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# THE FEAR FACTOR: UNDERSTANDING FEAR IN THE WORKPLACE

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## ABSTRACT

This article seeks to identify and explain the existence of fear in the workplace. And while the world of work appears to change constantly with new technologies, it also seems that there is another constant, and that is the persistence of fear that people experience on a daily basis at their place of employment. Here, we identify the main causes of fear in the workplace through a questionnaire administered to over 700 individuals in a master's degree program at a prestigious university in the northeast United States. Descriptive statistics were used and findings indicate that fear can manifest itself in different ways at various levels within an organization and can be gender specific. This research identifies these fears and posits leadership solutions to understand and combat them.

# INTRODUCTION

Fear, like stress, has always been. And just like stress, a certain amount of fear is not harmful to us and serves to keep us diligent in our duties. However, when fear reaches levels where it both obstructs and prevents performance then a culture of fear permeates an organization. This is detrimental to the psychological well-being of a workforce and is counter productive in achieving organizational goals. And while senior management may turn a blind eye or be ignorant to its existence it remains that if fear is handicapping organizational development then it is a management issue. This study contributes to the literature by exposing the strong presence of fear in the workplace and by identifying it as an issue which requires managerial attention.

Fear in its very essence is the physiological or psychosocial response to the potential of a negative event occurring. An example of such would be the potential of aggression from a co-worker (Ford, Myrden, & Kelloway, 2016). The focus of the individual then becomes avoidance (Kiewitz, Restubog, Shoss, & Tang, 2016) and the corresponding result of this is a lack of task and goal focus. This ultimately then returns production inefficiencies. Hence, the overriding factor with fear is that it has a domino affect, which hurts the organization and diminishes both organizational returns and employee value. So, for organizations seeking to squeeze value from every facet of their business it behooves them to identify fear as a cost factor and then seek to address its reduction. In this article the intention to make organizational leadership aware that fear obstructs efficiency, reduces production and if removed can promote a healthier work environment leading to greater organizational outcomes.



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# LITERATURE REVIEW

In terms of extant research there appears to be limited scholarly research on standalone fear in the workplace. Much reference to fear also includes a connector such as violence, discrimination, change, or leadership. However, as a standalone topic of the presence of fear in all organizations, there appears to be much that needs to be investigated. Inquiry into this topic reveals that there seems to be an abundance of discussion on ‘conflict’ in the workplace and its frequency as well as how to handle it (White & Thornbory, 2007; Beagrie, 2004; Bolanle, 2016; Wright et al, 2017). However, absent from this discussion is by how much workplace conflict incidences are reduced by those who are fearful to engage in it. Consequently, a conflict may exist below the surface amongst employees but not manifest itself due to fear of engagement. Research by Greco, Whitson, O’Boyle, Wang, & Kim (2019) explores how this conflict, if unaddressed, can affect the culture of a workplace thereby also affecting uninvolved parties. This therefore renders all reported conflict data as not reflective of the true level of conflict and its effects in the workplace. Hence, the unknown variable is fear. In terms of organizational leadership, this is an issue, which must be addressed as it

may hamper employee and organizational development as well as promote workplace bullying (Ågotnes, Einarsen, Hetland, & Skogstad, 2018). In terms of bullying, research by Rai and Agarwal (2018) illustrates how bullying promotes employee silence due to fear of further bullying but that such behavior also promotes closer individual friendships being formed by those that are bullied as a means to deal with its stress.

Suarez (1994) refers to fear in the workplace as “a distracting force that robs employees and organizations of their potential” and claims that strong leadership is the solution. Even Deming in his quest for quality improvement recognized fear as an inhibiting factor (Briksin, 1996). Improvement, be it in quality or any other realm, requires change and for many people, change is difficult. Warrick (2011) claims that organizations lack transformational leaders to effectively manage change, and hence resistance to change persists. To this end Howard and Hirani (2013) claim that fear of the unknown and its affects remains an issue for many. Goldsmith (2008) states that the first step in dealing with an organization rife with fear is for leadership to make it safe for employees to communicate honestly. Indeed, some organizations manage

and control employees through fear which hampers open communication and productivity (Appelbaum, Bregman, & Moroz, 1998).

