

## Chapter Six

# Counterproductive Behavior in Organizations

**E**mployees typically behave in ways that contribute positively to the goals of their employing organizations. That is, employees perform their jobs to the best of their abilities, occasionally go above and beyond the call of duty, and may even come up with innovative and creative ideas on their own. Employees tend to engage in such productive behaviors because organizations are selective in their hiring and, as will be shown in subsequent chapters, often set up motivational and leadership systems that encourage such forms of behavior.

However, employees may also, at times, engage in behaviors that run counter to organizational goals. Common forms of counterproductive behavior in organizations include ineffective job performance, absenteeism, turnover, and unsafe behavior. Other forms of counterproductive behavior include antisocial behaviors such as theft, violence, substance use, and sexual harassment. Although less common, these forms of behavior may be quite destructive and ultimately costly to organizations.

This chapter examines counterproductive behavior in organizations. In covering these forms of behavior, the emphasis will be on understanding both the causes and the consequences of such behaviors. A related objective is to explore ways in which an organization can eliminate these behaviors or at least keep them at a level that is not too destructive to the goals of the organization.

### DEFINING COUNTERPRODUCTIVE BEHAVIOR

Most readers have probably received poor service at a restaurant, or experienced the inconvenience of a long wait, brought about by poor scheduling or staffing shortages, at a doctor's office. While obviously annoying, these experiences represent relatively mild

forms of counterproductive behavior in organizations. More dramatic forms of counterproductive behavior, such as criminal activity or violence, may have very negative consequences and become very newsworthy events. For example, when a government employee commits espionage, national security may be compromised, and media attention surrounding such a crime is typically intense. Likewise, when a disgruntled employee enters an organization and fatally assaults several coworkers, lives are permanently altered, and the event receives considerable media attention.

The specific examples in the preceding paragraph are all different, but each represents a form of *counterproductive behavior* in organizations. For the purposes of this chapter, *counterproductive behavior* will be defined as behavior that explicitly runs counter to the goals of an organization. This definition is based on a number of underlying assumptions. For example, it is assumed that organizations have multiple goals and objectives. A major goal of private organizations is profitability, but such organizations may have many others as well. These may include a high level of customer service, a harmonious work environment, and the reputation of being socially responsible. According to the previous definition, if an employee engages in behaviors that make it more difficult for an organization to achieve any of its goals, the employee is engaging in counterproductive behavior.

The previous definition also makes no assumptions regarding the motives underlying counterproductive behavior, although much of the research on counterproductive behavior is focused on this very issue (Schat & Kelloway, 2005). A retail employee who steals merchandise from his or her employer is obviously doing it intentionally and, most likely, for personal gain. On the

other hand, it is entirely possible for an employee to engage in counterproductive behavior without intending to. For example, an employee who is poorly trained or who lacks job-related abilities may want very badly to perform well, but may not accomplish that goal.

Finally, the previous definition makes no assumption as to the causes underlying counterproductive behavior. Recall from Chapter 4 that productive behaviors likely result from a complex interaction between characteristics of individuals and characteristics of the environment. This same perspective is adopted in the examination of counterproductive behavior. In fact, one can make a strong argument for a person-by-environment interaction for literally all forms of counterproductive behavior (Fox & Spector, 1999). When an employee performs his or her job poorly, this may be due to limited ability, but may also be partially caused by poor task design. Likewise, when an employee engages in a violent act at work, this may be due to deep-seated psychiatric problems, but may also be exacerbated by an authoritarian organizational climate.

Based on the definition provided, there are undoubtedly many forms of counterproductive behaviors in organizations. In organizational psychology, however, only a handful of these behaviors have received empirical scrutiny. The most commonly studied counterproductive behaviors have been ineffective job performance, absenteeism, turnover, and accidents. More recently, organizational researchers have begun to examine several other forms of counterproductive behavior that are less common, but are potentially more devastating to organizations. These include theft, violence, substance use, and sexual harassment.

