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HOW DO FOLLOWERS AND LEADERS
MAINTAIN THE LEADER-FOLLOWER RELATIONSHIP
IN THE AFTERMATH OF TRUST VIOLATIONS ?*

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HOW DO FOLLOWERS AND LEADERS MAINTAIN THE LEADER-FOLLOWER RELATIONSHIP IN THE AFTERMATH OF TRUST VIOLATIONS?

Résumé

L'objet de cette communication est d'explorer les mécanismes de violation de confiance, puis de restauration de confiance dans la relation subordonné-supérieur hiérarchique. La littérature sur le leadership souligne l'importance de la qualité de la relation entre subordonnés et supérieurs hiérarchiques et sur l'importance de la confiance dans cette relation. Cette étude s'appuie sur l'approche de la théorie ancrée (grounded theory) pour identifier et catégoriser les violations de confiance, les réactions des subordonnés à ces violations, et les éléments nécessaires à la restauration de la confiance. L'étude, composée de 16 entretiens approfondis conduits en France et en Nouvelle Zélande, montre deux types différenciés de violation de confiance : 1) attente déçues et 2) abus de pouvoir. Le premier se forme dans le temps et laisse de la place pour une éventuelle restauration de confiance. Le second se forme autour d'un événement destructeur de la confiance empêchant la possibilité de la restaurer.

Mots clés : Leadership, violation de confiance, leadership relationnel, restauration de confiance

Abstract

The present paper explores how trust is violated and can be restored in the leader-follower relationship. The leadership literature is turning toward an emphasis on the relationship between leaders and followers, and trust is paramount to successful relationships. However, leaders can violate trust in any number of ways, intentionally and unintentionally. This study uses a systematic grounded theory approach to discover and categorise the types of trust violations that can occur and develops theory about how these different types of violations are processed by followers. The data are based on 16 in-depth interviews conducted in New Zealand and France. The conclusion is that there are two main types of trust violations: 1) dashed expectations in which the leader demonstrates incompetence and 2) power abuse. The former builds up over time and provides the opportunity for restoration whereas the latter is more likely to be a single event and create barriers to ever creating trust again.

Key words: Leadership, trust violation, relational leadership, trust repair

INTRODUCTION

The gregarious nature of humans drives them toward developing relationships and helping one another. How we get things done in work settings is no exception. Leading people in organisations depends on how people relate to one another, and the leadership literature has begun to focus on relationships between leaders and followers (Uhl-Bien, 2006). Moreover, trust is central to leader-follower relationships (Dirks and Ferrin, 2002), yet violations of trust naturally occur. How supervisors and subordinates deal with trust violations has received scant scholarly attention. Therefore, the present study investigates how trust builds between supervisors and subordinates, how it is harmed, and how people imagine their relationships when trust violations have occurred.

1. Trust in Leadership

Trust is essential to leadership. Leading and influencing other people in formal or informal settings requires that followers trust that leaders have good intentions and know what they are doing. The very essence of leadership is engaging others toward collective action, and the process of engaging in action requires that followers trust that their leaders know where they are taking the group and have some competence to do so (Kouzes and Posner, 2002). It is hard to imagine substantial leadership or followership without trust, which is defined as willingly making oneself vulnerable to another (Mayer, Davis and Schoorman, 1995). Previous research has suggested a strong empirical link between leadership and trust broadly defined (Dirks and Ferrin, 2002). While there is general agreement that trust in leaders is positive, there is considerably less understanding of how trust develops, and more importantly, how followers and leaders deal with disruptions to trust.

1.1. Trust violation

One of the intriguing aspects of relationships at work is that trust is sometimes violated. These violations may in some cases be intentional and harmful with vindictive or malicious intent, and in other cases be inadvertent changes to circumstances or oversights (Kim, Dirks and Cooper, 2009). We are interested in how followers continue a relationship following betrayal, which is “a voluntary violation of mutually known pivotal expectations of the trustor by the trusted party (trustee), which has the potential to threaten the well being of the trustor” (Elangovan and Shapiro, 1998). These betrayals are likely to occur from time

to time in the leader-follower relationship, and therefore it seems reasonable to investigate how followers categorise and deal with these betrayals of trust.

