Designing a Model for Managing the Organizational Behavior of Difficult Employees

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Abstract

The effective management of difficult employees is a critical challenge for leaders in any workplace. The problematic behavior and poor attitude of an employee can quickly spread and negatively impact their productivity as well as that of other team members. The objective of this study is to propose a model for managing the organizational behavior of difficult employees at Misan University. This research was conducted using a qualitative-inductive approach and employed Strauss and Corbin's grounded theory method. A semi-structured interview was used as the data collection tool. Using the grounded theory method, data obtained from interviews with 16 experts in the field of education (including managers and academic experts at Misan University) were analyzed through three stages of open, axial, and selective coding. The findings resulted in 20 general categories, structured within a paradigmatic model. These factors encompass causal conditions (negative organizational behaviors, negative managerial behaviors, factors contributing to difficult behavior, and organizational harm), the central phenomenon (management of difficult employees), contextual conditions (negative organizational culture, negative communication, inappropriate organizational changes, and ineffective leadership), intervening conditions (flawed policies and procedures, and an unsuitable work environment), strategies (designing a human resource management model, formulating organizational policies and regulations, effective management of difficult employees in the organization, and providing psychological-social support), and outcomes (a healthier and more efficient workplace, cultural enhancement, improved organizational performance, enhanced human resource management effectiveness, and a reduction in difficult behaviors).

Keywords: Management, Organizational Behavior, Employees, Difficult Employees, Grounded Theory.

1. Introduction

Work behavior is one of the important aspects of human behavior, as it defines an individual's interaction with other members of the workplace. Organizational behavior helps individuals work together despite cultural and intellectual differences, enabling them to interact and create a strong cooperative experience. Since organizational behavior examines human interactions, it is highly complex, to the extent that, in some cases, analyzing the behavior of organizational members becomes impossible. Individuals exhibit different behaviors in various settings depending on their thoughts and cultural background (Aguinis et al., 2022).

Dealing with difficult employees is a significant challenge (Gbolabo et al., 2023). Organizational management faces numerous concerns, one of which is managing and improving employees' abnormal and negative behaviors within the organization (Bennett & Robinson, 2003). Sometimes, individuals refuse to move even slightly from their position or opinion, creating a toxic work environment. With globalization and the employment of staff from different countries, cultural differences and other factors have contributed to various psychological, familial, and physical tensions. These tensions transfer from individuals to organizations, exacerbating difficult employee behaviors worldwide (Blazi & Awoluse, 2020).

Difficult employee behaviors are a subset of negative organizational behaviors that have emerged in recent decades and have entered the management literature, necessitating in-depth investigation (Yazdankhah et al., 2022). Passive actions, such as refusal to work or incompetence, threaten a healthy organizational environment and cause severe damage to the organization (Gong et al., 2020). Difficult employees are a disruptive force in the workplace, and their negative behaviors and communication styles can have adverse and incompatible effects on the entire organization and its external environment (Agarwal et al., 2023; Imam & Kim, 2023). These employees also negatively influence the psychological well-being of other employees and, through their deviant behaviors, pose a risk to the organization's health, causing significant harm (Gong et al., 2020).

Such employees can significantly impact profitability and, in extreme cases, even lead to self-harm or homicide. In the absence of awareness and ethical behavior within organizations, these behaviors can negatively affect organizational innovation and creativity (Vaez et al., 2017). Furthermore, they adversely impact the psychological well-being of other employees in the organization (Cortina et al., 2001), leading to deviant and negative behaviors.

Several factors contribute to employee difficultness, including tendencies toward violence, abnormal workplace behaviors, insult, harassment, globalization, cultural differences, and psychological tensions at home and in the workplace (Blasi, 2020). To manage these behaviors, specific strategies such as communication transparency, strengthening team spirit, and fostering an environment of honesty and trust must be implemented. Additionally, training employees in social and psychological skills can help mitigate the negative effects of such individuals (Imam & Kim, 2023).