## INEFFECTIVE JOB PERFORMANCE

Most people who go to work each day want to do their jobs well, and for good reason. High levels of performance are often associated with positive tangible outcomes such as merit increases, cash bonuses, promotional opportunities, and the like. Performing well may also lead to intangible rewards such as praise and admiration from others, and a heightened sense of personal accomplishment. Despite all the logical reasons for performing well, some employees do not perform up to par. Ineffective job performance is often a difficult issue for organizations, for a number of reasons. For example, in many cases, it may be difficult for an organization to detect ineffective performance in the first place. Once detected, it is often challenging to diagnose the cause of the performance problem. Finally, organizations often struggle with the issue of how to respond to, and prevent, instances of ineffective performance. Each of these issues is discussed in the following paragraphs.

### Detection of Ineffective Performance

Recall from Chapter 4 that models of job performance propose that behaviors constituting job performance may be categorized into a number of different types, such as core tasks that are specific to the job, and more general or peripheral tasks. Ideally, all organizations would have in place performance measurement systems that would allow assessment of the many behaviors that constitute the performance domain. If this were the case, a routine performance appraisal would be quite useful in the detection of ineffective performance. Unfortunately, most performance measurement systems

typically provide information about the impact of employee behavior, but far less information about the behaviors themselves.

Performance-related data that organizations typically collect may be classified into four different types: *personnel data*, *production data*, *subjective evaluations*, and more recently *electronic performance monitoring*. Personnel data include items such as absences, sick days, tardiness, disciplinary actions, and safety violations. Some of these, as will be shown later in the chapter, are counterproductive behaviors for which personnel data provide a direct measure. Personnel data may also, at times, provide useful information in the diagnosis of the cause of performance problems. For example, an employee who is absent or late may have a substance abuse problem that ultimately negatively impacts his or her performance.

Production data provide an organization with useful information about tangible outcomes associated with job performance. The most commonly used form of production data is probably sales commissions, although production indexes may be used in many other settings. As a means of detecting ineffective job performance, there are clearly advantages to using production data. Such data provide organizations with an objective performance metric that an employee cannot dispute (i.e., numbers don't lie). Such data are also typically not costly to obtain because they are often collected for multiple purposes.

A potential drawback with production data is that they often provide an overly simplistic view of employee performance. A salesperson may exhibit reduced sales commissions in a particular year, yet these numerical data provide an organization with little information about the source of the performance problem. Also, in the first author's experience, reliance on production

## COMMENT 6.1

## THE IMPORTANCE OF PERFORMANCE FEEDBACK

WITHOUT A DOUBT, one of the least favorite tasks of managers and supervisors is conducting annual or semiannual performance reviews. This is particularly true when an employee is performing poorly. Ironically, though, performance reviews have the potential to provide the greatest benefit to those employees who are not performing well—provided they are done well.

Research on conducting performance reviews has shown that there are several attributes of an effective performance review. One of the most important of these, particularly for a poorly performing employee, is that the tone of the review should be constructive rather than punitive. An employee who is performing poorly is likely to respond much more favorably to a supervisor who says, "What can I do to help you improve?" than to a supervisor who lists all of the things that the employee is doing poorly.

It is also very important that the feedback provided to an employee is specific and is focused on behavior. Telling a poorly performing employee that he or she has a "bad

attitude" doesn't provide that employee with much diagnostic information. On the other hand, telling the same individual that he or she often does not thank customers after completing a transaction is much more specific and, more importantly, is something the individual can change.

Finally, research has also shown that performance reviews should be conducted separately from salary reviews. When the performance and salary reviews are conducted together (which is common), most people tend to focus disproportionately on the size of their salary increase. Unfortunately, what ends up receiving much less attention in comparison is performance feedback and, if necessary, suggestions for improvement. This is particularly unfortunate for employees performing poorly; these individuals stand to benefit the most from focusing on performance.

Source: H. H. Meyer, E. Kay, and J. R. P. French, Jr. (1965). Split roles in performance appraisal. *Harvard Business Review*, 43, 123–129.

data may lead supervisors to adopt a somewhat callous attitude toward subordinates who are experiencing a performance problem. The response to reduced sales commissions may be: "Increase your sales, or else!"

By far the most common form of employee performance data comes from subjective appraisals. Most typically, an employee's immediate supervisor(s) completes some performance appraisal instrument on an annual or semiannual basis. In considering subjective appraisals, it is important to keep in mind that what is actually being measured in most cases is the result of employees' behavior, or, more specifically, employee

effectiveness (Pritchard, 1992). To be sure, some organizations may invest the time and effort required to develop and implement elegant behaviorally based performance appraisal systems. Most organizations, however, still tend to rely on performance appraisal instruments that utilize rather general dimensions of employee performance and engage in rather minimal efforts to train raters (Cascio, 1998).