Trust violations have received only limited research attention in general and little research specific to the leader-follower relationship. Some of the most careful research on trust violations is in the bargaining realm. People are more forgiving of deceits if they are indirect as opposed to direct lies (Boles, Croson and Murnighan, 2000). The timing of distrustful deceit also influences perceptions such that a breach of trust at the beginning of the bargaining relationship is more detrimental than one later in the relationship, when its impact is assumed to be more temporary (Lount, Zhong, Sivanathan and Murnighan, 2008). Similarly, trust takes time to restore and is not particularly aided, at least in the experimental setting, by promises or other talking strategies beyond simply being honest in repeated episodes (Schweitzer, Hershey and Bradlow, 2006), although the likelihood of forgiveness is moderated by the harmed party's implicit beliefs about moral character (Haselhuhn, Schweitzer and Wood, 2010). While the findings from the bargaining literature are insightful to the leader-follower relationship, these relationships are more prolonged, deeper, and less competitive than the bargaining situation.

Aftermath behaviour of the betrayer is important to outcomes (Aquino, Tripp and Bies, 2006). Giving apologies and justifications of what has happened serve to promote interactional justice in such encounters (Bies, 2005). Ferrin, Kim, Cooper, and Dirks (2007) found that both apologies and denials of wrongdoing help restore trust, but a reticence to broach the topic is detrimental to long term trust. No studies that we know of have investigated trust recovery in the leader relationship. Andiappan and Trevino (2010) developed theory for how supervisors and subordinates reconcile after an injustice is done. They theorised that the likelihood of reconciliation depends on the severity and cause of the injustice and how much pre-existing trust was in the relationship. Ballinger, Schoorman, and Lehman (2009) found that initial trust development in new leader relationships depends on affective response to the departure of a previous leader. Brower, Lester, Korsgaard, and Dineen (2009) further demonstrated that *mutual* trust was part of the leader-follower relationship: Leaders' trust directed toward followers interacted with followers' trust in leaders on organisational citizenship behaviours.

1.2. Leadership Relationship

The relationship between the leader and the follower is fundamental to our investigation of trust betrayals. Leadership theories have made the call to bring the relationship to the forefront of leadership research (Graen and Uhl-Bien, 1995, Uhl-Bien, 2006). The heart of leader-member exchange theory (LMX), in particular, is the quality of the leader-member relationship. LMX has grown from the vertical-dyad linkage theory focused on in-groups and out-groups of leaders as those with lower and higher quality relationships. Graen and Uhl-Bien (1995) redefined this theory to show its growth from vertical-dyad linkage theory (Dansereau, Graen and Haga, 1975) that focused on leaders' in-group and out-group members to a stage that looked at the outcomes of better and lower quality relationships to one that considered how these relationships develop (Graen & Uhl-Bien's stage 4).

There is limited empirical research on how relationships develop. Uhl-Bien (2006) developed relational leadership theory (RLT) based on developments in the field, which distinguishes modernist appraisal of relationships between leaders and followers as something that is knowable and tangible ("entity" approach) to one in which relationships are part of a process. That process is a socially created reality that is influenced by the two parties: the context and the extended parties around them (Uhl-Bien, 2006). Trust development, violations and recovery are integral to this new, broad conceptualisation of relational leadership.

The present paper seeks to investigate a unique part of the relational process based on the trust literature. We explore lapses of trust in the leadership relationship and how these lapses (violations) affect the relationship in the short and long term. Because little published research has reported about these issues, we take an inductive, grounded theory approach to explore how leader-follower relationships develop, the types of trust violations, and how the relationship recovers from trust violation.

The first objective of the present study is to identify such behaviours in a qualitative, inductive fashion and attempt to categorise them in meaningful ways for future research while examining their impact on the relationship. The second objective of this study is to link follower reactions to these various types of trust violations, addressing the question of how people react to the violation and recover some form of future relationship.

