

REASONS FOR EMPLOYEE SABOTAGE IN THE WORKPLACE

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ABSTRACT: Unionized workers at a factory were asked to rate a variety of reasons which would justify the use of sabotage in an organization, as well as the justifiability of four general methods of sabotage (slowdowns, destructiveness, dishonesty, and causing chaos). Results showed that as compared to those who didn't accept a wide variety of reasons for sabotage, those who accepted a variety of reasons would more readily justify all forms of sabotage except dishonesty. The data is discussed in terms of the reasons for the lack of justification that dishonesty receives, as well as future directions for the study of sabotage.

Organizational sabotage can be defined as any behavior by a payroll employee which is intended to inflict a production or profit loss for the targeted organization. Although the cost of sabotage is difficult to ascertain, it is believed to be on the increase (Dubois, 1980). With only one major research work written, it is an area whose investigation is difficult for a variety of reasons. Since sabotage is often performed via anti-social means (violence and destructiveness), a primary problem in the investigation of sabotage is an association with criminal activity. Investigating sabotage, therefore, may bring legal authorities into the research picture. Secondly, sabotage is an activity which, because of legal implications, employees prefer not to discuss with outsiders, or insiders. Reporting information to researchers regarding sabotage may mean the job of a co-worker or one's own job. Thus, it can be expected that many individuals who are involved in sabotage or aware of it would refuse to divulge im-

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portant qualitative or quantitative information. Finally, since sabotage seems not to be a phenomenon performed daily by particular groups or individuals, it is difficult to assess the extent to which any saboteur is responsible for a set of sabotage behaviors. Despite these difficulties, some advances toward understanding sabotage can be made if these problems are confronted directly.

Fear of sanction from either legal authorities or management can be minimized by engaging in research methods which maintain the respondents' anonymity and/or reduce the direct contact between investigators and participants so as to further protect the respondent's identity. This can effectively be done by maintaining a policy of anonymous surveys, as well as investigating sabotage (via questionnaires, for examples) *outside* the confines of the work building. Pinpointing the saboteur, while a more difficult issue, is nonetheless resolvable. Although the study of sabotage has no foundation on which to rest its methods, it seems that it does have a close tie to the literature on aggression, which involves some of the same anti-social behaviors that can be found in any study of sabotage. Social psychologists who have long investigated conflict and aggression in laboratory settings (cf. Katz and Kahn, 1978; Baron, 1977), have found that the destructive effects of aggression can be minimized in a laboratory setting predominantly through the use of games (cf. Deutsch & Krauss, 1962), video tapes (cf. Bandura and Kupers, 1964), deception (cf. Berkowitz, 1970) and role-playing (cf. Freedman, 1969). The study of sabotage could lend itself to similar research paradigms. Alternatively, the use of field and archival data used by a number of researchers who have done work on convicted felons (cf. Felson, 1978; Toch, 1969) may also prove fruitful. The combination of both laboratory and archival/field studies may yield data on the motivations and constraints of a saboteur's work which could be compared relative to each other.

Sabotage: Some Elementary Distinctions

According to Dubois (1980), three general forms of sabotage can be distinguished:

- 1) *Destruction of machinery or goods.* Within this class of sabotage, Dubois includes arson, breaking machinery, and sabotaging of the product.
- 2) *Stopping production.* There are a variety of methods for stopping production, including controlling the supply of raw materials or component parts, an indefinite strike of a facility, a partial strike at regular or irregular intervals, and seizure of the finished product inventory to prevent delivery to customers.

- 3) *Slowing down production*. Six methods can be implemented to slow down production: 1) working slowly, 2) working strictly according to rules, 3) working unenthusiastically, 4) absenteeism, 5) labor turnover, and 6) refusing to work.

Still, while the forms of sabotage may vary greatly, the aims of sabotage seem to fall within two distinct categories. *Instrumental* sabotage is directed toward the achievement of certain limited demands and/or a change in socio-political power. On the other hand, *demonstrative* sabotage is not directed toward the achievement of any particular goal, but rather, serves “to castigate management, (as) a protest against injustice, (and) a rejection of accepted values” (Dubois, 1980, p. 61).