The literature on managing difficult employee behaviors highlights various psychological, structural, and organizational factors contributing to the phenomenon. Yazdankhah et al. (2022) categorized difficult behaviors into cognitive, attitudinal, and behavioral dimensions, emphasizing the role of environmental and structural factors in reinforcing such behaviors within organizations. Sadeghi et al. (2021) found that narcissistic and antisocial attitudes significantly influence all indicators of difficult employee behaviors, whereas Machiavellianism only affects envious and vengeful employees (Yazdankhah et al., 2022). Zarei et al. (2018) demonstrated that organizational cynicism impacts employee difficultness among administrative staff at Hamadan University of Medical Sciences, with behavioral and emotional cynicism showing the highest effects at 4.9% and 5.8%, respectively (Zarei, 2018). Hutton and Gates (2008) concluded that incivility from patients and management has a greater impact on employee productivity than incivility from other workplace sources (Hutton & Gates, 2008). Together, these studies underline the necessity of a multifaceted approach to managing difficult employee behaviors, incorporating ethical policies, leadership awareness, and supportive workplace environments.

Given the increasing economic, social, cultural, and political challenges, employees face numerous mental struggles, leading to behavioral issues in the workplace. Examining and studying these behaviors can contribute to improving organizational work processes. Designing a human resource management model that addresses the challenges related to difficult employees can serve as a long-term planning framework for organizations. The findings of this research can provide a model for reviewing and managing the organizational behavior of difficult employees, particularly at Misan University. Based on the aforementioned points, the main research question is: How can a model for managing the organizational behavior of difficult employees at Misan University be developed and explained?

2. Methods and Materials

Given that the objective of this study is to design a model for the concept of managing the organizational behavior of difficult employees at Misan University in Iraq, the present research is applied in terms of its purpose, cross-sectional survey in terms

of data collection timing, and qualitative in terms of data nature and research approach. To address the research questions, library studies, a review of literature and theoretical background, and interviews were utilized. Descriptive and inferential statistical methods were employed to analyze the research questions. The primary objective of this qualitative study is to identify the variables and constructs associated with the model for managing the organizational behavior of difficult employees at Misan University in Iraq and to develop an appropriate model.

For data collection and analysis, organizational actions related to the research topic were observed, and exploratory interviews were conducted with 16 experts in the field of education (managers and academic experts at Misan University). Participants were selected using purposive sampling and the snowball sampling method. Semi-structured, in-depth interviews with open-ended questions were conducted. The demographic characteristics of the participants are presented in Table 2. The adequacy of the sample size was determined through theoretical saturation.

To implement the grounded theory strategy, a systematic approach was applied using three coding techniques: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding, as follows:

A. **Open Coding:** Open coding is an analytical process through which concepts are identified and their characteristics and dimensions are discovered within the data. At this stage, primary categories regarding the causes of organizational defiance were formed by segmenting the data. After systematically analyzing the interviews, the main categories, subcategories, and sub-subcategories were identified.

B. **Axial Coding:** Axial coding is the process of linking categories to subcategories and establishing connections between categories based on their characteristics and dimensions. This type of coding is termed "axial" because it revolves around a central category.

C. **Selective Coding:** After completing open and axial coding, the research findings take the form of a theory, where selective coding serves as the process of integrating and refining categories. In this study, once saturation was reached and concepts became repetitive in the interviews, selective coding was conducted. The results of this process are presented in the final section in the form of discussion and conclusions.

Additionally, the criterion of credibility was used instead of conventional validity and reliability measures for evaluating grounded theory research. Credibility refers to the extent to which the research findings accurately reflect the experiences of the participants, the researcher, and the audience regarding the studied phenomenon. Ten indicators have been introduced as measures of credibility, five of which were applied in this study to enhance scientific rigor, validity, and reliability. The auditing strategies used included researcher sensitivity, methodological coherence, sample adequacy, repetition of findings, and feedback from informed individuals.

3.   Findings and Results

To address the research question, "What is the conceptual paradigm of managing the organizational behavior of difficult employees?" the open and axial coding for each section of the grounded model is presented as follows.

Causal conditions refer to the categories that influence the central phenomenon. Based on the conducted interviews, the axial codes of "negative organizational behaviors, negative managerial behaviors, factors contributing to difficult behavior, and organizational harm" were identified. These were then linked to a broader selective code named "causal conditions," as detailed in Table 1.