No categorisation scheme for follower trust betrayals exists to our knowledge. Theorists have identified certain elements of the trust violation, such as its severity, who is to blame, and the interdependence of the relationship as important (Aquino et al., 2006, Andiappan and Trevino, 2010, Kim et al., 2009). The types of behaviour, however, have not

received attention and before this area of research can move forward, a rich contextual categorisation is required. The negotiation literature has primarily considered deception as a key behaviour (Schweitzer and Croson, 1999, Lount et al., 2008, Boles et al., 2000). While deception – either overt or a misrepresentation – is detrimental to the leader-follower relationship, other behaviours, such as supporting a person, being consistent, sharing power, or showing negative favouritism, could be perceived as betrayals of trust by subordinates.

We expect that followers are affected by different types of betrayals in different ways. The strength or severity of the betrayal should affect the degree of reaction and engagement by the followers. In addition, there could be other characteristics of violations of trust that affect how they are perceived by followers and how the followers react.

2. Method

The issue of trust violations between supervisors and subordinates was investigated by conducting individual interviews and using the critical incident method. Seventeen face to face, in-depth interviews were conducted with employees whose trust in their supervisor was violated. The sample, based on employees from the white-collar sector, was approximately 50% male, between 30 and 40 years old, and all participants worked with their direct supervisors for at least one and a half years. At the time of the study all the respondents were involved in MBA Programs. The interviews were run by three of the four authors and each interview took one to one and half hours. They were all recorded and transcribed verbatim. The interview protocol included questions about the job of the respondents and their organisation, the relationships with the direct leader, the trust they have toward their direct leader, the reason why they do not trust their leader anymore, the consequences of this trust erosion, and the way to rebuild trust. The interviews were conducted in France and New Zealand, and some of the interviewees were foreign nationals from other countries including the United States and India. Interviews were conducted in either French or English by native speakers.

Data analysis was run by two of the four researchers. The data were analysed following the content analysis method used by Pratt and colleagues (2006) and Corley and Gioia (2004), which are based on the grounded theory. This method allows the researcher to progressively increase the level of data abstraction by going through a series of code levels: first-order codes, theoretical categories, and aggregate theoretical categories. First order codes are created by identifying statements regarding the dynamic of trust – distrust in the

respondents' relationships with their direct supervisor. After codes were labelled, we reviewed the data again, to verify that each fit the constructed category. Some categories are abandoned or revised if some data do not fit well into a category. Second order codes are theoretical conglomerations of the first order codes, grouping individual reports into meaningful categories. For example, several first order codes led us to see that one type of trust violation is the knowledge that the direct supervisor has complained of the follower behind his back. We used the category "denigration" to capture these elements. These second order codes are then subsumed under the aggregate theoretical dimensions in order to build a coherent picture of trust dynamic in leader-follower relationships. Once we identify a possible framework and that new data failed to reveal new categories or relations among them, we re-examined the data fit using three additional interviews in order to verify the consistency of our coding. Figure 1-3 summarise the process followed and shows the first order categories, theoretical categories and aggregate theoretical dimensions (Note that for space reasons, we only provide a sample of the first order categories). The aggregate dimensions are the ones that give the best insight into trust dynamic in follower-leader relationships that is how trust is harmed, its consequences on the subordinate and how to recover trust.

3. Results

3. 1. Factors that harm trust in the subordinate-supervisor relationship

The first coding clusters address the first research question, namely the identification of factors that harm trust in the subordinate-supervisor relationship.

3.1.1. Dashed expectations of the subordinate towards the supervisor

The first aggregate dimension is labelled dashed expectations toward the supervisor. Subordinates show high expectations towards their supervisors that influence trust. They expect the supervisors to trust them in their tasks, to get clear expectations, to consider them, to take care of their career progression, to be legitimate, to be sincere, to delegate wisely, to reattribute the task credit, to take their defence if needed, to provide positive and negative feedback, including an improvement plan, to have a predictable behaviour, to support them

Violations of these expectations generates disappointment by subordinates (Kim, Ferrin, Cooper and Dirks, 2004), which erodes trust towards the supervisor over time. When asked, the respondents talk about their disappointment towards the lack of qualities and

the missing skills of their supervisor as factors that erode their trust towards their supervisor. Subordinates remaining in the company reported hope of supervisory improvement, showing thus some hope for trust restoring. These trust violations tend to reduce or diminish the trust from the subordinate towards the supervisor. For example, one of the informants reported that the trust she has toward her supervisor has slightly decreased with the accumulation of small trust violations. For example, she regrets the lack of support and of consideration demonstrated by her supervisor who communicates only by emails, give mainly negative feedback, do not protect her from client complaints when not justified, do not make any efforts to understand her job and to help her....