As a method of detecting ineffective performance, subjective appraisals have certain advantages when compared to either personnel data or production indexes. Compared to production data, a supervisor's thoughtful

consideration of an employee's performance may provide considerably greater insight into the root causes of ineffective employee performance. Also, if appraisals are performed well and the information is regularly transmitted to employees (e.g., Meyer, Kay, & French, 1965), they may prevent ineffective performance before it occurs (see Comment 6.1).

Despite these potential advantages, subjective appraisals are often of marginal value in the detection of ineffective performance. Because many organizations still utilize performance appraisal instruments that assess very global performance dimensions, such ratings may often fail to reveal performance problems. Also, despite the considerable technical advances in performance appraisal methodology over the past 25 years (e.g., Borman, 1991; Murphy & Cleveland, 1990), many organizations still administer performance appraisals very poorly or simply ignore them.

A final method of detecting ineffective performance, and in some cases other forms of counterproductive behavior, is *electronic performance monitoring* (Zweig & Webster, 2002). It is common, for example, for employees in customer service call centers to be monitored by supervisors when they interact with customers on the telephone. Research has shown that electronic performance monitoring can be an effective method of detecting ineffective performance, particularly when employees know in advance that it is taking place (Hovorka-Mead, Ross, Whipple, & Renchin, 2002). However, it has also been shown that many employees view it as an invasion of privacy (Aiello & Kolb, 1995).

### Causes of Ineffective Performance

Let's assume for the moment that an instance of ineffective performance has been detected. A salesperson has failed to meet his or her

quota for 3 consecutive months; a clerical employee repeatedly makes mistakes on his word-processing assignments; a university professor repeatedly receives negative assessments of his or her teaching performance. In each of these cases, all we know is that the employee is not performing up to par. What is often *not* known is why the employee is performing poorly.

In many organizational settings, the underlying causes of ineffective performance are often unclear. As a result, the cause(s) of ineffective performance must be determined by attributional processes; that is, after observing some instance of ineffective performance, a supervisor must make some judgment about the cause(s) of this behavior. *Attribution theory* suggests that people make use of several pieces of information when determining the causes of another person's behavior (Kelley, 1973). For instance, people examine the consistency of behavior over time, between different settings or contexts, and in comparison to others. Thus, if an instance of poor performance were encountered, a supervisor would ask questions such as: Is the poor performance consistent with this employee's past performance? Does he/she perform poorly on all aspects of the job or just certain ones? Is the level of performance poor compared to other employees?

If a supervisor is able to find answers to these three questions, he or she is likely to make some determination as to the cause of the ineffective performance. Generally speaking, if the ineffective performance is consistent over time and settings, and is seen as poor in relation to others, a logical conclusion would be that the ineffective performance was due to a lack of ability or motivation, both of which are internal to the employee. In contrast, if the ineffective performance is not a consistent pattern over

time and settings, and is not seen as being poor in relations to others, a supervisor would likely conclude that the ineffective performance was due to factors external to the individual (e.g., poor task design, interruptions from others).

Unfortunately the attribution process is not always accurate. Furthermore, people may in fact hold certain biases in assessing the causes of others' behavior. The best known of these is termed the *fundamental attribution error* (Ross, 1977) and refers to the bias toward attributing the causes of others' behavior to internal, as opposed to external, causes. Although the reasons for this bias are complex, the basic issue is that, in most situations, people are more distinctive than the situations they are in. Thus, when any behavior occurs, there is a tendency to focus on personal (as opposed to situational) factors being the cause.

There is evidence that the fundamental attribution error may impact diagnoses of ineffective performance, although several factors may influence it. For example, in a laboratory study, Mitchell and Kalb (1982) found that supervisors who lacked experience in the tasks their subordinates performed tended to attribute poor performance to internal causes. In contrast, those with more task experience made more external attributions. In another laboratory study, Ilgen, Mitchell, and Frederickson (1981) found that supervisors who were highly interdependent with subordinates tended to make more external attributions for ineffective performance; supervisors who saw little interdependence tended to make more internal attributions.