Sabotage, Aggression, and Self-Presentation

Pfeffer (1981) has noted that organizational behavior may be governed by underlying symbolic processes. Evans (1984) has hypothesized that symbolic interactionism (cf. Mead, 1934) offers a framework to help organizational behavior. In keeping with these suggestions, we will offer a self-presentational approach to the study of sabotage. Inasmuch as sabotage is directed at injuring an organization, we decided to pursue our study of sabotage as a particular form of aggression. It is hypothesized that sabotage could be better understood by extrapolating and applying the extensive literature on aggression and self-presentation.

Self-presentation theory (cf. Schlenker, 1980) views individuals (workers) as motivated to maintain an identity both for themselves and an audience (fellow workers and management). Regarding aggression, Schlenker (1985) notes that a possible objective for violence might be to display a public image that is in the best interests of the aggressor, for “to show an opponent during a conflict that one is tough, irrational, and likely to inflict severe harm...(will create) a “negative” impression of self that is in one’s best interests at the time” (p. 82). Similarly, the act of sabotage may stem from a management-subordinate conflict in which management insults or maligns an employee or group of employees. The insult (or other offense) would seem to make the saboteur look “weak, incompetent, and cowardly. A successful counterattack is one effective way of nullifying the imputed negative identity by showing one’s strength, competence, and courage” (Felson, 1978, p. 207).

Alternatively, Baumeister (1982) distinguishes between self-presentation designed for pleasing the audience (so as to attain rewards), and for self-construction, enacted to “make one’s public self congruent to one’s ideal self” (p. 3). From this vantage, sabotage is an individual’s way of establishing what he/she is *not*; that is, through an aggressive act, he/she

establishes that he/she does not fit within the established expectations the organization has for him/her. As such, "aggression is a means of (negative) self-construction rather than pleasing the audience" (Baumeister, 1982, p. 16). Similarly, Allen and Greenberger (1980) have hypothesized that violence may be for private rather than public reasons. People, they note, may engage in destructiveness so as to feel a sense of mastery and control over their environment which they cannot achieve through conventional, non-violent means. Sabotage, therefore, may be a symbolic way of not feeling at the mercy of management; sabotage of the organization, which baffles and aggravates management, serves to convince the saboteur that he/she controls the organization, or at least his/her part of the organization, albeit by terrorist means.

Accounts and Employee Sabotage

Self-presentation theorists have provided a variety of tactics which employees might use in the interests of self-presentation; among these are *accounts*. Accounts are reasons or explanations of events designed to minimize the severity of an anti-social or untoward act (see Schlenker, 1980; Scott and Lyman, 1968). These explanations provide the individual or his/her audience with a motive for the act committed. For self-serving reasons, the use of explanations could provide the potential saboteur with a framework for presenting his/her actions as seemingly less socially undesirable, and perhaps, legitimate. For example, a saboteur might attempt to excuse his/her actions by noting that "it was an accident" or he/she might justify his/her actions by noting that the victim of his/her act had hurt others in a similar (or worse) fashion (see Semin and Masteed, 1983 for a typology of the various forms of accounts). Such accounting may help to relieve the possible effects of guilt and help to maintain the saboteur's self-respect by providing seemingly proper reasons for his/her activity. Of critical importance, however, is whether these accounts will effectively mitigate the saboteur's responsibility for the action, thereby freeing the saboteur to continue his/her worklife without pangs of conscience, or legal sanctions.

It seems, however, that some individuals will accept many motives for a particular act like sabotage, while others will not. For example, some individuals may accept retaliation for a company wrong as the only reason for sabotage, although others may include the protection of job interests or the "fun" involved in sabotage as justifiable reasons, too. Essentially, it may be proposed that there will be individual differences in the number and type of accounts that particular persons will accept as justifiable reasons for sabotage.

Most work on accounting has shown that accounts tend to be used retrospectively to attain a "best-case reading" (see Schlenker, 1980) of a

particular anti-social or untoward act. The present investigation takes a different view of accounts. From our perspective, accounts may be created *prior* to an action which makes the individual look poorly. As Snyder, Higgins, and Stucky (1983) note:

Anticipatory excuses are explanations or actions, generated prior to an expected bad performance, that serve to lessen the negative implications of an actor's subsequent performance and thereby also serve to maintain a positive self-image for the actor or others (pp. 117-118).