“He avoided any problems, conflicts, communicate only by email (...), he does not defend his team from a client, (...), he never came with me on the field to meet my clients (...) when I had problems, I sent him emails, there was no return (...) For me, he has not proven to be a good manager, I believed in him less and less”

These types of trust violations usually have a low intensity but a high frequency: One single trust violation does not necessarily harm the trust from the subordinate to the supervisor, but small trust violations over time present a cumulative effect and definitely harm trust. Figure 1 shows examples of these trust violations.

3.1.2. Abuse of power

For subordinates, beyond the dashed expectations towards their supervisors by which the trust relationship gets eroded over time, there are critical incidents that are very sensitive and can violate the subordinates' values. These incidents are a result of an abuse of power by supervisors over their subordinates involving their beliefs of an inability to protect themselves from the abuse. This aggregate dimension is similar to what Kim and colleagues (2004) termed exploiting dependencies. Events such as not keeping the supervisor's promise, willingly bypassing the subordinate in his tasks, escaping from his financial engagements, having hidden agendas that impact the subordinate, practicing unfair favouritism, having a duplicity speech, denigrating, withholding information useful for the work, use the subordinate as a scapegoat, are considered by subordinate as critical events that violate trust. Amongst those most emotionally intense incidents are unfulfilled promises. These trust violations tend to break the trust from the subordinate towards the supervisor. They show a high intensity and a low frequency: Trust can be broken as a result of a single event presenting a strong intensity in the subordinate's eyes. For example, one of the informants

reported that her supervisor has totally destroyed the trust she had toward him by harassing one of her colleagues. This behaviour was completely inconsistent with the values of the subordinate and therefore she thought it was despicable.

“He has taken a dislike (to one of my colleagues) for no particular reason, it was really ugly, criminal behaviour... I discovered at that time the dark side of him... he harmed my values, (...) after it has been difficult to work with him because something has happened, I lost confidence in him”

Power abuses of this kind affect subordinates in ways prohibiting a restoration of trust. Nevertheless, participants often stayed with a company following abuse of power incidents in order to maximise their investment in the company and obtain personal benefits, such as promised bonuses or promotions.

3.2. Impact of trust violation over the subordinate

The second research question concerns how trust violations affect subordinates at work. Subordinates adopt specific behaviours when confronted with signs of trust violation. Two types of reactions appear after a trust violation: Some of the subordinates engage in “last chance” behaviours, like expressing their dissatisfaction to the supervisor or increasing task-oriented efforts, hoping that the trust relationship will improve. Subordinates who adopt these behaviours have typically only experienced a small reduction of trust towards their supervisor after the trust violation compared to a long-standing deterioration of trust. Other subordinates immediately engage in withdrawal behaviours when the trust relationship is broken. Exiting the company is the most common reaction, but also intending to quit, leading to detrimental consequences such as absenteeism, low level efforts, and withholding information. Some participants exited the industry, and others left the unit but remained with the company. Subordinates adopting these behaviours lost trust in their supervisors following a decrease in trust over time or a trust destruction without any sign by the supervisor to engage in a restoring process.

