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From Organizational Gossip to Documentation: The Role of Abusive Supervision in Instituting High-Performer Sabotage

Thewodros K. Geberemariam[1*]

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ABSTRACT

Merit-based personnel systems are designed to reward competence, creativity, and strong performance. But even the highest-performing employees are often not recognized or promoted in direct proportion to their accomplishments. Ego and fear are at the basis of this structural failure. An insecure supervisor does not view a good performance as an advantage but as an existential danger to his power and a mirror of managerial constraints. In private organizations, the owners keep a careful eye on the operations to preserve the stars. There is no such direct financial oversight in government environments, which are protected by strict civil service protections. Insecure managers realize they can't reject empirical data or arbitrarily fire superior talent. So, they consciously push the evaluation fight to a very subjective measure: the employee's personality. The manager builds an unchallengeable narrative by judging arbitrary factors such as "attitude", "tone" or "communication style". This research develops a four-stage model of fabricated paper trails that successfully overcome empirical merit, causing the involuntary separation of exceptional talent.

INTRODUCTION

Merit-based personnel systems are designed fundamentally to reward competence, innovation, and excellent performance (Park & Liang, 2020). And yet, the most productive employees are often not recognized or promoted according to their efforts. Traditional management literature tends to interpret this stasis as an unintentional structural flaw or a localized communication failure. This research offers a more disturbing truth. Organizations often supply the very bureaucratic instruments for high-performer sabotage. Administrative checks and balances are disconnected from their protective intent and militarized when an insecure supervisor views an elite subordinate as an existential danger to personal authority rather than an organizational asset (Braun *et al.*, 2025; Tepper, 2000).

To comprehend this phenomenon, you have to address the Government Protection Trap. In the private sector, survival is measured in bottom-line dollars. Thus, an owner or executive will step in to stop an insecure manager from firing a high performer who is directly protecting the bottom line. Conversely, the lack of a profit metric in public and governmental settings, where there is no direct financial oversight, allows the administrative bureaucracy to become a playground of insecure egos (Bozeman & Su, 2021; Moon *et al.*, 2020). Ironically, the civil service laws and progressive discipline measures that protect public employees from arbitrary dismissal force deficient managers to adjust. To avoid these protections, supervisors must become extremely adept bureaucratic snipers who hide their hatred behind strict compliance rules (Currie *et al.*, 2017; Lewin, 2001).

The supervisor is forced to employ personality as an administrative weapon, because the objective measurements and output volumes are not easily contested under current public service norms. The supervisor fundamentally rigs the game, changing the evaluative battleground from empirical data to highly subjective judgments of "attitude," "tone," or "communication style" (Harvey *et al.*, 2023). The charge of having an inappropriate "tone" cannot be plausibly defended against by the high-performing subordinate, because the supervisor making the charge is also the only institutional actor with the authority to establish an acceptable tone.

In the end, this trajectory reveals a fundamental institutional betrayal, in which the official administrative documentation procedure legitimizes psychological assault. Public companies rely on written records as objective representations of reality, assuming progressive discipline frameworks exist to reform or fairly handle people (Bozeman & Su, 2021). However, where the motivation for a supervisor's review is driven by status-threat envy rather than operational inadequacies, these official compliance instruments are effectively co-opted to serve as a corporate hit list (Tariq *et al.*, 2020). The insecure supervisor can twist the organization's own institutional checks and balances to make personal jealousy into a permanent, unassailable administrative fact by carefully building a compliance-verified paper trail around unfalsifiable behavioral metrics (Tepper *et al.*, 2018).

To map this process, this study develops a four-

[1] P.O. Box 23195 Brooklyn, NY 11201, USA
[*] Corresponding author's e-mail: tgm232@nyu.edu

stage conceptual framework that maps the systematic transformation of informal interpersonal antagonism and organizational gossip into permanent institutional disadvantage.

Theoretical Foundation

This theoretical foundation merges disparate literature with organizational behavior, social psychology and public administration to examine how extraordinary success might paradoxically create institutionalized disadvantages. The following part builds the theoretical basis for this trajectory through an examination of five linked pillars. It starts with the dual nature of high-performer visibility and the social comparison dynamics that it spawns and that result in managerial status threat. It then describes the outward expression of these internal psychological pressures, beginning with informal communication systems such as workplace gossip and social undermining by peers and ending with the formal involvement of abusive supervision. Finally, this part addresses the ways in which bureaucratic organizations legitimate these skewed forms of interpersonal interaction through formal systems of documentation, rendering a supervisor's subjective bias an official and impregnable administrative reality.