Essentially, individuals may cognitively create an account or group of accounts for any particular act, and then apply it/them to excuse or justify their actions. It could then be hypothesized that the more reasons or accounts the person could muster for engaging in an action, the more likely it is that the individual would engage in the act, since it can be *more easily* excused. As Schlenker (1985) explains, individuals may "proffer explanations in advance such that the path to the event can be smoothed and it can be placed in the 'proper light' when it occurs" (p.86).

Using the process of accounting as a basis, the present study investigated whether the a priori reasons a person has for the acceptability of sabotage will result in a greater likelihood that they will justify sabotage within an organization. Specifically, the study investigated whether individuals who will accept more reasons for sabotage will justify sabotage more highly than those who do not. It was predicted that persons who tended to accept more reasons for sabotage would be more likely to justify sabotage than those who did not accept many reasons for sabotage, regardless of the sabotage type.

METHOD

Subjects. Subjects were 38 unionized laborers at a northeastern electrical factory who volunteered their participation.

Construction of the Sabotage Methods Questionnaires. A five-year employee of the plant who had recently resigned was asked to list the different methods that were used by the employees to sabotage the company. Inasmuch as the methods of sabotage used by the employees were common knowledge among non-supervisory personnel, this list was easily created. In order to facilitate the answering of the questionnaires, smaller categories of similar sabotage types were placed into more global categories. When all the methods were listed, a total of 29 general sabotage methods were listed. These methods are listed in Table 1.

In turn, these methods fell into four global categories that the former employee had told us existed in the factory: work slowdowns (methods 1, 10, 11, 13, 17, 21, 25, 26), destruction of machinery, premises, or products (methods 4, 5, 6, 7, 12, 14, 15, 16, 22, 23, 28), dishonesty (methods 2, 8, 9, 24, 27), and causing chaos (methods 3, 18, 19, 20, 29).

TABLE 1
Sabotage Forms

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1. Creating "down time".
 2. Doing "personal work" on company time with company tools and supplies.
 3. Leaving bodily waste in areas not designed to be toilets.
 4. Carving poetry on bathroom walls.
 5. Using "Loctite" glue to freeze up tool lockers and clothes lockers.
 6. Using "Blueing dye" to redecorate car interiors, clothes, finished products, windows, phones, etc.
 7. Pouring steel shot into auto gas tanks, flattening tires, etc.
 8. Punching someone else's time card or the reverse.
 9. Stealing to compensate for low pay, poor job/conditions, get back at the boss/company.
 10. Creating work slowdowns (e.g., slow up feed and speed machine rates, go "looking for parts", sitting in the men's room).
 11. Going to the clinic to get away.
 12. Greasing, bluing or otherwise booby-trapping the foreman's personal/work property.
 13. Switching paper work around or "losing" it.
 14. Snipping wires on machines or changing them around to put the machine down.
 15. Altering the dimensions or specs on the goods produced.
 16. Passing defective work/parts onto the next station.
 17. "Getting lost" for periods of time; leaving company property while on the clock to do personal errands.
 18. Calling upon the Union to intervene.
 19. Setting up the foreman to get him/her in trouble.
 20. Attempting to scare foreman/supervisor into quitting or getting a transfer.
 21. As a group, slowing down work output to get foreman in trouble/ fired/transferred.
 22. "Forgetting" to turn a valve, flip a switch, etc. to damage a machine or work product.
 23. Turning on a machine and walking away, knowing it will crash.
 24. Altering the time on the punch clock.
 25. Pulling the fire alarm, bomb threats.
 26. Carrying out management directives to the letter.
 27. Taking tools and supplies home as "fringe benefits."
 28. Pushing feeds and speeds too fast so as to wreck job or shut down the machine.
 29. Throwing time cards away.
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TABLE 2
Reasons for Sabotage

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1. Self-defense
 2. Revenge
 3. An eye for an eye
 4. Protect oneself from boss/company
 6. To protect one's job
 7. The foreman/company deserved it
 8. The foreman/company hurt me previously
 9. No one was hurt by the action
 10. Release of frustrations
 11. Just for fun/laughs
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Construction of the Sabotage Reasons Questionnaire. Similar to the way that construction of the methods questionnaire was developed, we instructed the same former employee to make a list of reasons justifying sabotage that employees gave when they heard of an act of employee sabotage. Since sabotage by others was a subject of frequent discussion among employees, non-supervisory personnel often discussed among themselves the reasons why sabotage occurred and why it was justifiable. It was from these discussions that the list was constructed. When all of the reasons were listed, a total of eleven reasons for justifying sabotage were found. These reasons are listed in Table 2.