Table 1. Axial Coding of Qualitative Data (Causal Conditions)

Axial Coding	Secondary Coding	Open Coding
Negative Organizational Behaviors	Individual Deviance	Tendency toward violence, insult, harassment, defiance of regulations, failure to comply with rules, abnormal workplace behaviors
	Cognitive	Criminal mindset, controlling nature, weak perceptual skills, unconscious arrogance, lack of self-esteem, narcissism, self-monitoring, Machiavellianism, introversion, inability to accept criticism
	Difficult Workplace Behaviors	Tardiness, unexcused absences, decline in work quality and quantity, excessive criticism and complaints, reduced motivation and commitment, lack of cooperation and attention
Negative Managerial Behaviors	Decline in Trust Toward Management	Reduced trust in management and organizational leaders, workplace instability
	Decline in Organizational Communication Quality	Poor organizational communication quality, negative employee discourse, damaged relationships between employees and management

	Weakened Team Morale	Creation of unhealthy competition, disregard for small successes, public criticism, lack of effective communication
Factors Contributing to Difficult Behavior	Personal and Family Issues	Job dissatisfaction, psychological tensions at home
	Workplace Stress and Pressure	Job-related conflicts and pressures, behavioral challenges among employees
	Social Deviance	Perceived injustice or inequality in the organization, deviant workplace behaviors
	Cultural Issues and Misalignment with Organizational Norms	Negative organizational culture, ambiguity in rules and regulations, inappropriate behavioral guidelines
Organizational Harm	Direct Harm	Replacement costs, destruction of resources and equipment
	Indirect Harm	Decreased team morale, negative impact on psychological well-being, increased employee stress

Context refers to a set of distinctive characteristics that define the phenomenon in question, namely the environment where incidents and events related to the phenomenon occur. The context indicates the specific conditions under which action-response strategies are executed. The contextual elements in managing the organizational behavior of difficult employees include "negative organizational culture, negative communication, inappropriate organizational changes, and ineffective leadership," as outlined in Table 2.

Table 2. Axial Coding of Qualitative Data (Contextual Conditions)

Axial Coding	Secondary Coding	Open Coding
Negative Organizational Culture	Toxic Culture	Lack of cooperation and positive interaction, baseless criticism and constant complaints, distrust and cynicism
	Shifts in Organizational Values	Prioritization of results over processes, disregard for employee satisfaction and well-being, decline in ethical and professional values, encouragement of unhealthy competition, rewarding negative behaviors
Negative Communication	Individual Deviance	Destructive and unfounded criticism, persistent complaints, lack of transparency and openness in communication, unprofessional and disrespectful behavior, lack of cooperation and positive interaction, rumor-mongering and discord
	Analysis of Deviant Behaviors	Decline in the quality of organizational communication, lack of communication skills
Inappropriate Organizational Changes	Lack of Transparency in Changes	Rapid, unplanned changes, workforce reductions without considering impacts, mismanagement of human resources, creation of complex and bureaucratic structures, failure to align with actual organizational needs
	Structural Problems	Excessive focus on rules and regulations, rigid leadership style, significant power distance, ambiguity in roles and responsibilities, centralized authority with high formalization
Ineffective Leadership	Leadership Issues	Rapid, unplanned changes, mismanagement of human resources, workforce reductions without considering impacts, creation of complex and bureaucratic structures, lack of transparency in changes, failure to align with actual organizational needs, ineffective performance management, lack of recognition and appreciation
	Managerial Changes	Changes in the management team, fluctuations in human resources, shifts in management approaches

These findings highlight the various causal and contextual conditions that contribute to managing the organizational behavior of difficult employees. By understanding these factors, organizations can develop more effective strategies to address difficult employee behaviors and mitigate their negative impacts on the workplace.

Structural conditions belong to the phenomenon and influence action-response strategies. These conditions either facilitate or constrain strategies within a specific context. Participants identified "flawed policies and procedures" and an "unsuitable work environment" as the key intervening conditions for managing the organizational behavior of difficult employees, which are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Axial Coding of Qualitative Data (Intervening Conditions)

Axial Coding	Secondary Coding	Open Coding
Flawed Policies and Procedures	Non-Transparent Policies	Ineffective performance evaluation system, weak communication and lack of transparency, ineffective crisis management, unfair rewards and promotions, disregard for employee well-being and satisfaction, lack of development and training opportunities, failure to accept feedback and constructive criticism
	Deficient Disciplinary Processes	Lack of transparency in disciplinary policies, unfair and discriminatory disciplinary actions, failure to provide feedback and opportunities for improvement, disproportionate and severe disciplinary measures, increased turnover rate, reduced trust and organizational commitment, enforcement of discipline without proper documentation, decreased motivation and productivity, increased dissatisfaction and stress, prolonged ignorance of negative behaviors, irresponsible crisis management, increased negative and difficult behaviors