Understanding the attributional processes involved in determining the causes of ineffective performance is important because such attributions may have a strong impact on supervisory responses to ineffective per-

formance. For example, if a supervisor sees the cause of the ineffective performance as being poor task design, his or her response may be quite different than if it is seen as due to a lack of effort. Ilgen et al. (1981) found that supervisors responded to ineffective performance more favorably when they attributed it to external (versus internal) causes. It has also been shown that supervisors react more favorably to ineffective performance when they perceive it as being caused by a lack of ability, as opposed to a lack of motivation (Podsakoff, 1982). This is presumably because employees have less control of the former than the latter.

For the moment, we'll take as a given that determining the cause(s) of ineffective performance often requires the use of imperfect attributional processes. What then are the most common causes of ineffective performance? To answer this question, it is useful again to think back to Chapter 4 and the discussion of the causes of productive behaviors, such as job performance. Based on this vast literature, it can be concluded that ineffective performance may be due to employees' inability to perform their jobs effectively (e.g., lack of ability, lack of skills, poor training), lack of willingness to perform effectively (e.g., unwilling to put forth or sustain effort, putting efforts in the wrong direction), or aspects of the environment that prevent the employee from performing well (e.g., poor task design, ineffective co-workers).

In examining each of these causes of ineffective performance, there are tangible organizational activities that may contribute to them. Despite the advances that have been made in employee selection (Guion & Highhouse, 2004), selection is still an imperfect process. As a result *selection errors* may result in organizations hiring individuals who lack either the skills or the abilities

necessary to perform their jobs. Selection errors may also occur when employees possess the requisite skills and abilities necessary to perform their jobs, but simply do not fit well into the culture of the organization (Kristof, 1996).

How can organizations avoid selection errors? At the risk of sounding overly simplistic, organizations simply need to put a systematic effort into employee hiring. While many organizations clearly do this, many others do not. More to the point, many organizations simply fail to gather and utilize data that would help them make more informed hiring decisions. Although a complete exploration of the employee selection is clearly beyond the scope of this chapter (see Guion & Highhouse, 2004, for complete coverage), selection errors may often be avoided by the systematic use of tests, personal history information, and background/reference checks.

Another way in which organizations may contribute to ineffective performance is through *inadequate socialization and training*. As was pointed out in Chapter 3, when employees first enter an organization, they typically need to be trained on specific job-related skills, as well as more general information about the culture of the organization (Goldstein & Ford, 2002). Employees who receive either inadequate training or no training at all may be set up for failure when they enter an organization. In such an environment, only those who have very high levels of ability and self-confidence may survive.

With respect to socialization, organizations may make a number of errors that could lead to poor performance among employees. Specifically, failing to provide new employees with information about important aspects of the culture of the organization may lead to failure. For example, if the

culture of an organization is such that timely completion of work is highly valued, a new employee may inadvertently perform poorly by not completing work on time. Typically, this type of situation is resolved when the new employee realizes the value of timeliness.

A more problematic situation occurs when new employees receive *mixed signals* about the culture of the organization and how this relates to performance expectations. Both authors have found that this is a typical problem for faculty at medium-size regional universities. Because such institutions do offer a limited number of doctoral programs, some faculty and administrators feel that an organizational culture that places a strong emphasis on research is appropriate. On the other hand, many institutions this size have historically placed a strong emphasis on undergraduate education, so many others feel that the culture should place a strong emphasis on teaching excellence and availability to undergraduate students. Although such differences in philosophy may sometimes lead to insightful dialogue, they often prove to be very confusing to new faculty members who must decide where to focus their efforts.

Finally, in some cases, employees may want to perform well but are prevented from doing so because of constraints in the environment. For example, an employee's job tasks may be designed in a way that makes it difficult to perform well, or in a way that is incompatible with the organization's reward systems (Campion & Berger, 1990; Campion & Thayer, 1985). For example, if it is crucial for an employee to make independent judgments in order to perform effectively, it would not make sense to design the job in a way that denies this employee decision-making authority. Even if tasks are designed properly, other constraining forces



in the work environment may hinder performance (Peters & O'Connor, 1980; Spector & Jex, 1998). For example, employees may be unable to perform well because of interruptions from others, poor tools or equipment, and perhaps poor information from others.

