methodology might also be used to further understand the mechanisms responsible for the effects of support training. Supervisors and subordinates could be asked to report their interactions before, during, and after supportive supervision training. We would expect to find that during supportive supervision training, daily supervisor reports of increased supportive supervision directed at specific subordinates would be linked to reports by those subordinates of increased supportive supervision and decreased abusive supervision. Moreover, training studies designed using experience sampling methods can be used to explore the associated changes in health and well-being. The measurement of health outcome variables, such as self-reported stress or psychophysiological strain indicators, on a daily or weekly basis can extend our understanding of supervisory treatment and its influence on employees' occupational health.

Another future research direction involves exploring the role of subordinate attributions. Martinko et al. (2011) found that employees' hostile attributional style explained a sizable proportion of the variance in subordinates' abusive supervision perceptions, and more recent research supports the role of these attributions on the experience of and reaction to abuse (Burton, Taylor, & Barber, 2014). Such results led Martinko et al. (2013) to propose a constructive revision of the Tepper (2007) model, whereby the link between supervisor behavior and employee perceptions of abusive supervision is mediated by subordinate attributions. Future research should continue to investigate the impact of subordinate attributions on perceptions of supervisory abuse and the conditions that predict the type of attribution made in response to an abusive behavior.

Practical Implications

Although additional studies that extend our training design and investigate the mechanisms underlying our findings are desirable, our results suggest that supportive supervision training may be a useful methodology for organizations to combat abusive supervision and enhance PSS. Furthermore, this type of training may have effects that reach beyond perceptions of supervisor behavior. Research has consistently shown that abusive supervision severely impacts worker well-being, contributing to stress and emotional exhaustion (Aryee, Chen, Sun, & Debrah, 2007; Breaux, Perrewé, Hall, Frink, & Hochwarter, 2008; Carlson, Ferguson, Hunter, & Whitten, 2012; Wu & Hu, 2009), work-to-family conflict (Carlson, Ferguson, Perrewé, & Whitten, 2011), and decreased psychological health and life satisfaction (Bowling & Beehr, 2006; Bowling & Michel, 2011). Conversely, general supervisory support is associated with greater positive affect (Cole et al., 2006; Giumetti et al., 2013) and less stress (Hall, 2007; Kirmeyer & Dougherty, 1988; O'Driscoll et al., 2003) and work-to-family conflict (Nicklin & McNall, 2013). Thus, supervisor support training may provide an intervention with broad favorable influences on employees' psychological well-being and health.

The general strategies, realistic practice, and homework assignments included in the training can be emulated in various kinds of organizations. Combating abusive supervision may be especially relevant in occupations where employees experience heavy work demands during peak periods and significant time pressures (Restubog et al., 2011; Tepper, 2007). The stress created by difficult demands and time pressures may elicit aversive emotional reactions and impatience by supervisors with subordinate behaviors whose own performance may be less than optimal because of similar pressures. Supervisor support training benefits supervisors by providing them with practical strategies to deal with these difficult situations, gives them practice in implementing the strategies, and provides positive feedback as they observe the favorable reactions to supportive supervision.

Scholars in this area have also proposed other strategies for curtailing abuse: implementing organization-wide zero tolerance policies against abusive behavior (Restubog et al., 2011), improving managerial selection procedures (Shoss et al., 2013), educating supervisors about the negative consequences of abuse (Walter et al., 2015), and promoting constructive problem-solving approaches so as to minimize destructive employee responses to abuse (e.g., deviant behavior; Mitchell & Ambrose, 2012). As part of a comprehensive set of strategies, supervisor support training may help combat the negative consequences of abusive supervision on employee welfare and productivity.

Study Strengths and Limitations

Our quasiexperimental design provides the first relatively strong causal evidence that organizations can influence abusive supervision by altering the work context. Second, the application of training to a field setting enhances the external validity of the

findings. Finally, that the effects of support training on abusive supervision were evident 9 months following training suggests that the findings have practical implications.

In terms of limitations, because of anonymity requirements by management, we were unable to identify particular subordinates in order to assess individual change scores. However, the sample of subordinates was large and we were able to assess the average level of change in supportive and abusive supervision in the experimental and control restaurants. In addition, our effects sizes were small. However, as suggested by several scholars, small effect sizes can tell a big story (Abelson, 1985; Aguinis & Harden, 2009; Cortina & Landis, 2009; Prentice & Miller, 1992). This is especially true when a phenomenon can be detected even in inauspicious circumstances (Cortina & Landis, 2009). Circumstances in our research setting were unfavorable in several ways. First, the mean and variance of abusive supervision scores were low, suggesting that in the future, measures that capture less extreme abusive behavior would be helpful. Other researchers, like Martinko and colleagues (Martinko et al., 2013; Mackey et al., 2015), have suggested more direct assessments of abusive supervision that involve comparing subordinate perceptions to actual complaints filed against supervisors, coworkers' perceptions of abusive committed by the same supervisor, or even video footage obtained from surveillance cameras in organizations or laboratory studies. Second, a lengthier, more comprehensive training program would probably promote deeper learning and application. Third, the human resource system was not altered in any way to reinforce the training. Further, following the training, organizational leaders and trainees did not set proximal and distal goals for applying newly acquired capabilities. Thus, transfer of training to the job was unlikely to have been maximized. However, despite these conditions, we did find significant effects for PSS and abuse.

The organization records that we were able to access showed that not all supervisors who completed training remained with the organization for the entire study period: 35% of the trainees left the organization during the course of our study. In this industry turnover is high and expected. However, to the extent that supervisors left the organization, our results most likely underestimate the effects among the variables we studied. For example, if a supportively trained supervisor was replaced by a less supportive, untrained supervisor, the effect of training on the restaurant employees would be reduced. As a result, our findings may represent a conservative estimate of the impact of training. Finally, we did not use Tepper's (2000) 15-item scale to assess perceptions of abuse but an adaptation of the Einarsen et al. (2009) workplace bullying scale. Sasso and González-Morales (2014) report a correlation of .80 between these two measures, and a meta-analysis by Hershcovis (2011) show that Tepper's and Einarsen's measures correlate similarly with outcome variables such as job satisfaction and psychological and physical well-being. Even though there is substantial conceptual overlap between our measure and Tepper's scale items, we cannot definitively conclude that our results would remain unchanged if Tepper's scale was used.

Conclusion

We found that training supervisors to treat subordinates supportively resulted in greater perceived supervisor support and lesser abusive supervision relative to subordinates of untrained supervisors. This study makes a substantive contribution to the abusive supervision literature by showing that organizations can effectively reduce abusive supervision by changing the work context. Our findings also confirm OST's view that the supervisor, as an organizational agent, can play an important role in the psychological well-being of subordinates. Although additional work needs to be done to strengthen our training procedures and extend our findings to health outcomes and other organizational settings, the results provide a promising start to helping organizations deal with the problem of abusive supervision.

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