Detert and Edmondson (2007) posit that the lack of safety in speaking up not only exacerbates problems, but it also stifles creativity in organizations. Later studies in this area by Hutchins, Penney, and Sublett (2018) indicate that an ‘imposter phenomenon’ exists whereby individuals who lack confidence feel they are not as accomplished as their title would suggest. Lerner (2015) posits that this is more prevalent in women than men, while Slank (2015) argues that it is more organizational specific. Regardless, such individuals feel as if they constantly have to justify their position which becomes exhausting and reduces productivity. This fear of under-performing then becomes a catalyst, which affects behavior towards others with a domino effect of affecting others performance. The examples from this literature review illustrate that fear comes in many different forms and inhabits organizations in a variety of different ways. Continued research can help shed further light on its affect on individuals and their performance.

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# METHODOLOGY

The purpose of the study was to explore the main sources of fear in the workplace and whether they affect everybody in the same way; this was done to examine for differences between men and women. Due to

the lack of depth of research on ‘fear’ as a standalone phenomenon we intentionally kept this research investigation rudimentary in its approach so as to serve as a guide for future research. To that end, we

sought to identify the presence or location of fear in the workplace, i.e., where does it reside? In terms of measurement, the questionnaire identifies what causes fear in employees, for example, fear of a

supervisor. What it does not seek to measure is why employees fear their supervisor, which could be for a number of reasons: pay, promotion, retaliation, etc.

Students in a master’s degree program in the northeast United States were asked to survey their peers at their workplace or any extended employed contacts familiar to them. The survey involved 17 questions developed by the

researchers that were asked to assess the level of fear in the workplace. Any incomplete responses were disregarded and all completed surveys were destroyed once tabulated. The surveys were collected over two semesters in order to achieve a higher rate of return (n=772). Questions were arranged in no order of importance so as to not ‘lead’ the responder in any direction. Questions were presented in a 4-

point Likert scale from ‘Strongly Disagree’ to ‘Strongly Agree’ with a further option of N/A. There were roughly an equal number of males (404) to females (368), all were employed full-time, and the age range was from 29 years old to 62 years old. Again, the purpose of the methodology was to solely identify dominant fear factors in the workplace.

## RESULTS

As can be seen in table 1, the 17 questions have been ranked in the order of those that illicit more fear in the workplace. ‘*What my manager thinks of me*’, ‘*Not being paid what I should be*’, and ‘*Not being appreciated*’ garnered the highest percentages of those in the survey. This information therefore gives us a simple, but valuable insight into what causes fear in the workplace.

**Table 1.** Causes of fear in the workplace

Question #	I fear:	Agree + Strongly Agree %
3	What my manager thinks of me	.68
15	Not being paid what I should be	.50
13	Not being appreciated	.49
9	Uncomfortable taking sick days	.38
1	Being fired	.36
2	Being laid off	.36
11	Coworker mistrust	.36
8	Uncomfortable taking vacation	.33
7	Being stuck trapped in my current job	.32
14	Too ill to work; how would I be perceived	.28
4	Being scolded	.27
5	Loss of benefits	.27
6	Being publicly humiliated	.19
12	Being too old to find another job	.19
17	Loss of control, temper outburst	.14
16	Terrorist attack	.09
10	Physically unsafe	.04

N=772

Upon further examination, we felt the answers to the questions in Table 1 warranted further classification and consequently, we feel that fear in the workplace could be divided into 5 sub-categories as follows:

- Vulnerability
- Trapped
- Job Insecurity
- Social and Ego Consequence
- Safety



In terms of vulnerability items 1, 3, 13, 4, 14, 6, and 12 were used to examine for a sense of vulnerability in the workplace and returned that there were gender differences across all levels – entry level, supervisor, manager, senior manager, with females reporting higher levels of vulnerability perception. In terms of feeling trapped, we used items 7, 8, 9, 12 and found no gender differences with regard to fear of being trapped.