### Management of Ineffective Performance

Given the multitude of factors that may contribute to ineffective performance, managers need to investigate its causes when it occurs. Thus, as a first step toward investigating ineffective performance, managers should talk to the employee. Perhaps more importantly, such discussions should involve considerable listening on the part of the manager (Meyer et al., 1965). Depending on the outcome of the conversation with the poorly performing employee, a number of corrective actions may be utilized by the manager to improve performance. In some cases, it may be possible to improve an employee's performance through relatively straightforward *training interventions*. For example, if an employee is consistently producing poor-quality written reports, a logical way to improve performance might involve some form of training aimed at improving his or her written communication skills.

In other cases, the underlying cause(s) of ineffective performance may not be as obvious. Let's say, for example, that a real estate salesperson is failing to produce acceptable commissions. For a sales manager to accurately diagnose the cause of this particular performance problem, he or she may need to actually observe the employee trying to close a sale. This type of activity may be thought of as *on-the-job coaching* of the employee. Coaching is a form of training, but it is much more extensive and time consum-

ing. The manager who provides coaching to employees is engaged in a form of active learning that may involve examining all aspects of the employee's performance-related behavior. Another option in dealing with ineffective performance is the use of *counseling and employee assistance programs (EAPs)* (Cooper, Dewe, & O'Driscoll, 2003). Employees do not *compartmentalize* their lives; thus, problems outside of work may manifest themselves in the workplace. Marital or financial problems may have a negative impact on the performance of even highly competent employees. If this option is considered, however, managers must be very careful how they approach the employee. Even if such efforts are well intentioned, the suggestion that employees need to seek such services may be met with considerable resistance on the part of an employee. Despite these potential caveats, providing counseling or EAPs may be very useful ways of dealing with some instances of ineffective performance.

As is evident by now, organizations have a variety of ways of dealing with ineffective performance when it occurs. Ideally, though, organizations usually prefer to prevent ineffective performance before it occurs. A first step toward preventing ineffective performance is the utilization of scientifically based selection programs. There is considerable evidence that some variables—most notably, general cognitive ability, conscientiousness, and prior experience—predict performance across a variety of job types (Barrick & Mount, 1991; Schmitt, 2004; Schmidt & Hunter, 1998). Thus, organizations that employ rigorous selection programs increase the probability that employees enter with the skills, abilities, and personality traits necessary to perform their jobs.

Once employees enter an organization, steps must also be taken to nurture employees'

skills and abilities so they are translated into performance (Colarelli et al., 1987). As stated earlier, one way of addressing this issue is through proper training and socialization. The manner in which organizations conduct initial training and socialization varies widely (see Chapter 3). Organizations that take the time to properly socialize and train new employees clearly stand a good chance of avoiding performance problems in the future.

A final step toward the prevention of performance problems is having a systematic performance measurement and feedback system. This helps to keep employees on track with respect to performance, and serves to communicate performance expectations. In many cases, ineffective performance may simply be due to the fact that employees do not know what the organization (or their immediate supervisor) expects. Regular performance evaluations also signal to employees that performance matters.

## EMPLOYEE ABSENTEEISM

The second form of counterproductive behavior examined in this chapter is employee absenteeism. Recall from the previous chapter that absenteeism was discussed, but only as a potential consequence of job dissatisfaction and low organizational commitment. In this section, we approach absenteeism from a somewhat broader perspective and examine other predictors, as well as various ways in which organizations can reduce the incidence of employee absenteeism.

### Defining and Measuring Absenteeism

Absenteeism appears to be a relatively simple variable to define and measure; that is, *absenteeism* can simply be defined as not showing up for work. However, defining absenteeism

in such a general way is problematic when the goal is to predict and control absenteeism. In the absenteeism literature, researchers typically make some distinctions with respect to the types of absences. The most common distinction is between excused and unexcused absences. Excused absences would be those due to reasons that the organization deems as acceptable (e.g., illness, caring for a sick child). In contrast, unexcused absences would be those that are either due to unacceptable reasons (e.g., decided to go shopping) or cases in which an employee has not followed proper procedures (e.g., neglected to call in to one's supervisor). Making distinctions between types of absences is important because different types may be caused by different variables. To underscore this point, Kohler and Mathieu (1993) examined a number of predictors of seven different absence criterion measures among a sample of urban bus drivers and found different predictors for different criteria. For example, they found that absences due to nonwork obligations (e.g., caring for children, transportation problems) were most strongly related to variables such as dissatisfaction with extrinsic features of the job, role conflict, role ambiguity, and feelings of somatic tension. On the other hand, absences due to stress reactions (e.g., illnesses) were most strongly related to dissatisfaction with both internal and external features of the job, feelings of fatigue, and gender (women were absent more frequently).