LITERATURE REVIEW

High Performance and Visibility of Organization

Within organizations, employees that continually beat performance expectations are in a special niche. High performers usually become noticed for the results they achieve, the innovative ways they work, their ability to minimize inefficiencies and the fact that they deliver results that are superior to the standard (Wang & Zheng, 2020). Contributions such as this usually promote organizational effectiveness, but they also increase visibility.

Visibility is a double-edged sword. On the other side, visibility may provide opportunities for recognition and promotion. Visibility, however, increases social comparison. Employees would be more inclined to compare themselves with high achievers while managers may be more cognizant of the differences in employee performance (Harvey *et al.*, 2023). Status threat research reveals that obvious performance gaps can cause deep psychological discomfort for those whose competence, authority, or influence is put to the test (Tariq *et al.*, 2020). Consequently, great performers can find themselves unwittingly at the center of office gossip and office politics.

Office Rumors and Developing a Reputation

Gossip in the workplace is one of the most popular types of informal communication in the organizations. While gossip can often fulfill informational tasks, it is also an important factor in shaping employee attitudes and building corporate narratives (Chang, 2023). High performers are often the focus of workplace discussions, since their visibility raises questions about their motivations, work approaches, and accomplishments.

At first, conversations may be neutral or even favorable. But organizational stories have a way of evolving. Without the ability to assess objective performance, informal talks tend naturally to focus on ambiguous, unquantifiable metrics (Geng *et al.*, 2024). As time goes on, discussions about performance often move to topics of personality, ambition, interpersonal conduct, or fit with the organization. Consequently, high performers are sometimes perceived as arrogant, hard to work with, disruptive, politically driven or not collaborative enough despite great objective achievement. Such stories do not have to be true to shape views in the workplace. Once repeated frequently across organizational echo chambers, these informal characterizations become accepted organizational assumptions (Pheko, 2018).

Social Undermining and Workplace Exclusion

Gossip is sometimes a direct precursor of social weakening. Social undermining, as defined by Duffy *et al.* (2002) are activities meant to prevent a person from forming positive relationships, protect a good reputation, or succeed at work. People don't usually socialize undermined by overt, trackable confrontation. Instead, it frequently manifests itself as subtle exclusion and damage to reputation. Information may be suppressed, institutional backing withdrawn, operational inputs curtailed, and tangible successes attributed to external good fortune rather than human competence. These practices produce an environment in which the objective accomplishments of high-performing people are increasingly ignored, while the contrived concerns of reputation become more and more prominent (Duffy *et al.*, 2002). Over time, these localized workplace narratives come to dominate larger-scale assessments of employee value, resulting in the high performer being socially isolated and structurally susceptible (Zhu *et al.*, 2013).

Abusive Supervision, Managerial Insecurity and Threat To Status

Abusive supervision is the point at which informal animosity is given legitimacy through official power. Tepper (2000) defined abusive supervision as subordinates' impressions of persistent, hostile verbal and nonverbal behaviors. In conventional literature this animosity is seen as sporadic or generic, yet there is a particular subcategory of abuse that is explicitly triggered by subordinate excellence. This targeting is rooted in managerial ego, anxiety and deep-seated insecurity (Braun *et al.*, 2025; Milosevic *et al.*, 2020).

An insecure manager does not see the exceptionally capable employee as an asset to collaborate with when that capability becomes highly visible, but rather as an existential threat to their institutional authority and a psychological mirror that reveals their managerial limitations (Gandolfi & Stone, 2022). This upward social comparison results in strong envy and danger to status when the supervisor perceives that he/she cannot

outperform or outwork the subordinate (Tariq *et al.*, 2020). Private sector firm owners have a financial incentive to reduce this behavior to safeguard their bottom line, while governmental and public sector bureaucrats are not subject to direct financial supervision. The supervisor uses their institutional power, which is unique to their position relative to their peers, to neutralize this threat within the rigorous limits of the civil service (Huai, 2014; Kiazad *et al.*, 2010).