3.3. Trust restoring elements as represented by the subordinates

The third coding exercise addresses the research question about restoring trust. Few subordinates engage in behaviours aiming at restoring trust with their supervisors after trust violations. Similarly, few supervisors seem to engage in reactions aiming at restoring the trust with the subordinate. In all examples subordinates reported that the effort to restore trust is to

be done by the supervisor. Nevertheless, subordinates associate the possibility of trust recovery towards their supervisors with two categories of behaviours: “supervisor questioning” and “uncertainty reduction for the subordinate.” The first category of trust recovery behaviours refers to the fact that the supervisors are able to question themselves. Trust recovery is thus more likely when supervisors question themselves and make it known to subordinates. Supervisors’ self-questioning is understood by subordinates as them recognising their own errors, being open to feedback from the subordinate and asking advice to the subordinate on trust recovery issues. These behaviours are defined as metacommunicating to “clear the air” of the subordinate-supervisor relationship. An example is given by one respondent: *“I couldn’t give credit to her anymore, furthermore she was never going to question her methods”*. Another respondent says *“My boss asked me “how did it work in your previous company?” [talking about the team dissatisfaction]. So I did explain to him that we went to some seminars because there was a real bad atmosphere between the executives and the company. Then he started the first seminar after this, so he did listen to me, he accepted the critics, he took that as an advice, and we did make the first seminar in the history of the company...”*.

The second element to restore trust refers to a set of supervisors’ behaviours which may reduce the subordinate’s uncertainty at work. Trust violations generate insecurity and uncertainty in the subordinate’s mind, which lead to fear about their situation of vulnerability. They expect to get sincere reassurance from the trustworthiness of the supervisor thanks to clear and tangible explanations, complete feedback, and an individual improvement programme, or by the supervisor increasing his/her proximity and providing support to the subordinate.

Trust recovery seems possible only when trust has diminished. When broken, the situation looks irrevocable to the subordinate. Interestingly, subordinates who no longer expect to restore trust nevertheless expect their direct supervisor to engage in the set of behaviours presented above. In their case, the point is to get one’s due, for example, by claiming for the promised financial bonuses which have not been attributed.

In summary, factors originating a trust violation are twofold: subordinate dashed expectations towards the supervisor, and abuse of power by the supervisor. Trust is violated because the subordinate reaches a situation of insecurity and uncertainty in front of the supervisor and doubts regarding the morality of the leader. In consequence, trust in the leader may be restored firstly by the ability of the supervisor to question himself and to accept

feedback from the subordinates and secondly by reducing the uncertainty raised by the trust violation(s).

4. Discussion

This study investigated trust leader relationships from the perspective of the subordinate, qualitatively investigating how trust is formed, broken, and restored. Because research on trust between leaders and followers is still in its infancy, it is necessary to determine what trust betrayal looks like in these relationships. The present study has discovered two types of trust betrayal between leaders and followers. The first type we labelled dashed expectations and these factors erode trust in the direct leader over time. Examples include providing only negative feedback to subordinates and overly controlling the employee's performance. The second type we labelled abuse of power, and these trust violations had immediate and lasting (and perhaps irreparable) impacts on the relationship with the leader.

4.1. Explanations and theoretical Implications

We found that when subordinates' expectations of their leaders were not met trust decreased over time. This finding fits with Lord and Maher's (1993) schema theory of leadership, in which employees hold schemas of what good leadership is and then match daily leader behaviours to that ideal of effective leadership. Positive matching of the schemas triggers positive effects and mismatches ignite the reverse reaction, as we found in the present study. In terms of leader integrity and trust, a common schema is that leaders should be trustworthy (Brown, 2007). If the perception of the leader's integrity and honesty is undermined by leader behaviours such as lying, a lack of defending the employee or the team, or unpredictable behaviour, as reported by a number of interviewees, then their level of trust declines; eventually eliminating the possibility of restoring the relationship.

One of the ways that leaders dashed expectations was by not trusting subordinates. This issue has just begun to attract attention, with Brower and colleagues (2009) showing that people had higher performance and organisational citizenship behaviour when they felt they were trusted by the leader. McAllister (1995) theorised that untrusting managers replaced their trust in followers through measures of control as a result of low levels of cognition-based trust. The fact that interviewees also reported that defensive behaviours on part of the

leader led them to experience lower levels and even a total absence of trust in their leader is also in line with this assumption.