To measure absenteeism, the most common indexes are *time lost measures* and *frequency measures* (Hammer & Landau, 1981). When a time lost measure is used, absenteeism is represented by the number of days or hours that an employee is absent for a given period of time. As an example, if an employee is absent from work 3 days

over a 3-month period, that employee's level of absenteeism would be 3 days or 24 hours (assuming that each workday is 8 hours).

If a frequency metric is used, absenteeism represents the number of absence occurrences for a given period of time. An occurrence can range from 1 day to several weeks. In the previous example, if each of the 3 days that the employee is absent occurs in a different month, the time lost and the frequency metrics would be identical. However, if the employee was absent for 3 consecutive days, the absence would be recorded as only one occurrence if a frequency metric is used.

Although both time lost and frequency measures of absenteeism have been used in studies of absenteeism (e.g., Hackett & Guion, 1985; Steel & Rentsch, 1995), time lost measures are generally more desirable because they exhibit greater variability than frequency measures (Hammer & Landau, 1981). Thus, it is generally more difficult to predict absenteeism when using frequency-based absenteeism measures.

Another important issue in the measurement of absenteeism is the time frame used to aggregate absences. In terms of aggregation periods, studies can be found in which absenteeism data are aggregated over periods ranging from as short as 1 month to as long as 4 years (Hammer & Landau, 1981; Steel & Rentsch, 1995). The primary advantage to using longer aggregation periods is that the distributions of such measures are not as likely to be skewed as those from shorter periods. Given that absenteeism is a low base-rate event (as are many other forms of counterproductive behavior) even for relatively long periods of time, aggregating absenteeism data over a very short period of time may pose researchers with some vexing statistical problems.

## Predictors of Absenteeism

For many years organizational psychologists have focused on affective predictors of absenteeism, such as job satisfaction and organizational commitment. As was shown in Chapter 5, however, meta-analytic reviews have generally found the relationship between affect and absenteeism to be rather weak (e.g., Hackett, 1989; Hackett & Guion, 1985; Mathieu & Zajac, 1990). These findings can be attributed at least in part to the issues discussed previously (e.g., choice of absenteeism measures, aggregation periods). They also may be due to the fact that there may be other variables that predict absenteeism better. In this section, we go beyond affective variables and review other predictors that have been explored in the absenteeism literature.

As a first step toward understanding absenteeism, it is useful to consider employee attendance decisions in a general sense. According to Steers and Rhodes (1978), two general factors—the ability to attend and the desire to attend—determine employees' attendance. Ability to attend is determined largely by an employee's health but may also be due to factors such as nonwork responsibilities, reliability of transportation, and weather. The desire to attend work is determined to a large extent by employees' feelings about the organization or job, but may also be due to other factors. For example, an employee may like his or her job but choose not to attend because of some more attractive nonwork alternative. For example, an employee may choose to be absent on a particular day in order to go holiday shopping.

Based on this view of absenteeism, three nonaffective variables have been shown to stand out as consistent predictors of absenteeism. For example, it has been consistently

found that women tend to be absent from work more frequently than men (Farrell & Stamm, 1988; Steel & Rentsch, 1995; VandenHeuvel & Wooden, 1995). Based on Steers and Rhodes (1978), this is probably because women are more likely than men to be in situations that constrain their ability to attend work. For example, it has been shown that, even in dual-career situations, women tend to assume primary responsibility for child-care and household chores (Hochschild, 1989).

Another important nonaffective predictor of absenteeism is the nature of an organization's *absence-control policies*. Some organizations are quite lenient; they choose not to even record employees' absences. At the other extreme, some organizations require extensive documentation for the reason for absences, and respond with strict disciplinary actions when employees are absent frequently. As one might expect, the frequency of absenteeism tends to be lower in organizations that have more strict absence-control policies (Farrell & Stamm, 1988; Kohler & Mathieu, 1993; Majchrzak, 1987). It is important to note, however, that simply having a strict absence-control policy in place may not always reduce absenteeism. For example, Majchrzak (1987) found that in Marine Corps units where the absence-control policy had been communicated clearly and applied consistently, unauthorized absences were reduced significantly over a 6-month period. In contrast, absences remained constant in units where no policy existed, or where the policy was not communicated clearly.