Supervisors determine performance evaluations, developmental opportunities, work assignments and progressive discipline processes. The importance of supervisory behavior is further supported by recent studies showing that leadership styles significantly influence employee commitment, productivity, and performance outcomes across organizational settings (Abdu *et al.*, 2026; Dusaran & Caballero, 2026). This structural authority permits insecure managers to purposefully manipulate formal administrative processes, turning their private fear-based hostility and informal workplace gossip into targeted administrative and disciplinary consequences (Eissa & Lester, 2017).

Documentation And Bureaucratic Legitimation

In bureaucratic organizations the documentation has a position of exceptional influence and frequently invulnerability. Formal records are the main objective evidence that detached executives, civil service boards, and human resources departments utilize to determine promotions, disciplinary measures, and terminations (Bozeman & Su, 2021). Documentation conveys tremendous institutional legitimacy, since the systems view written records as objective, verified reflections of employee conduct.

Records are not neutral. They are intentionally made by people whose observations are inherently impacted by personal biases and political objectives. In the public sector, where jobs are well protected, an official document acts as an important administrative disguise. Social undermining, arising out of a toxic lifecycle of management envy, informal gossip, and social undermining, systematically institutionalizes subjective and unmeasurable interpersonal friction as a part of the formal policy compliance (Einarsen *et al.*, 2010). Once recorded, these contrived accounts gain institutional legitimacy, irreversibly affecting the employee's official civil service record and displacing their empirical worth.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This section gives the deductive framework that is used to study structural differences in organizational reactions to high performing subordinates. This study does not investigate actual data and the technique is based only on the qualitative synthesis of the established organizational and public administration literature. The next parts describe the structural logic of the comparative matrix, the integration of the underlying theoretical viewpoints and the sequential analysis utilized to trace the institutionalization of supervisory bias.

Architecture Of The Framework And Typological Design

The current study adopts a conceptual framework design based on a contingency-based typological structure (Doty & Glick, 1994; Dent, E. B., 2021). The methodology does not evaluate raw empirical data sets or statistical distributions but provides a deductive synthesis of current organizational literature to identify a qualitative process framework. In particular, we develop a comparative matrix, which tracks the varying processing of the same subordinate behavioral inputs (extraordinary autonomous behavior) as a function of the overall governance design of an organization: At-Will Governance vs. Civil Service Insulation. In contrast to these macro-level systemic structures, the framework specifies the exact border criteria that determines whether high performance is optimized or administratively punished.

Theoretical Synthesis And Construct Integration

We embed the framework in separate areas of study in organizational behavior and public administration. Our deductive reasoning is based on well-established, peer-reviewed theoretical ideas, directly connecting three domains:

- **Aggressor Antecedents**: Applying Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1957; Garcia *et al.* 2020; Suls, J., & Wheeler, L. 2012) and Supervisory Status Threat Models to Understand the Psychological Arousal of Managerial Envy
- **Informal Amplification**: Tracing reputational damage from first interpersonal friction using literature on workplace gossip and social undermining.
- **Administrative Weaponization**: Leveraging Literature on Public Personnel Management and Performance Appraisal Bias to Understand How Supervisors Navigate Strict Employment Protections via Discretionary Documentation.

We next look at the boundary intersections of these existing models and by logical deduction we arrive at a sequential chronology with particular attention to the shifts in administrative changes in public sector environments that do not have direct market or financial surveillance mechanisms.

Analytical Approach: Conceptual And Temporal Sequencing

The four-stage framework was developed using a reasoning process of literature synthesis and timeline sequencing, comprising three phases:

1. Phenomenon Mapping: In organizational literature, we found clear administrative anomalies where strong performers were consistently excluded, stagnated, or left despite excellent performance indicators (Büyükyılmaz & Kara, 2024; Einarsen *et al.*, 2010).
2. Mechanism Identification: Identifying the specific

administrative instruments that supervisors utilized to link informal interpersonal dislike to formal consequence (Fischer & Sitkin, 2024; Velez & Neves, 2017). The period was marked by the question of how supervisors bypassed tight employment or civil service protections, shifting the critical transition moment from verbal animosity to administrative paper.

3. Temporal Sequencing: Finally, we arranged these findings into a logical path of four stages. This phase captures the process from the internal psychological trigger (managerial ego and status threat) to informal group dynamics (gossip) to administrative escalation (weaponized paperwork) to organizational systemic validation (institutionalization).