For Job Insecurity items 1, 2, and 5 were examined and showed gender differences among supervisors and senior managers. In the social and Ego Consequence category we used items 11 and 17 and found gender differences at the managerial level. And at the Safety level we used items 16 and 17 and found no gender differences at any level. These results are depicted in Table 2.

**Table 2.** Gender differences

<b>Fear Type/Level</b>	<b>Entry Level</b>	<b>Supervisor</b>	<b>Manager</b>	<b>Snr. Manager</b>
Vulnerable	yes	yes	yes	yes
Trapped	no	no	no	no
Job Insecurity	no	yes	no	yes
Social/Ego	no	no	yes	no
Safety	no	no	no	no

While we have already identified the major causes of fear people experience in their workplace, it appears that vulnerability in one’s position is a common thread across all levels where there is a difference between men and women. This gender difference carries through at the supervisor and senior manager levels in terms of job insecurity.

Overall, the results reveal that at all levels within organizations women have a greater sense of vulnerability in their jobs and at the supervisor and senior manager level they also experience a greater sense of insecurity. Of note however, as this 17-item questionnaire was developed specifically for this study, the reliability of the instrument cannot be verified until it achieves repeated use. In terms of validity, due to the large sample size, the questionnaire achieves validity, which again would be verified with repeated measures.

## DISCUSSION

In relation to the results uncovered from this ‘simple’ study of frequency of responses, we sought to understand why fear exists in the workplace and to recognize if it affects men and women differently. Through writing this article, the challenge now posed is why fear exists. We know where it lies, but a further question pertains to why it resides where it does: fear of retaliation, physical fear, career damaging fear, and does it affect genders differently?

It may be obvious that all people are concerned with what their ‘boss’ thinks of them as a direct supervisor holds great power over employees earning potential and day to day job experience. However, this study had over 700 responses from individuals in different industries and at different levels within companies, and

informed us that in particular, women have a greater sense of vulnerability in their place of employment. The question then bodes “why?”. Furthermore, it compels us to seek reasons in answering this question. Women identify fear differently to men. Simply because males do not recognize fear in areas women do, does not mean that fear does not exist; it means men don’t identify fear the way women do. Or, it could imply that women are more sensitive to potential fear variables, which the male psyche fails to pick up on.

The top three fear items in this survey (*‘What my manager thinks of me’*, *‘Not being paid what I should be’*, and *‘Not being appreciated’*) might suggest that a perception issue exists in terms of what others think of us. Therefore, our perception of the

workplace may be skewing us towards concerns over what others think of us professionally. And what clouds our perception is a lack of open, clear, and communication from those around us. We are therefore left to our own devices to create paradigms of thinking of how others view us. And it is here, possibly, that self-doubt and fear creep in. Of further concern with these top three reasons for fear is that they may lead to individuals leaving an organization. This in turn would lead to an inability to retain key talent. Without talent organizations eventually die; inhibiting talent accelerates that process.

When fear invades an organization, it results in many things. But in seeking to understand it, we are aware that throughout the centuries we as humans consistently

seek shelter from it. In today's workplace, we do this by forming alliances with co-workers (North & Jensen, 2018; Berman, West, & Richter, 2002). These alliances provide us with valid, timely information we may need when

confronted with a 'fear' situation, and they also provide us with allies who may intercept a fear situation before it happens (DeScioli & Kimbrough, 2019). Furthermore, these alliances provide us with sounding boards for our thoughts and opinions while also

offering a valuable source of stress relief through opening the pressure valve to help us relieve our fear and stress while also forming a game-plan to combat stress (Sprigg, Niven, Dawson, Farley, & Armitage, 2019).