Another important nonaffective predictor of absenteeism is *absence culture*. The term was originally defined by Chadwick-Jones, Nicholson, and Brown (1982) as "the beliefs and practices influencing the totality of absence frequency and duration—as they cur-

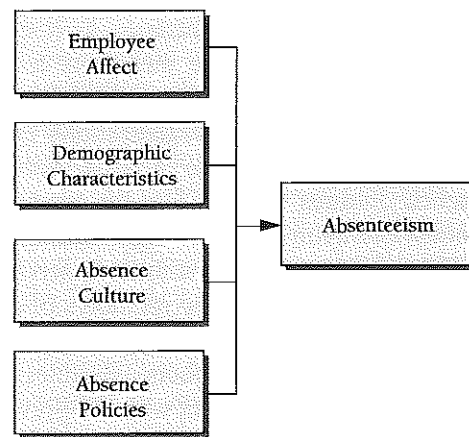
rently occur within an employee group or organization" (p. 7). There are two things to note about this definition. First, absence culture is a group- or organization-level construct, and thus must be measured at the appropriate level (e.g., group or organization). Second, because organizations typically consist of multiple groups, several absence cultures may in fact be operating simultaneously in the same organization.

Given that normative standards serve as an important guide for the members of any social unit (Hackman, 1992), one would expect that group members' absenteeism would tend to be consistent with the prevailing absence culture. Unfortunately, to date, there has been relatively little empirical investigation of the absence culture construct or of its effects on absenteeism. One exception is a study in which Mathieu and Kohler (1990) examined the impact of group-level absence rates on individual absences. Using a sample of transit operators employed by a large public transit authority, they found that the level of absences in the various garages in which these employees worked predicted absenteeism using a time-lost measure.

A more direct test of the effect of absence culture comes from a study conducted by Martocchio (1994). Unlike the method in the Mathieu and Kohler (1990) study, Martocchio actually assessed absence culture within groups and investigated the impact of this variable on absenteeism. Based on a sample of clerical employees at a Fortune 500 company, Martocchio found that group-level beliefs regarding absenteeism (e.g., absence culture) were predictive of individual employees' absenteeism, measured in terms of the frequency of paid absences. Individuals' beliefs regarding absenteeism predicted only the frequency of unpaid absences. Figure 6.1 summarizes all of the

**FIGURE 6.1**

Summary of the Major Determinants of Employee Absenteeism



factors that have been shown to influence employee absenteeism.

Overall, the research on absenteeism provides fairly clear guidance for organizations wishing to reduce absenteeism. More specifically, organizations need to have in place absence-control policies that are fair, yet at the same time, discourage employees from unnecessary absences. It is also important for organizations to foster a positive absence culture in the organization as a whole, as well as within work groups. Finally, in some cases organizations can prevent absences by helping employees overcome barriers to attendance. Benefits such as sick child care, flexible schedules, and telecommuting may allow employees to reduce absences that are due to nonwork demands.

### Cross-Cultural Differences in Absenteeism

Like most phenomena studied by organizational psychologists, absenteeism has been examined largely in samples of either American or Western European employees. Despite calls for cross-cultural absenteeism research (e.g., Martocchio & Harrison,

1993), few studies have examined cross-cultural differences in absenteeism. One notable exception is a study by Johns and Xie (1998). Employees from the People's Republic of China and from Canada were compared on a number of aspects of absenteeism, such as perceptions of their own absence levels in comparison to those in their work groups; manager-subordinate agreement on absence norms; and legitimacy of reasons for absenteeism.

The most notable cross-cultural difference found in this study was that Chinese employees were more likely than Canadians to generate estimates of their own absenteeism that favored their work group. This suggests that absence norms may be a more powerful predictor of absenteeism among the Chinese. Along these same lines, it was found that Chinese managers were in greater agreement with their work groups on absence norms than were Canadian managers. Finally, with respect to reasons for absence, the Canadians were less likely than the Chinese to see domestic reasons as a legitimate excuse for absences. In contrast, the Chinese were less likely than the Canadians to see illness, stress, and depression as legitimate excuses.

