

# Relationship Between Organizational Bullshitting and Employee Job Satisfaction

Subjects: Others

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Bullshitting is a term that has been introduced lately in the literature to describe the practice of communicating with no grounding in truth. Research finds that employees are more likely to be dissatisfied when their organizations have no regard for the truth in making their decisions, and specifically, when their direct supervisor is bullshitting.

Keywords: bullshit ; bullshitting ; job satisfaction ; work environment

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## 1. Introduction

The impact of organizational culture and the work environment on employees is much discussed in the literature (e.g., [Amabile et al. 1996](#); [James and James 1989](#); [Venard et al. 2022](#); [Zimmerman et al. 2019](#)). An interesting element of the work environment that has received attention lately is “bullshitting”, a term that describes the practice of communicating with no grounding in truth ([Ferreira et al. 2022](#); [Frankfurt 2009](#); [McCarthy et al. 2020](#); [Petrocelli et al. 2021](#); [Spicer 2013, 2017](#)). Bullshitting is everywhere in our lives and has become part of our culture around the world ([Frankfurt 2009](#)). Words are thrown right and left without much scrutiny ([Luks 2017](#)). Our daily social interactions are filled with bullshit, whether it is an advertisement of a product that a company is trying to persuade us to buy or a gathering of friends with many jokes and teasing ([Christensen et al. 2019](#)).

For organizations, communication represents a huge part of their routine, as they spend a lot of time in meetings and discussions, sending and responding to emails, preparing and reading reports, as well as other types of communication. As organizations rely more on communications, be it verbal, written, or visual, organizational bullshit has been increasing ([Christensen et al. 2019](#); [Ferreira et al. 2022](#); [Frankfurt 2009](#); [McCarthy et al. 2020](#); [Spicer 2013, 2017, 2020](#)). For example, think of a meeting in which your supervisor is bragging about the performance of his unit without any factual evidence? What about a presentation in which the presenter overwhelms you with colored charts that do not say anything? Or maybe a formal letter from the CEO of your organization that is supposed to explain his/her vision for the organization moving forward, only to find it full of jargon and ambiguous words that do not mean anything? We all, one way or another, face situations like these. This is bullshit.

While bullshitting might decorate an organization's image ([Ferreira et al. 2022](#)), it also negatively affects organizations in several ways. For example, bullshitting could contribute to things such as “...crowding out the primary task of the organization, violating (previously) valued occupational identities, and undermining stakeholder trust”. ([Spicer 2013, p. 655](#)). Bullshitting might also undermine trust and rational thinking within organizations, as well as limit constructive feedback within organizations ([Christensen et al. 2019](#); [Spicer 2013, 2017](#)), which would eventually negatively affect organizational learning ([Argyris 1990](#); [Christensen et al. 2019](#); [Huber 1991](#); [Senge 1990](#)). At the individual level, bullshitting might lead to confrontations among employees and some might actually elect to escape this situation and look for jobs elsewhere ([McCarthy et al. 2020](#)).

While some research has begun to address bullshit and its impact on organizations, very few studies have addressed this issue ([Ferreira et al. 2022](#); [McCarthy et al. 2020](#); [Petrocelli et al. 2021](#)). Specifically, we still do not know much about how bullshitting correlates with employee's behavior in bullshitting organizations. [McCarthy et al. \(2020\)](#) suggests that such employees usually tend to react in four different ways: exit the organization, confront the bullshit, embrace and spread the bullshit, or neglect it. However, to the best of the researchers' knowledge, there is no empirical evidence of the relationship between bullshitting and individual outcomes. Additionally, much of the current research on bullshit focuses on bullshitting in the Western and developed countries, providing political, scientific, and social examples mainly from the US and Europe. Hence, in the current research, the researcher employ theories such as the Job Demand–Resources (JD-R) Theory ([Demerouti et al. 2001](#)), the dispositional theory of job attitude ([Staw et al. 1986](#)), the Leader–Member Exchange theory of leadership ([Dansereau et al. 1973](#); [Dansereau et al. 1975](#); [Graen and Uhl-Bien 1995](#)), and the Motivational

Language Theory (Sullivan 1988) to address those gaps in the bullshit literature by examining the relationship between bullshitting and employee job satisfaction in an emerging country.