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## RECOMMENDATIONS

Due to the lack of scholarly work on fear in the workplace there is lots to recommend in fully understanding this realm of inquiry; and in combating fear, there are many options to choose from. Primarily, we must first recognize that fear is a great inhibitor to decision-making, personal initiative, and creativity. The removal of this anxiety is key to creating an atmosphere of potential and growth within a company. The cultivation of Leader Member Exchange (LMX) where leaders try to form positive working relationships with all their direct reports may be just one option to remove fear. This approach is favored by Wang, Liao, Xia, and Chang (2010) in their research.

Another may be a change of leadership style to a more servant leadership orientation where leaders act as facilitators to their subordinates to give them the support and resources they need to be successful in their positions. However, it appears open communication and fostering an environment of open communication without retribution is vital to removing fear in the workplace (as well as identifying fear mongers). This open communication helps create an environment of 'us' and makes everyone responsible for working together to solve workplace problems. According to Boone (2019) in quoting Greenleaf (1970, 18) he states "servant leaders listen first. Only a true natural servant

automatically responds to any problem by listening first". Many management experts and gurus have addressed the importance and power of listening. Kouzes and Posner (2012) in their book "The Leadership Challenge" advise leaders to "listen first and often". Peter Drucker (2006) advised leaders to "listen first and speak last", and John Maxwell (2007) states "inexperienced leaders are quick to lead before they know anything about the people they intend to lead, but mature leaders listen, learn, and then lead.

In fostering this open communication, it then becomes the domain of senior leadership to create such an environment where there exists clear lines of responsibility and an expectation of communication when issues arrive. By creating a culture of responsibility and transparency leaders therefore cut off the life source to fear, that of ambiguity and failure to communicate. Hence, it could be that an authentic style of leadership is best suited to organizations in preventing fear. Authentic leaders have strong personal values, address issues when they occur, and identify acceptable and unacceptable levels of behavior within a firm. Again, this serves to stifle the possibility of fear arising and creates a positive organizational culture.

In this article, we identified what causes fear and how women and men identify it differently. We now recommend that as a natural next

step, further studies investigate why people perceive these particular fear phenomenon, which may or may not exist, and how they each respectively respond to these fear factors. While both stress and fear keep our senses alert, overload of either serves counterproductively. Although we have offered avenues for 'fear management' in this article, the use of these methods need to be measured through the lens of responding to fear. Therefore, we propose that human resource officers recognize and accept the presence of fear in the workplace, address same with senior management, and develop an organizational culture where fear trafficking is identified and removed as a tool of leadership. This shift in culture must therefore come from the higher echelons of organizations. Senior leadership must impact culture to create an environment where all employees perceive themselves as partners in pursuit of a common organizational goal where all employees are obligated to help, assist, and facilitate each other where possible. This would then lead to one organizational vision and effort that would eliminate the oxygen supply to fear. The creation of 'oneness' in an organization removes employees feeling as though they work 'for' someone in an organization and replaces it with a sense of working 'with' people within an organization. The creation of this atmosphere would then readily expose individuals trying to employ

fear as a tool as being out of sync with organization culture and methodology in the pursuit of goals. Consequently, our proposition is that leaders must focus on climate control in terms of culture to prevent the emergence of fear and foster communication to enhance information flow, better decision-making and creativity. A positive culture is one where workplace values, beliefs, attitudes, and behavior are non-threatening and facilitate value-added work outcomes of employees. We would also advise/recommend that organizational leadership adjust compensation packages throughout the organization and close the pay gap/disparity that exists between top management and subsequent pay grades. In line with compensation adjustment would also be to include developing a career plan for each employee, which would foster a greater sense of inclusion and job security. Both of these actions would most likely contribute to reducing fear in the workplace by illustrating that employees are valued and that they have a future at the company.