This repeated conceptual modeling results in the framework isolating documentation as the most important administrative mechanism that converts subjective, unmeasurable management bias into an unassailable permanent organizational reality that can safely avoid meritocratic institutional safeguards.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of this study identify a four-stage process through which managerial status threat may evolve into institutionalized administrative disadvantage for high-performing employees. Through deductive synthesis of the literature, the analysis suggests that this process unfolds across four interconnected stages: (1) the creation of gossip and status-threat activation, (2) social undermining and reputational priming, (3) documentation escalation, and (4) institutionalization. Together, these stages explain how informal interpersonal tensions may become embedded within formal administrative systems

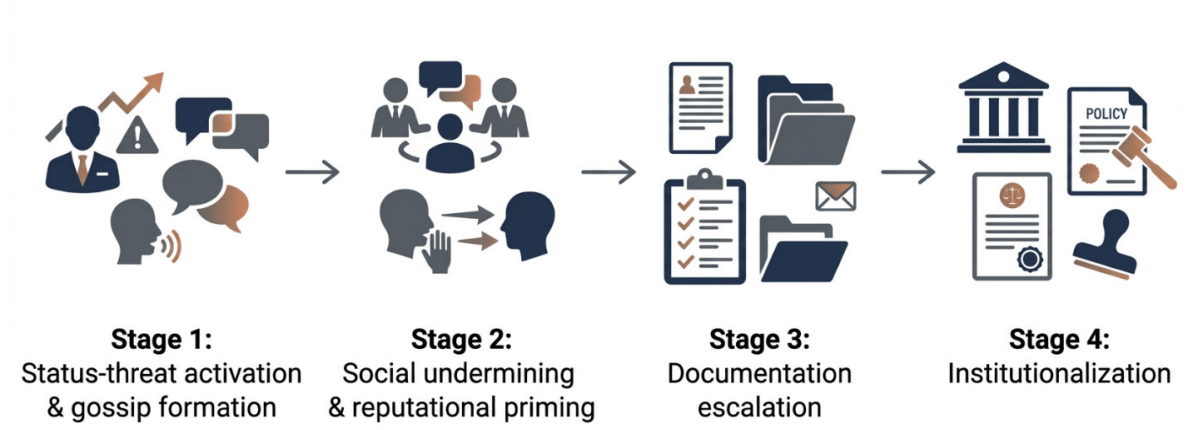


Figure 1: Four-Stage Conceptual Framework of Administrative Escalation

and ultimately influence organizational outcomes. Figure 1 illustrates the resulting process model.

The framework illustrates how managerial status threat may progress from informal narrative formation to formal institutionalization through four sequential stages: (1) status-threat activation and gossip formation, (2) social undermining and reputational priming, (3) documentation escalation, and (4) institutionalization.

To further explain the progression of this process, the four stages are presented sequentially. Each stage represents a distinct phase in the transformation of informal managerial perceptions into formally recognized organizational outcomes. The process begins with the emergence of status-threat perceptions and narrative formation, progresses through social and administrative mechanisms that amplify those perceptions, and culminates in their integration into organizational decision-making structures. The following sections examine each stage in detail.

Stage 1: The Creation Of Gossip And The Status-Threat Trigger

It starts with outstanding individual performance, which is by definition a disruption of existing operating norms. High achievers receive a lot of institutional attention since their qualitative and quantitative outputs are positively different from organizational norms. This extra visibility can be a double-edged sword in situations where financial performance is not normally visible, such as public sector organizations. It can spark strong curiosity and discussion among peers and management. Importantly, such visibility creates a significant sense of ego-defensiveness and terror among insecure supervisors (Braun *et al.*, 2025). The narrative shift is the result of the manager's perception of the subordinate's greater skill as an existential danger to personal authority and not as a collaborative asset (Tariq *et al.*, 2020). The top performer's empirical work is irrefutable. The supervisor begins to evaluate the subordinate based on informal, subjective judgments about motivation, intent, and personality. The supervisor creates and develops certain narratives about the workplace, consciously diverting the organizational discourse from what the individual produces to how they interpersonally function, laying the stage for devaluation based on character (Geng *et al.*, 2024).