Procedure. Subjects were asked to complete a packet by a fellow non-supervisory worker which contained the sabotage method and sabotage reason questionnaires and were told that they should not write their names or any identifying information on the questionnaires. Each subject was also advised that the questionnaires were being used for an industrial psychology seminar and that management would not have access to the responses.

Subjects were asked to rate each of the sabotage methods on a scale of 1 (not at all justifiable) to 7 (totally justifiable). Subjects were asked to rate each of the sabotage methods on a scale of 1 (not at all justifiable) to 7 (totally justifiable). Subjects were also instructed to rate the sabotage reasons questionnaire on a scale of 1 (not at all justifiable) to 7 (totally justifiable).

Subjects' responses were summed across responses on the potential reasons for sabotage; median splits were performed on the potential reasons for sabotage ($Md = 25.5$), thereby creating two groups: high reason accepters and low reason accepters. Subjects' responses to each of the sabotage methods within each of the four categories were also summed, thereby creating four general indices of general sabotage methods.

RESULTS

Sabotage Methods/Reasons for Sabotage. Table 3 summarizes the results of t tests (using reason acceptance as a blocked variable), overall means,

TABLE 3
Summary Table for Sabotage Methods

<i>Sabotage Method</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>High Reason Accepters</i>	<i>Low Reason Accepters</i>	<i>t</i>
1.	3.03	1.81	3.63	2.42	-2.16*
2.	3.71	1.87	3.84	3.58	- .43
3.	1.11	.65	1.21	1.00	-1.00
4.	1.37	1.13	1.47	1.26	- .57
5.	1.68	1.21	1.26	2.11	-2.26*
6.	1.25	.63	1.26	1.21	- .25
7.	1.45	1.20	1.84	1.05	-2.12*
8.	3.24	2.06	2.95	3.53	.86
9.	1.97	1.76	2.61	1.37	-2.27*
10.	3.18	1.66	3.89	2.47	-2.89
11.	2.97	2.01	3.68	2.26	-2.19*
12.	1.76	1.44	2.21	1.32	-1.99*
13.	2.08	1.50	2.47	1.68	-1.67
14.	1.55	1.22	1.95	1.16	-2.08*
15.	1.45	1.27	1.89	1.00	-2.30*
16.	1.60	1.38	1.89	1.28	-1.37
17.	2.05	1.63	2.53	1.56	-1.87
18.	4.68	2.35	5.05	4.32	- .97
19.	2.03	1.57	2.74	1.32	-3.10**
20.	1.82	1.43	2.53	1.11	-3.50***
21.	2.94	1.76	3.53	2.33	-2.16
22.	1.29	1.09	1.53	1.05	-1.36
23.	1.34	1.17	1.68	1.00	-1.86
24.	1.97	1.40	2.32	1.63	-1.53
25.	1.08	.49	1.16	1.00	-1.00
26.	4.26	2.17	4.10	4.42	.44
27.	2.84	1.69	3.42	2.26	-2.23*
28.	1.50	1.27	2.00	1.00	-2.62*
29.	1.50	1.43	1.95	1.05	-2.02*

* $p < .04$ ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$

Degrees of freedom ranged between 35 and 36

TABLE 4
Summary Table for Sabotage Reasons

<i>Reason</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>
1. Self-defense	3.37	2.51
2. Revenge	2.21	1.77
3. An eye for an eye	2.50	2.08
4. Protect oneself from the boss/company	2.97	2.41
5. To protect friends or family from boss/company	3.16	2.45
6. To protect one's job	3.47	2.39
7. The foreman/company deserved it	2.40	1.88
8. The foreman/company hurt me previously	2.32	1.85
9. No one was hurt by the action	2.30	2.08
10. Release of frustrations	1.97	1.53
11. Just for fun/laughs	1.29	1.04

and standard deviations for each of the 29 sabotage methods listed in the questionnaire.

Similarly, Table 4 summarizes the overall means and standard deviations for each of the 11 reasons for sabotage.