## **2. Bullshit in Organizations**

The word “*Bullshit*” might be understood by the majority as vulgar slang that is synonym with “nonsense”. Thus, the verb “*Bullshitting*” is defined as “talking nonsense”. Once considered an offensive and vulgar language, it has been normalized and accepted in mundane language (Christensen et al. 2019). Importantly, it has been commonly used in academic research with a scale developed to measure it (Ferreira et al. 2022).

In organizations, bullshit describes a situation in which communication inside an organization is characterized by no regard for the truth (Ferreira et al. 2022; Frankfurt 2009; McCarthy et al. 2020). Such communications can be written (e.g., letters, emails, and reports), verbal (e.g., conversations, meetings, and interviews), or visual (e.g., charts, diagrams, and videos). It should be noted that bullshitting is different from lying (Frankfurt 2009). While the latter provides incorrect information intentionally, the former communicates without regard for the truth (Frankfurt 2009; McCarthy et al. 2020). In other words, liars care about the truth and try to misrepresent it and hide it intentionally, while bullshitters do not care about whether what they are communicating is true (Christensen et al. 2019; Ferreira et al. 2022; Frankfurt 2009). Bullshitters bullshit mainly to mislead and overwhelm people. They make decisions with no evidence and use ambiguous language full of jargon and glorified phrases to get away with their agenda (Christensen et al. 2019; Kelly 2014). It also should be clear that bullshit does not include fruitful discussions in brainstorming sessions, for example, where employees share unproven ideas, as such practices are common and usually effective in generating innovative ideas.

While bullshitting is not new in organizations, it has reached high levels to a point where scholars have proposed a movement towards evidence-based management (Pfeffer and Sutton 2006), urging managers to base their decisions on proven evidence. Generally, research asserts that bullshit exists in organizations “whenever circumstances require someone to talk without knowing what he is talking about”. (Frankfurt 2009, p. 63). In other words, managers and employees might feel obligated to talk about topics that they usually do not have enough information about, resulting in bullshitting (Petrocelli 2018). Bullshitting is also present in organizations because of the “...increasing propensity to let subjective positions and self-presentations play a bigger role in contemporary organizations”. (Christensen et al. 2019). Research suggests that the social environment of an organization that normalizes bullshitting and allows it to pass with ease also encourages bullshitters to bullshit (Petrocelli 2018). Technological advances have also contributed to bullshitting. Think about a software that allows managers to present deceiving charts and graphs to mislead their audience or social media platforms that provide bullshitters with a tool to spread their bullshit. (Pundir et al. 2021).

It is unfortunate that organizations of all sizes and in different industries accept bullshit as the norm (Spicer 2017, 2020) without attempting to deal with it, knowing that it has negative impacts on organizations, as discussed earlier. One of the main reasons why bullshit is ignored or accepted is that people tend to compare it to lying, which evaluates bullshit lightly (Petrocelli 2018). In the next section, the researcher move on to the individual level and discuss how bullshitting impacts not only organizations, but also employees.

## **3. Bullshitting and Job Satisfaction**

Research asserts that work environment affects employee job satisfaction (e.g., Judge et al. 2000; Langer et al. 2019; Venard et al. 2022; Wright and Davis 2003), which is defined as “a pleasurable or positive emotional state resulting from the appraisal of one’s job or job experiences” (Locke 1976, p. 1304). Put differently, job satisfaction describes an employee’s evaluation of factors related to their job, such as pay, supervisor, co-worker, and working condition, among others (Brendel et al. 2023; Kim et al. 2023; Öksüz et al. 2023; Rayton and Yalabik 2014; Steel et al. 2019). Given that human capital is the main source of organizational competitive advantage (Hatch and Dyer 2004; Pfeffer 1995), it is crucial to study the factors that directly affect employees. The current research examines the relationship between organizational bullshit and employee job satisfaction.