Stage 2: Social Undermining And Reputational Priming

As these subjective stories propagate, workplace gossip moves from passive labeling to aggressive social sabotage. Social undermining is defined as "behavior intended to hinder the ability to establish and maintain a positive interpersonal relationship" (Duffy *et al.*, 2002, p. 330). The supervisor at this point weaponizes the gossip generated strategically to stimulate the immediate organization environment and gently alienate the top performance from colleagues and upper management. As a direct result of this reputational pollution, colleagues grow more and more reluctant to engage with the targeted individual. Interpersonal information sharing declines, informal institutional support declines, and the visible accomplishments of top performers are systematically reduced or attributed to luck rather than to individual talent. The end result is an employee's organizational identity that is entirely divorced from objective output and instead governed by the supervisor's constructed narrative. The insecure supervisor socially isolates the high performer and engineers a consensus that they are "difficult" or "disruptive," creating the cultural justification necessary to move from informal animosity to formal administrative sanctions (Zhu *et al.* 2013).

Stage 3: Increasing Documentation

The third stage of the concept is the core proposition that the structural power dynamics of the organization are being used to institutionalize bias. The formal, administrative power to appraise performance and generate the official personnel record is held by abusive supervisors (Tepper, 2000). When supervisors pursue technically impeccable high-performing subordinates, they purposefully shift from objective productivity metrics to highly subjective behavioral criteria. The supervisor exploits their evaluative judgment by hyper-scrutiny and selective monitoring, embedding misleading workplace narratives into the employee's permanent file to progressively destroy their credibility (Tariq *et al.*, 2020). Since quantifiable performance indicators are not easily contestable, the supervisor deliberately emphasizes ambiguous categories, especially categories like Behavioral issues and Professionalism evaluations. Within this subjective framework, basic characteristics of great performers, including as autonomy, critical questioning and autonomous problem-solving, are systematically recontextualized as organizational liabilities. Therefore, strategic pushbacks are seen as "insubordination," specialized attention is perceived as "poor communication" or "not a team player," and independent execution is dismissed as "toxic team alienation" (Eissa & Lester, 2017). Thus, formal personnel management tools such as counseling memos, subjective performance evaluations, and biased compliance reviews are divorced from their developmental goal and used as instruments of administrative censure (Huai, 2014; Kiazad *et al.*, 2010). Every document is thoroughly insulated with sufficient apparent reason to pass muster with Human Resources, but the aggregate trajectory establishes a fake negative record. This institutional paper trail successfully hides the employee's real high performance, creating a legally justifiable basis for termination or forced attrition (Tepper *et al.*, 2018).

Phase 4: Institutionalization

The fourth stage shows the legitimization of the story the supervisor has created and its structural integration into the wider business architecture. After they have a string of bad papers in a row, systemic organizational governance structures start to justify and ratify their biased findings (Tepper, 2000). Personnel files are widely relied upon by human resource departments, promotion committees, and senior leadership when making crucial administrative choices, using the text as an objective proxy for employee value (Currie *et al.*, 2017). These high-level organizational actors have minimal direct visibility into the daily operations or actual technical contribution of the targeted individual, therefore the official file is the major, unchallenged source of truth (Marler & Fisher, 2013).

Hence, the isolated, subjective interpersonal friction, status-threat envy, or targeted workplace gossip become systematically integrated in corporate decision-making systems (Tariq *et al.*, 2020). This structural separation of appraisal from actual merit, makes a supervisors informal, malevolent perceptions into a structured, permanent organizational reality (Eissa & Lester, 2017). This institutional echo chamber successfully isolates the high performance, hospitalizes internal channels of recourse and creates a legally shielded environment for termination or forced attrition (Sahabuddin et al, Velez & Neves, 2017).

Discussion

In this study, we develop a conceptual framework that reveals a key paradox in contemporary corporate governance: formal administrative mechanisms, which are supposed to safeguard employees, can be systematically co-opted to engage in character assassination and target top talent. Starting from the informal interpersonal friction, we work our way back to the formal systemic alignment and derive three deep insights on how the bureaucratic framework accidentally enables high-performer sabotage in the insecure leader.