Followers place a great deal of responsibility for the relationship in the hands of the leader. Our participants argued that restoring trust and re-establishing a functioning relationship following betrayal lies with the leader. The reason for this is that leaders – formal leaders or supervisors in this study – have greater power and responsibility for the relationship. Therefore, the breach of trust can only be repaired if followers feel that the leader emphasises the relationship, which is consistent with Kim and colleagues's (2004) proposition that leaders damage trust by exploiting the follower dependency and failing to fulfil follower expectations. Moreover, if followers do not perceive the leader as willing to take the first step towards restoring trust, or view the attempt of reparation as a genuine attempt, then the relationship is likely to diminish further. Leaders are therefore most successful in restoring trust if engaging in participative leadership behaviours asking both for follower's advice on how to restore trust and allowing followers to provide feedback on the leader. The finding that participation is perceived as trust-instilling supports previous findings showing that communicating the importance of employee opinions serve as antecedent of follower trust in the leader (e.g., Korsgaard, Schweiger and Sapienza, 1995)

The findings from the interviews allow an early insight into the processes involved in a total breakdown of trust and the point of no return at which it is impossible to re-establish a trusting relationship with the follower. With this research presenting one of the first of its kind, it aids in planning future research to investigate the underlying processes and the factors influencing both deterioration of trust as well as the potential to restore it. Casimir, Waldman, Bartram, and Yang (2006) found no time effect regarding the development of trust. Indeed, their results showed that trust does not increase with time. Our results suggest that the opposite is true for the deterioration of trust. A great portion of interviewees pointed out that the process of losing trust in the leader was usually one over a longer period of time in which recurrent events confirmed their doubts about how much they were able to trust their leader.

4.2. Practical Implications and Future Research

Although at an early stage, the present findings support further the importance of the right leadership behaviours. Yet, it is not enough to establish trust, leaders need to be aware that trust is a dynamic and fragile variable that is easier broken than fixed. Leaders need to frequently engage in feedback sessions collecting information on their behaviours and

follower perceptions of their leadership in order to prevent potential detrimental processes, particularly if behaviours are not intentional and the leader not aware of the consequences.

The importance of the present study is that it identifies precise issues of trust that followers deal with, which will provide the foundation for future studies to explore more precisely. For example, laboratory and survey studies could help to clarify the interrelationships of the constructs and test our proposition that dashed expectations have more malleable effects on trust than does abuse of power.

4.3. Limitations

Due to the relatively small sample and a range of different cultural and professional backgrounds, future conclusions need to be based on greater sample sizes. Various other factors will also need to be considered, including responses from leaders to further understand to what extent employees contribute to the deterioration of trust and their role in its restoration. A number of other variables, such as personality traits, will need to be considered in the future.

Figure 1: Factors that harm trust in the subordinate-supervisor relationship from the subordinate's perspective:

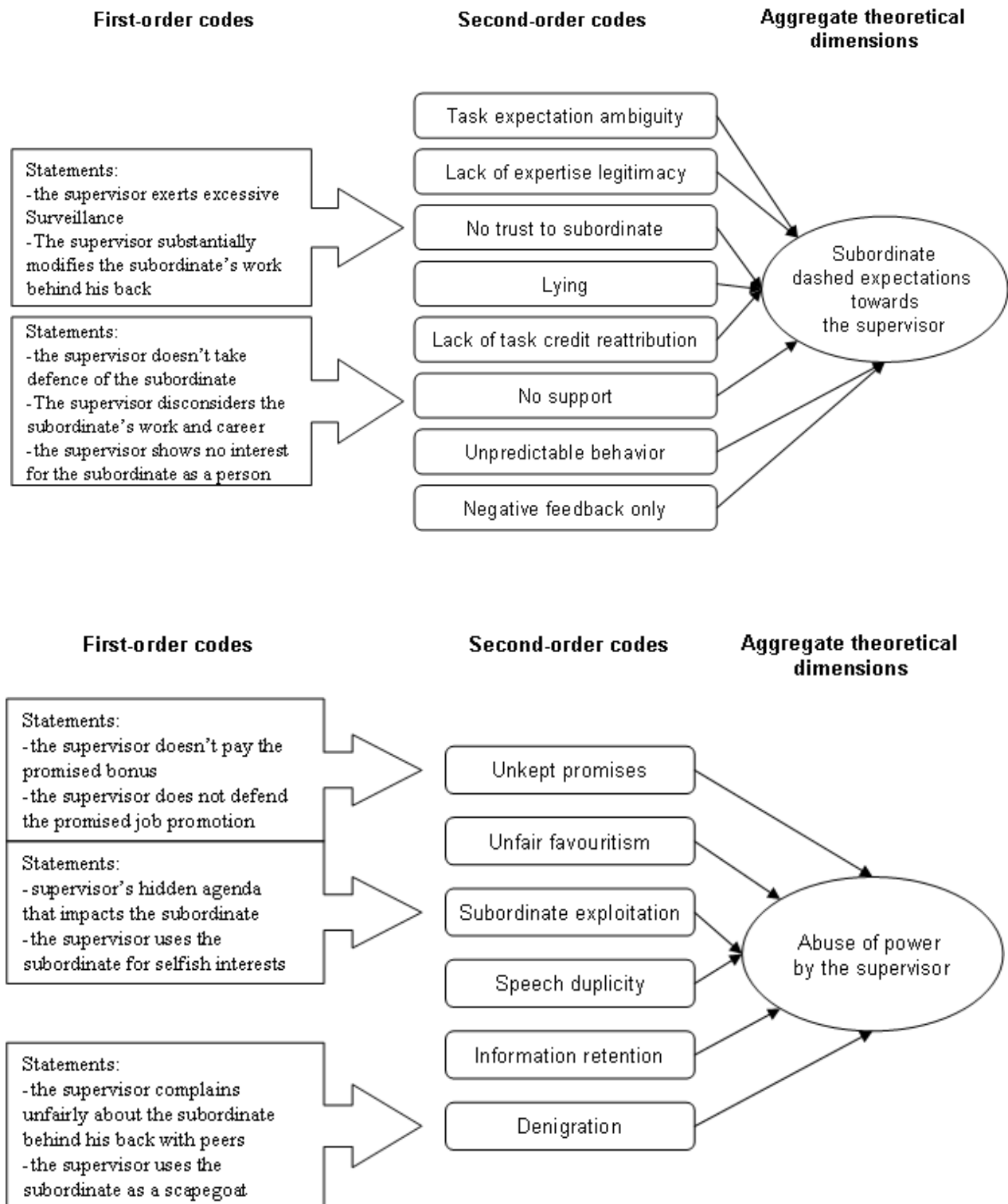


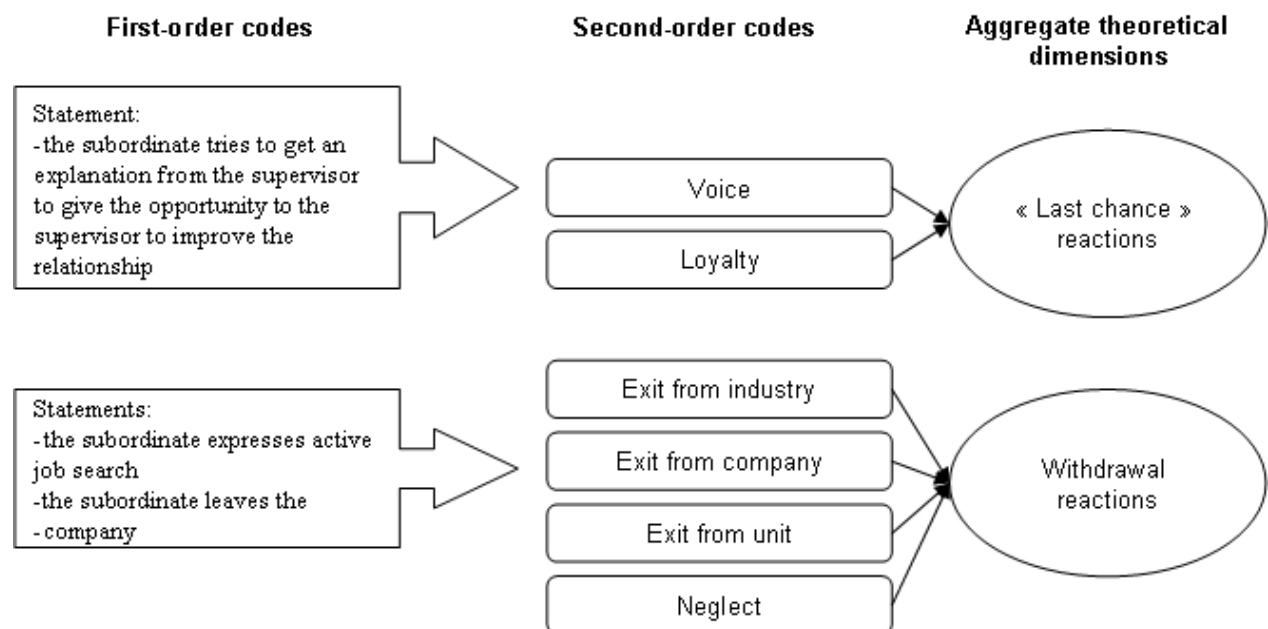
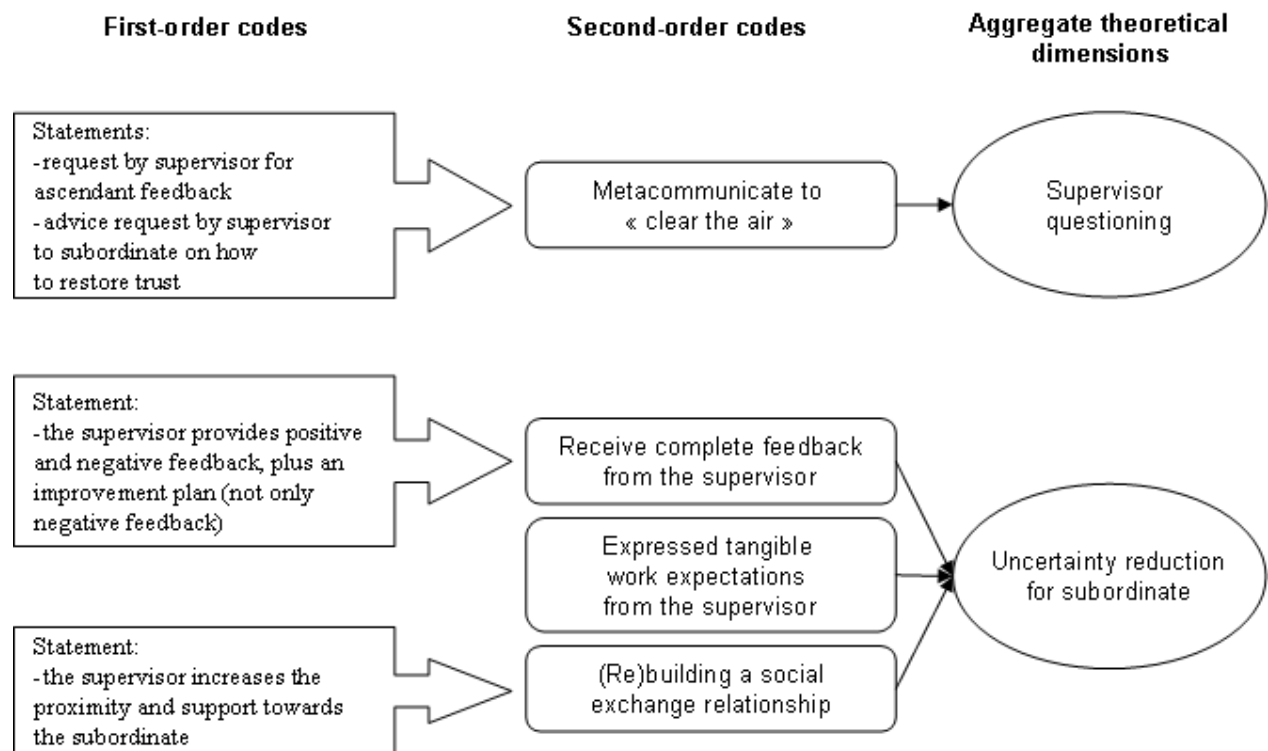
Figure 2: Subordinate Reactions of Trust Violation

Figure 3: Trust restoring elements as represented by the subordinates



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