Several theories have been employed to study employee job satisfaction. Among these theories is the JD-R Theory (Demerouti et al. 2001), which assumes that jobs have two high-order characteristics: job demands, which refer to the physical, psychological, social, and organizational aspects of the job that requires cognitive and emotional effort, and job resources, which refer to the job-related characteristics such as autonomy, social support, relationship with the supervisor, and performance feedback (Bakker and Demerouti 2007; Demerouti et al. 2001; Schaufeli and Bakker 2004). The theory is a leading framework in studying employee-related characteristics such as job satisfaction and wellbeing (Bauer et al. 2014). Research has long applied the JD-R theory to predict employee-related outcomes such as organizational

commitment, exhaustion, work engagement, and learning, among others ([Demerouti et al. 2001](#); [Doi 2005](#); [Halbesleben and Buckley 2004](#); [Salanova et al. 2005](#); [Taris and Feij 2004](#)). When it comes to bullshitting in organizations, I argue that bullshitting is a vital factor that affects the organizational and social environments (job demands) in which employees work. For example, research asserts that employees' wellbeing and satisfaction are negatively affected when there is much ambiguity in their work environment (e.g., [Keller 1975](#)), such as an expected situation when communications are not clear in the workplace about one's role or individual targets. One could also argue that a bullshitting environment could be emotionally stressing and demanding, especially for those with personalities that prefer direct, clear, and evidenced-based communications (more on this below).

[Ferreira et al. \(2022\)](#) suggests that bullshit communication is a product of three factors: no regard for the truth, bullshitting by bosses, and bullshitting language. The first factor describes situations in which decision-makers rely heavily on their own experience and assumptions rather than on the data and proven evidence ([Pfeffer and Sutton 2006](#)). Such situations not only affect the quality of the decision but might also indicate that employees are not competent and do not know what they are doing ([Ferreira et al. 2022](#)). The second factor of bullshit, bosses' bullshit, relates to the bullshit practiced by employees' direct supervisors. While organizations with no regard for the truth are dangerous and problematic, it might affect employees who are close to the upper echelon, as lower-level employees might not be exposed to such bullshit in the higher levels of the organizational hierarchy. In contrast, bosses' bullshit affects all employees, as all are supervised by a manager in one way or another. Thus, although an employee might not be affected by an organization's lack of regard for the truth, one could predict that any bullshit that comes from a direct supervisor might impact the employee. The third factor, bullshit language, refers to the use of jargon and misleading acronyms in communication within the organization. Overall, this research proposes that when communication within the organization is filled with information and presentations that have no regard for the truth, when bosses interact with their subordinates without evidence, and when the overall language inside the organization is characterized by ambiguous and misleading statements, it is a sign of an organization that is full of bullshit.

Another theoretical umbrella the paper builds on is the dispositional approach to job attitude. In organizational research, contrary to other theories that emphasize the role of situations in shaping employee job attitude (e.g., the job enrichment and social information-processing theories), the dispositional approach highlights the relationship between personalities and individual-level factors on one hand and job attitude on the other hand ([Staw et al. 1986](#)). Building on this approach, previous studies have found that employee job satisfaction can be predicted by personality (e.g., [Cucina et al. 2018](#); [Furnham et al. 1999](#); [Judge et al. 2000](#); [Judge and Larsen 2001](#); [Staw and Cohen-Charash 2005](#); [Steel et al. 2019](#)). This stream of research builds on a century-old proposition by [Parsons \(1909\)](#), in which success at work is proposed to be a result of one's understanding of their values, interests, and capabilities, as well as the understanding of the work itself and the required skills and conditions to succeed. Put differently, employees, based on their personalities, tend to assess the fit between their values and capabilities on the one hand, and the values and requirements of their jobs and organizations on the other hand. Studies have found that misfits in values between organizations and employees usually lead to lower levels of job satisfaction (e.g., [Gabriel et al. 2014](#); [Wheeler et al. 2007](#)). Thus, when it comes to organizational bullshit, one can argue that bullshitting at some point would reach a level where it is unacceptable and annoying for employees, as they tend to prefer open and honest communication ([Cooper-Thomas et al. 2018](#)). Such dishonesty can eventually lead to the disengagement and exit of employees with personalities that value honesty and straightforwardness ([McCarthy et al. 2020](#); [Rusbult et al. 1988](#); [Turnley and Feldman 1999](#)).