The Government Protection Trap And Structural Blind Spots

One of the key insights of this approach is what I call the government protection trap. In the private sector, survival of the fittest and leadership tenure are directly proportional to market performance and financial transparency. In that commercial arena a business owner or chief executive has a financial incentive to actively interfere and prevent a manager from destroying a top performance, because losing extraordinary talent has immediate implications for the bottom line of the organization. However, public and governmental

environments do not have direct financial surveillance and defined profit measurements. In such cases, the lack of an immediate market-driven driving mechanism renders administrative bureaucracy subject to excessively discretionary authority. Ironically, the strict civil service norms, union rights and progressive discipline procedures that are meant to protect public employees from arbitrary dismissal actually transform the nature of managerial animosity. Instead of preventing misuse, these systemic protections require deficient supervisors to adjust, turning tight compliance frameworks into vectors for the growth of structural red tape (Bozeman, 1993; Moon *et al.*, 2020).

Perilarization Of Personality And Data Illusion

Personality is the only administrative weapon the supervisor can rely on, because the volume of production and technical accuracy are not easily contestable in public service frameworks. The supervisor moves the evaluative fight from empirical findings to highly subjective, unfalsifiable criteria like "attitude," "tone," or "communication style," structurally rigging the game (Harvey *et al.*, 2023). This exploits a fundamental design flaw in performance appraisals: the absolute dependency on administrative discretion in qualitative appraisals. The targeted high performer is left without any plausible rebuttal to the charge of "toxic attitude" or "poor communication" because the supervisor making the charge is the only institutional actor who can determine appropriate communication (Daswati *et al.*, 2024). Autonomy, independent problem-solving, and healthy strategic pushback are traits that drive great execution and can easily be re-framed as serious liabilities like "insubordination" or "team alienation" (Eissa & Lester, 2017). This procedure provides a fake story to satisfy the institution's need for paperwork but entirely hides the manager's underlying status-threat envy (Tariq *et al.*, 2020). Table 1 below illustrates the consistent recontextualization of elite qualities across diverse organizational environments.

Table 1: The Administrative Recontextualization of Exceptional Performance Across Varied Personnel Governance Structures

Exceptional Subordinate Behavior	**At-Will Governance Architecture (Discretionary At-Will Authority)**	**Civil Service Insulation Architecture (Rigid Procedural Protections)**	**Formalized Administrative Recontextualization Track (Weaponized Paper Trail)**
Intellectual Autonomy & Independent Problem-Solving	Tolerated or actively incentivized due to immediate, market-driven output pressures.	Perceived by a status-threatened supervisor as a structural challenge to centralized procedural compliance (Braun *et al.*, 2025).	"Insubordination" or "Failure to follow established administrative directives" (Huai, 2014)
Healthy Strategic Pushback & Operational Critique	Utilized as cross-functional feedback to optimize baseline task efficiency.	Interpreted as a direct, disruptive behavioral challenge to formalized hierarchical authority (Tariq *et al.*, 2020).	"Unprofessional Communication" or "Defensive attitude" (Harvey *et al.*, 2023).
Deep Focused Execution & High Task Specialization	Recognized and leveraged primarily through objective volume and technical performance metrics.	Framed as an intentional, calculated refusal to conform to normative group cohesion and baseline team dynamics.	"Social Alienation" or "Failure to participate as a collaborative team member" (Eissa & Lester, 2017).

Systemic Betrayal And The Rejection Of Internal Remedy

Ultimately, this results in a terrible systemic betrayal where the formal administrative documentation process legitimizes psychological assault. Traditional personnel management paradigms tend to assess workplace friction through a solely operational lens, depicting conflicts as isolated deviations or individual performance failures, as opposed to systemic consequences arising from inequalities in positional authority (Currie *et al.*, 2017). Public organizations assume progressive discipline systems are in place to reform staff or defend the integrity of the organization, and that written records are objective representations of reality. But when the supervisor's assessments are influenced by ego and fear rather than operational shortcomings, these compliance tools are effectively co-opted to serve as an organizational hit list. The disconnected human resource departments and top executives have little direct visibility into day-to-day, ground-level activities and hence interpret the accumulated paper trail as a neutral proxy for employee worth (Marler & Fisher, 2013). The institutional echo chamber is effective in confirming the supervisor's fabricated story, turning personal jealousy into a permanent organizational truth (Tepper *et al.*, 2018). The organization's own administrative checks and balances get separated from their original aim of protection, leaving

the high performer totally alone with a legally insulated basis for their involuntary separation.