Unsuitable Work Environment	Lack of a Supportive Work Environment	Absence of an appropriate physical work environment, lack of a psychologically safe workspace
	Economic Conditions	Economic instability, labor market conditions
	Poor Workplace Design	Insufficient and cramped workspace, inadequate lighting, poor ventilation, unsuitable equipment and furniture, distracting noise, decreased job satisfaction and organizational commitment, increased conflicts and tensions, reduced productivity and motivation, heightened stress and dissatisfaction, lack of shared spaces, impaired employee collaboration

Strategies are deliberate actions and responses aimed at controlling, managing, and addressing the studied phenomenon. These strategies are purposeful and implemented for specific reasons. The strategies identified in this study include "designing a human resource management model, developing organizational policies and regulations, effectively managing difficult employees in the organization, and providing psychological-social support," as detailed in Table 4.

Table 4. Axial Coding of Qualitative Data (Strategic Conditions)

Axial Coding	Secondary Coding	Open Coding
Designing a Human Resource Management Model	Identifying and Evaluating Difficult Behaviors	Use of performance assessment tools and surveys, peer feedback for identifying difficult employees, analysis of collected data on difficult behaviors, determining the impact of difficult behaviors on the organization
	Analyzing the Depth and Severity of Issues	Providing quantitative data for analyzing negative and difficult behaviors, providing qualitative data for analyzing negative and difficult behaviors
	Developing Corrective Programs	Establishing frameworks for designing appropriate workplace behaviors and environments, implementing behavioral improvement programs and workplace enhancement initiatives
	Continuous Evaluation and Feedback	Periodic evaluations, ongoing monitoring, feedback sessions, fostering innovation and change
Developing Organizational Policies and Regulations	Behavioral Policies	Establishing and defining acceptable behavioral policies and regulations, clarifying roles and responsibilities, explicitly defining acceptable and unacceptable behaviors
	Legal Consultation	Access to online legal consultation, legal advisory centers, professional associations and unions, legal software and applications
	Disciplinary Protocols	Development of disciplinary protocols for addressing difficult behaviors, systematic enforcement of disciplinary protocols
Effectively Managing Difficult Employees in the Organization	Training and Skill Development	Implementing training programs related to communication skills, continuous training programs, professional development opportunities, stress management and promotion of positive behaviors
	Interactive Workshops	Conducting workplace interaction workshops, discussions and dialogues on difficult behaviors
	Rewards and Encouragement	Encouraging desirable behaviors, implementing reward systems
Psychological-Social Support	Psychological Support and Counseling	Access to psychological counseling, stress management, provision of psychological and mental health support programs
	Social Support	Support from senior management, peer support

These findings highlight the critical role of structural and strategic conditions in managing difficult employee behaviors. Implementing effective policies, improving workplace environments, and providing adequate psychological and social support can contribute to reducing negative behaviors and fostering a more productive organizational culture.

Consequences are the outcomes that emerge as a result of implemented strategies. They represent the results of actions and reactions. However, consequences are not always predictable and do not necessarily align with the intended objectives of individuals. Additionally, what may be considered a consequence at one point in time could later evolve into a condition or contributing factor. Based on the conducted interviews, the consequences identified include a healthier and more efficient workplace, cultural enhancement, improved organizational performance, increased effectiveness of human resource management, and a reduction in difficult behaviors. These outcomes are presented in Table 5.

Table 5. Axial Coding of Qualitative Data (Consequences)

Axial Coding	Secondary Coding	Open Coding
Healthier and More Efficient Workplace	Improved Work Environment	Increased employee satisfaction, positive changes in the work environment
	Effectiveness of Organizational Processes	Technical effectiveness, effectiveness of human resource management, strategic organizational effectiveness
Cultural Enhancement	Positive Organizational Culture	Promotion of a cooperative organizational culture, mutual respect and support
	Organizational Values	Encouraging positive behaviors, addressing negative behaviors