Such an impact is expected to be even more significant when the bullshitter is the direct boss of an employee. Research posits that leadership has a direct impact on employee job satisfaction (e.g., [Braun et al. 2013](#); [Cansoy 2019](#); [Janssen and Van Yperen 2004](#)). It is paramount to have a solid relationship between bosses and their subordinates as it relates directly to employees' ability to not only perform their job ([Zhu et al. 2022](#)), but also to establish trust and make employees more comfortable at their job ([Kelloway et al. 2012](#)). In particular, the way leaders communicate with subordinates is key to establishing trust and respect between them. In fact, leadership communication has been widely recognized as an important factor that affects employee attitudes and behaviors (e.g., [Men et al. 2022](#); [Zhu et al. 2022](#)), given supervisory day-to-day interactions and communication with employees ([Van Quaquebeke and Felps 2018](#)). Specifically, research asserts that one-to-one contact between supervisors and subordinates is related to employee self-efficacy ([Mellor et al. 2007](#)).

This argument is better explained using the Leader–Member Exchange theory ([Dansereau et al. 1973, 1975](#); [Graen and Uhl-Bien 1995](#); [Richter-Killenberg and Volmer 2022](#)), which is a unique leadership theory that focuses on the dyadic relationships between a leader and his/her subordinates, rather than focusing on leadership as a function of the personal characteristics of the leader ([Gerstner and Day 1997](#)). According to the theory, high-quality dyadic exchange between leaders and their subordinates leads to trust and respect, which increases the level of employee job satisfaction ([Toscano](#)

et al. 2022). By contrast, low-quality dyadic exchanges between leaders and subordinates tend to dissatisfy employees (Janssen and Van Yperen 2004). Thus, bullshitting by supervisors are argued to have a negative relationship with employee job satisfaction, as employees are expected to lose trust and respect for their bullshitting leaders.

Additionally, the Motivation Language Theory (Sullivan 1988) is another intriguing theory that supports the bullshit–job satisfaction argument. The theory emphasizes the crucial role of the language spoken by leaders and their impact on subordinate-related outcomes (Mayfield et al. 1995). For example, several researchers have found relationships between leaders' oral communication and employee outcomes such as goal attainment, employee engagement, decision making, and career progression (e.g., Conger 1991; Fairhurst 1993; Lamude et al. 1988; Mayfield and Mayfield 2016; Tao et al. 2022). Specifically, employee job satisfaction has been found to be directly influenced by the language leaders use in their communication (Mayfield et al. 2021; Rowley Mayfield et al. 1998; Nguyen et al. 2021).

Given the impact of language on employees' attitudes, as conceptualized by the Motivational Language Theory (Sullivan 1988), research has found that employees tend to assess the language organizations use in their communication and that the way organizations communicate with employees has a direct effect on job satisfaction (Giri and Kumar 2010; Pincus 1986). For example, a recent study on health workers found that employees who communicate in a shared language have higher levels of job satisfaction than those who communicate in different languages (Stühlinger et al. 2019). Research also affirms that employees are more satisfied with communications in which the language used is honest, direct, and transparent (Cooper-Thomas et al. 2018).

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