Further recommendations would be to consider confrontations in the workplace. Confrontation implies an incident or single occurrence whereas quite often we tend to understand conflict as on-going. Katz (2006) states that confrontation can be positive if the confrontation concerns a situation or topic as

opposed to an individual. Consequently, confrontation avoidance needs further development...are you frightened in the workplace because you wish to avoid confrontation? Do you not speak openly because it may lead to confrontation? Quite possibly, it could be a lack of leadership skills in dealing with employees that spawns confrontation avoidance. Another possibility could be that while some are not loathe to engage confrontation in the workplace in seeking positive outcomes, they identify potential responses/reactions from individuals who may have low emotional intelligence and therefore choose not to engage. This then renders the power to the other individual and results in a climate of fear to engage in productive confrontation on job related issues due to the unpredictability of their response. From this, we would advise other questionnaires to include a reference to 'fear of confrontation with fellow employees or supervisors' in seeking another reason for the presence of fear in the workplace.

Another more simple explanation could be that individuals are simply not engaged in their positions, do not feel vested in the organization, and as a result do not have the impetus to engage agitators or bullies in the workplace and therefore avoid confrontation. This avoidance serves to give others more

power and control and therefore creates a work environment where certain individuals are feared. This ultimately leads to a dysfunctional organization where those lacking legitimate position power assume control through fear. This final result affects the bottom line financial position of the firm and jeopardizes future sustainability. Hence, the acknowledgement of fear in the workplace must be made and addressed in securing the operational and financial future of a firm.

A final recommendation could be that leaders simply need to 'lead with love' which is a new approach to leadership still in its infancy. The concept of leading with love by Strauch (2006) implies that a leader communicates to people that they are employed because the company wants them there, cares about them, and wants to see them do well. Although similar to servant leadership, this approach takes a top down approach as opposed to a bottom up in terms of the leaders' role. It emphasizes respect and deference to expertise. This promotes open communication, quick resolutions to problems, and creates an environment where people enjoy work and want to be involved. Its importance to this research is that it involves the removal of fear of senior personnel second-guessing subordinate expertise.





This article addressed a topic that has received little attention in the literature, that of the existence of fear in the workplace. Therefore, the simple purpose of this article was to identify the main sources of fear in the workplace with a secondary goal of identifying if gender differences existed. Furthermore, we sought to offer paths to addressing and alleviating fear in the workplace. Our discovery from this research informs us that while everyone has concern over what their immediate supervisor thinks of them, women identify more stress points than men. Further research is proposed to identify if these gender differences are simply ‘gender differences’ or as a result of actual occurrences, which give women cause to be more fearful in the workplace.

Fear also can be a sense of anxiety that prevents performance. Therefore, do we ‘create’ fear? Do we choose to assign a fear factor to certain people? Do we need fear to keep us sharp and alert? In other words, is the presence or fabrication of fear a human condition?

Fear in the workplace can therefore be explained not as being an employee problem but rather a management issue to be solved (Potterton, 2018 suggests that civility from leadership is a key starting point). Organizational

leadership is responsible for plotting the course of an organization, introducing changes to achieve that course, and identifying and eradicating obstacles to progression. Fear is one of these obstacles and it needs to be addressed. In doing this, and based on the outcomes of this research, the first and rather difficult step is the recognition by senior leadership that fear of immediate supervisors, whether warranted or not, is the predominant fear in most organizations and that it affects performance. Then, becoming educated as to the questions of ‘why?’ and ‘where?’ in relation to organizational fear would greatly unlock progress inhibitors and improve organizational relationships. The difference between firms making similar products is quite often their people; and people need space and freedom to perform. An organization rife with fear strangles relationships and eventually jeopardizes its competitive position within its industry. We therefore suggest that senior leadership take an active role in redefining the culture of their organizations to one that does not tolerate fear as a tool in the workplace by creating a work environment that is driven by open communication and the removal of process barriers whereby everyone gains familiarity with co-workers at all levels.

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