Limitations And Future Empirical Research

If the framework is to be a valid evaluative instrument and not just a descriptive process model, researchers need to move beyond the specific structural mechanics of organizational exit and focus on the structural boundaries of the model. The preceding sections lay out the theoretical path of compliance-driven sabotage. To establish the practical validity of these assertions, we need to know where the framework breaks down and how to experimentally isolate the underlying mechanisms. Thus, this part defines the boundary conditions of the present conceptual model and sketches an integrated methodological roadmap to guide the forthcoming empirical validation.

Restrictions Of The Conceptual Framework

The suggested paradigm offers an in-depth mapping of bureaucratic sabotage, but certain boundary requirements need to be recognized. The study is first presenting a conceptual process model, which is a deductive synthesis of the current literature and hence does not have an instant statistical validation. These stage transitions are theoretical notions, not pathways that have been measured empirically. Secondly, the model presumes a very inflexible bureaucratic organization devoid of direct operational or peer-level surveillance. The escalation of documentation may be even more intense, faster and on a different course in hybrid organizations, matrixed corporate settings, or smaller, decentralized public organizations where leadership is less removed from day-to-day ground level. Finally, the framework assumes that the targeted high performer remains isolated, which is not always the case, especially when the employee has considerable external political capital or other means of building coalitions that could undermine the supervisor's strategic narrative.

Implications For Future Empirical Research

Future research needs to rigorously verify the linkages created across the four-stage pipeline to operationalize this model and to convert it from a conceptual taxonomy to a predictive framework. Since bureaucratic sabotage is a dynamic phenomenon unfolding over time, empirical validation needs a multi-methodological approach structured around the specific transitions between stages:

1. Validating the Stage 1 to Stage 2 Transition (The Gossip Pipeline) Future designs should use multi-wave, longitudinal field studies to track high performers across long operating horizons. Future studies might further clarify the precise time gap between the formation of the supervisory status-threat appraisals (Stage 1) and the increase in workplace gossip (Stage 2). Tracking this would test if informal reputational pollution is a statistically significant statistical precursor to formal institutional punishments.

2. Stage 3 Escalation analysis (linguistic content analysis): Qualitative research should do deep dive, anonymized case studies in public sector and non-corporate entities evaluating the real personnel records of exited top achievers. A thematic text analysis of the counseling memos, performance reviews, and termination justifications generated during the Documentation Escalation phase can identify the specific behavioral trigger words (e.g., uncooperative, disruptive, misaligned) that are systematically used to recontextualize professional autonomy and strategic pushback as formal insubordination charges.

3. step 4 Interventions (Structural Circuit Breakers) Evaluation Future research should examine organizational factors that may disrupt the last step of Institutionalization. Researchers should empirically assess whether High HR Independence (where human resource departments report directly to independent civil service boards rather than to local agency heads) or structured Skip-Level Leadership Surveillance serves as a structural circuit-breaker. To examine these boundaries is to test the effectiveness of structural supervision in preventing the subjective paperwork of a status-threatened supervisor from becoming unchallenged and permanent institutional reality.

CONCLUSION

We question the common idea that merit-based systems fail great performers mostly due to passive administrative oversight or localized communication problems. Instead, the study exposes systematic structural vulnerability through a four-stage conceptual framework: in a context of isolated oversight and lack of market-driven metrics, the organization's own progressive discipline mechanisms can be hijacked as tools of strategic marginalization. Status-threat appraisals and positional insecurity may lead supervisors to shift the evaluative focus away from invulnerable empirical outcomes to highly subjective behavioral criteria. What these actors do well is conceal the aggressive behavior behind the curtain of procedural compliance. They take the localized interpersonal friction and run it through formal documentation channels.

To summarize, the study shows that formal documentation not only records performance but also possesses the structural capacity to forge a parallel legal defense administrative profile that routinely overrides empirical merit. When independent human resource departments and senior leadership legitimize these subjective paper trails without operational oversight, they inadvertently support the attrition of the organization's most productive assets. For public and very bureaucratic institutions to uphold meritocratic ideas, they need to go beyond cosmetic conformity. Organizations need to build procedurally independent supervision frameworks to thoroughly evaluate subjective behavioral complaints so that administrative records serve their original developmental purposes rather than legitimize supervisory status protection.

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