General Indices. A priori t tests were performed on each of the four sabotage indices. As predicted, high reason accepters ($\bar{M} = 25$) justified production slowdowns more than low reason accepters ($\bar{M} = 18.9$), $t(36) = 2.67$, $p < .01$. Similarly, high reason accepters ($\bar{M} = 19.8$) justified destruction of machinery, premises, or products more than low reason accepters ($\bar{M} = 13$), $t(36) = -2.82$, $p < .01$. Unexpectedly, high reason accepters ($\bar{M} = 15.5$) did not significantly justify dishonesty more than low reason accepters ($\bar{M} = 12.4$), $t(36) = -1.70$, $p < .10$. Finally, high reason accepters ($\bar{M} = 13.5$) justified causing chaos significantly more than low reason accepters ($\bar{M} = 8.8$), $t(36) = -2.99$, $p < .01$.

DISCUSSION

While the predicted differences between high and low reason accepters were in the predicted direction for three of the four indices, high and low accepters did not differ in their justification of dishonesty as a means of sabotaging the company. Thus, while reason acceptance seems to affect justification of other sabotage forms, the same cannot be concluded for dishonesty. A number of explanations might be used to understand this finding. First, dishonesty can be seen as comparatively different from the

other sabotage forms. While work slowdowns, destruction, and causing chaos are geared at hurting the company, they do not represent a potential personal monetary gain for the employee; on the other hand, dishonesty does allow for such potential gains. As such, dishonesty may be a qualitatively different form of sabotage whose existence is justified under distinct conditions (e.g. "low" salary, "poor" benefits).

Second, and following from this point, it may be that because dishonesty can reap potential gains for the employee, it would not serve the same instrumental or demonstrative function. Management might discount the sabotage as a self-serving venture by a thief whose purpose was only the reward inherent in dishonesty, thereby eliminating the underlying symbolic process.

Third, it may be that dishonesty is not justifiable because it poses a threat to an individual's self-esteem; that is, other forms of sabotage may be justifiable because there is no financial gain, hence no threat to one's self-esteem is possible because the act is not a selfish one. Essentially, it seems less admissible for an employee to justify to himself that he received something via dishonesty: only "bad" people are dishonest. Finally, in a related vein, the wording of the items listed in the dishonesty may have raised the questions of the social desirability in the minds of the subjects. Certainly, the non-business social world has often justified cases of civil disobedience, for example, which have led to chaos. As such, the issues of social desirability associated with such acts may not be as clear-cut as for acts of dishonesty which are almost universally scorned.

Future Directions. While the data are provocative, the present study provides for a variety of future investigations which should help to clarify the role of self-presentation in sabotage. Specifically, we propose an emphasis on two areas: the relationship between sabotage justifiability and actual sabotage, and the role of individual differences in sabotage propensity.

Sabotage and Sabotage Justifiability. Although the present data reveal a relationship between sabotage justifiability among high and low reason accepters, future studies will need to determine the relationship between justifiability and the *behavioral act* of sabotage. Specifically, future studies will need to determine whether those justifying sabotage actually commit more acts of sabotage against the company. Although it may be difficult to determine this relationship for each employee, pre-tests of employees on their acceptance of reasons for sabotage may later be correlated with intradepartmental incidences of sabotage. Of more interest may be the relationship between justifiability of sabotage and reporting of the saboteur. This is, will employees who highly justify sabotage be less likely to turn over the saboteur to authorities? Discovering this relationship may be as important to the reduction of sabotage as would be

the relationship of sabotage justifiability and actual sabotage, since increased reporting of the saboteur would help immeasurably in alleviating the sabotage problem.

Individual Differences. Inasmuch as the present study investigated sabotage from the perspective of workers in one plant, future investigations will need to ascertain the role of individual differences in sabotage and sabotage justifiability. Researchers should focus on the possibility that individual differences in traits such as hostility (cf. Buss and Durkee, 1957), Machiavellianism (cf. Christie and Geis, 1970), or dishonesty (Ter-ris, 1985) may predispose employees to use sabotage as a technique to solve their organizational problems.

Conclusions. Since this is a preliminary investigation into an admittedly large problem area for management, the present study has hopefully raised issues for future work. From our perspective, particular importance ought to be placed on developing those investigations which help management to recognize and deter the saboteur and his costly acts, as opposed to studies dealing with the genesis of the problem. While this is undoubtedly a judgment on our part, it seems that with the potential volatility of such people, and the consequences of their deeds, a focus on sabotage recognition and deterrence may help to reduce an organization's risk and accident exposures as well as financial losses.

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