Improved Organizational Performance	Reduced Organizational Costs	Decreased disciplinary costs, prevention of long-term expenses
	Transparency in Communication	Establishment of clear and open communication among employees, creation of transparent and open communication between managers and employees
Effectiveness of Human Resource Management	Increased Team Efficiency	Development of effective teams, strengthening collaboration within teams
	Human Resource Management	Successful implementation of strategies, improvement in human resource management practices
	Managing Difficult Behaviors	Proactive change management, fostering mutual trust, enhancing the organizational climate, providing psychological support
Reduction in Difficult Behaviors	Improved Workplace Relationships	Strengthening relationships among employees, fostering healthy and positive employee interactions
	Increased Productivity	Higher employee productivity, greater job satisfaction, reduced absenteeism and turnover
	Enhanced Employee Efficiency	Implementation of fair reward and incentive systems, boosting employee motivation, superior performance
	Improved Psychological and Physical Well-being	Reduced stress and tension, support for mental health
	Personal and Professional Growth	Professional development, career advancement

From the identified factors, selective coding was conducted, establishing a linear relationship between the secondary codes and the core research components, including causal conditions, contextual conditions, intervening conditions, strategies, and consequences. Figure 1 illustrates the coding paradigm, effectively representing the qualitative research process model.
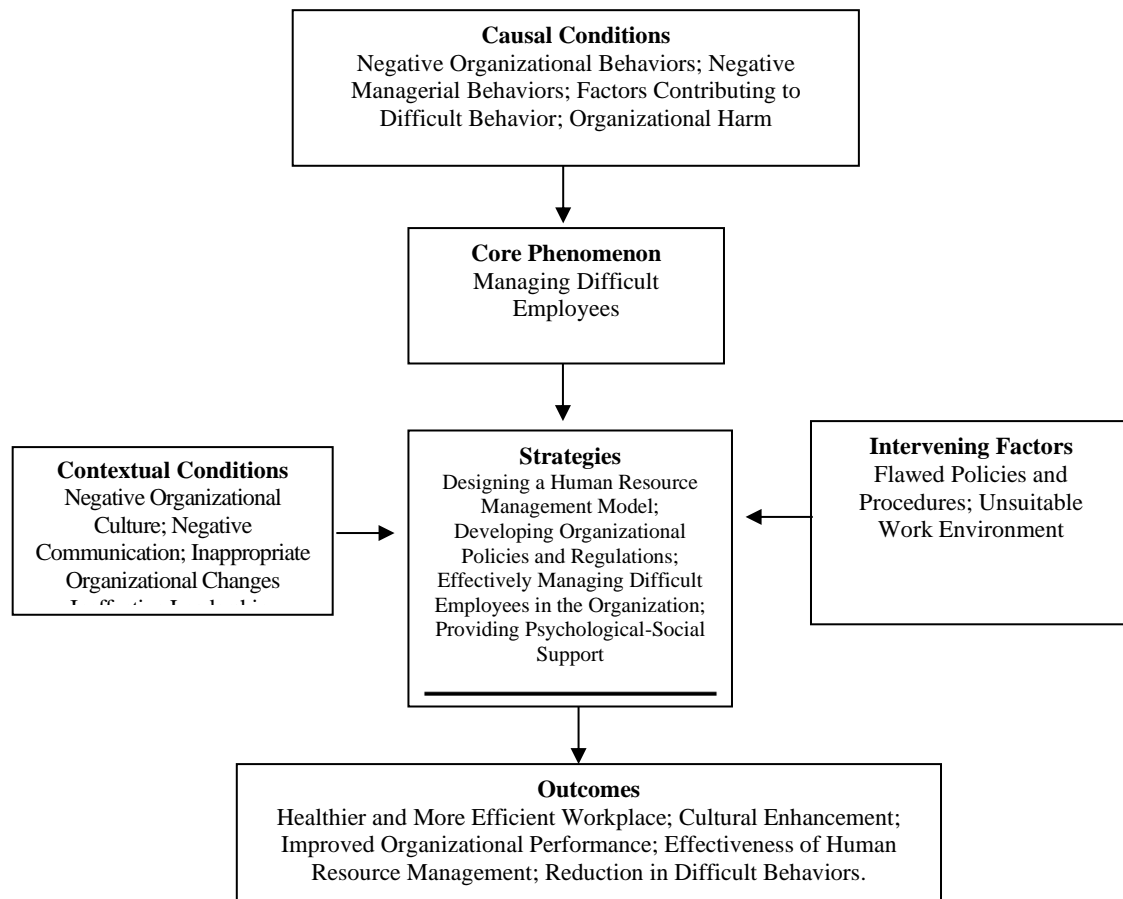

Figure 1. Final Model of The Study

4. Discussion and Conclusion

Improving the efficiency of employees exhibiting unconventional behaviors, including difficult behavior, enhances both technical and strategic organizational effectiveness. Based on the grounded theory approach, the identified factors include causal conditions (negative organizational behaviors, negative managerial behaviors, factors contributing to difficult behavior, organizational harm), contextual conditions (negative organizational culture, negative communication, inappropriate organizational changes, ineffective leadership), intervening conditions (flawed policies and procedures, unsuitable work environment), strategies (designing a human resource management model, developing organizational policies and regulations, effectively managing difficult employees in the organization, providing psychological-social support), and consequences (a healthier and more efficient workplace, cultural enhancement, improved organizational performance, increased effectiveness of human resource management, reduction in difficult behaviors), all of which are associated with the central phenomenon of managing difficult employees.

Ultimately, these strategies contribute to creating a healthier and more efficient workplace, reducing difficult behaviors, fostering cultural enhancement, and improving organizational performance, thereby strengthening both technical and strategic effectiveness. Reducing negative and difficult behaviors leads to a healthier and more collaborative work environment, which increases employee satisfaction and engagement. Yazdankhah et al. (2022) identified cognitive, attitudinal, and behavioral characteristics of difficult employees, demonstrating that environmental and structural factors within organizations can reinforce these behaviors (Yazdankhah et al., 2022). This finding aligns with causal conditions, particularly "factors contributing to difficult behavior" and "organizational harm," highlighting the importance of precisely identifying these factors for the development of effective strategies.

Sadeghi et al. (2021) examined the impact of dark personality traits such as narcissism and sociopathy on the behaviors of difficult employees. This study aligns with causal conditions, particularly "negative organizational behaviors" and "negative managerial behaviors," demonstrating how these personality traits can exacerbate difficult behaviors (Sadeghi, 2021). Zarei et al. (2018) investigated the effect of organizational cynicism on difficult behaviors among employees, showing that these factors, especially in behavioral and emotional dimensions, significantly contribute to difficult behaviors (Zarei, 2018). This finding corresponds with contextual conditions such as "negative organizational culture" and "negative communication."

Gbolabo et al. (2023) emphasized the importance of strengthening ethical procedures and organizational policies to counter workplace incivility and unconventional behaviors (Gbolabo et al., 2023). Their study highlights intervening conditions, particularly "flawed policies and procedures" and "unsuitable work environment," and underscores the importance of properly managing these factors.

Hutton and Gates (2008) studied the impact of workplace incivility on reduced productivity, demonstrating that incivility from management has a more significant effect on productivity (Hutton & Gates, 2008). This study corresponds with intervening conditions and consequences such as "unsuitable work environment" and "reduced organizational productivity."

These studies indicate that unconventional and difficult employee behaviors can be effectively managed by accurately identifying causal, contextual, and intervening conditions and by developing appropriate strategies to generate positive organizational outcomes. Effective management of these behaviors strengthens positive organizational culture and enhances internal communication, contributing to greater team cohesion and stability. By mitigating the negative effects of difficult behaviors, overall organizational performance improves, and productivity increases.

Successfully managing these behaviors enhances the effectiveness of human resource management by improving an organization's ability to attract, retain, and develop high-quality employees. Proper management of difficult behaviors reduces organizational harm, minimizing costs associated with employee conflicts and workplace challenges.

Recommendations:
- Utilizing tools such as anonymous surveys, individual interviews, and performance evaluations can aid in accurately identifying the causes of unconventional and difficult behaviors.
- Clear and fair policies and regulations should be developed to address unconventional and difficult behaviors.
- Conducting training programs for managers and employees to develop communication skills, conflict resolution, and emotional management can help reduce unconventional behaviors.
- Organizational psychology training can also increase awareness of difficult behaviors and how to manage them effectively.

- Providing counseling and psychological services to employees exhibiting difficult behaviors can improve their mental well-being and reduce negative behaviors.
- Creating an environment where employees can express their concerns without fear of punishment is essential.
- A positive organizational culture that emphasizes respect, collaboration, and fairness can help reduce unconventional behaviors. Organizational leaders should exemplify and support this culture.

- If organizational changes are necessary, they should be implemented in a planned and well-managed manner to prevent dissatisfaction and difficult behaviors.
- Providing regular feedback to employees regarding their behaviors and performance and supporting them in their improvement efforts can help reduce unconventional behaviors.
- Managers should serve as positive role models in behavior management and create a safe and trustworthy environment for employees.

Ethical Considerations

All procedures performed in this study were under the ethical standards.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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