Johns and Xie (1998) attributed their findings to well-documented differences in values between Western and Eastern societies. Most notably, in Eastern societies, the strong collectivist orientation suggests that social norms regarding such behavior may have a more powerful effect than they do in Western societies. This may also explain why those in collectivist societies may see absences due to family reasons as more legitimate than do those in more individualistic societies. In contrast, in Eastern societies, norms surrounding the expression of feelings may prohibit absenteeism based on poor mental or physical health. The

results of this study are provocative; they suggest that cross-cultural absenteeism research may be a fruitful area of research in the future.

## EMPLOYEE TURNOVER

Like absenteeism, employee turnover was discussed in the previous chapter as a correlate of job satisfaction and organizational commitment. Furthermore, compared to absenteeism, employee affect has been shown to be a stronger predictor of turnover decisions. Therefore, the focus in this section will be to examine employee turnover from a more macro perspective (e.g., the impact of turnover on organizations), explore nonaffective predictors of turnover, and, finally, explore a recent model that has applied behavioral decision theory to the study of turnover.

### The Impact of Turnover on Organizations

Like many variables explored in this book, employee turnover has been studied from a very micro perspective; that is, researchers have sought to more fully understand the individual-level decision-making processes that characterize turnover decisions. Organizational researchers have generally paid much less attention to examining the impact of employee turnover on organizational effectiveness. Abelson and Baysinger (1984), distinguished between *optimal turnover* and *dysfunctional turnover*. Optimal turnover occurs when poorly performing employees decide to leave an organization. These authors also suggest that, in some cases, turnover may be optimal even if a high-performing employee leaves because the cost of retaining that individual may be too high. This situation occurs frequently in professional sports when play-

ers from teams in relatively small markets become free agents. These teams want to retain their star players, but they simply do not have the financial resources to do so.

Like optimal turnover, dysfunctional turnover can be viewed in multiple ways. If an organization's rate of turnover is extremely high, this can be very dysfunctional. High rates of turnover translate into increased costs associated with constantly having to recruit and train new employees. A consistently high rate of turnover may also serve to tarnish the image of the organization (see Highhouse and Hoffman, 2001) and thus make it even harder to attract new employees. In most industries, there are organizations that have a reputation of "chewing up and spitting out" employees.

Turnover is also dysfunctional if there is a consistent pattern whereby good employees leave. As stated previously, in some cases the cost of retaining high-performing employees may be prohibitive; thus, some level of turnover among high-performing employees is inevitable. Unfortunately, if this is a consistent pattern then an organization will be losing valuable human capital.

Another way to view the impact of turnover on organizations is to distinguish between what might be termed *avoidable turnover* and *unavoidable turnover*. Turnover is avoidable when there are steps that an organization could have taken to prevent it. As argued previously, this is somewhat subjective and involves weighing the costs of losing employees versus the benefits of retention. Unavoidable turnover, on the other hand, is illustrated by situations in which an organization clearly cannot prevent an employee from leaving. This may occur when an employee's spouse is transferred to another location, or when there is simply no need for the employee's services. In other cases, turnover may be unavoidable simply

because an employee decides to withdraw from the labor force.

### Nonffective Predictors of Turnover

One nonaffective predictor that has actually received a fair amount of attention in the turnover literature is performance. Organizations obviously prefer that turnover is highest among lower-performing employees. Furthermore, empirical evidence has supported such a negative relation between performance and turnover (e.g., McEvoy & Cascio, 1987; Williams & Livingstone, 1994), although this relation is not strong. The relative weakness of the performance-turnover relation may be due to a number of factors. As Hulin (1991) has argued quite forcefully, turnover is a low base-rate event, and studies employing typical parametric statistical procedures may underestimate the true relation between turnover and other variables. This becomes even more problematic when performance is examined as a predictor of turnover because, due to a variety of factors, the variability in job performance measures may be severely restricted (e.g., Jex, 1998; Johns, 1991).

A more substantive variable that may impact the performance-turnover relation is organizational reward contingencies. One of the assumptions underlying the prediction that turnover is negatively related to performance is that low performers will receive fewer organizational rewards than high performers. Because of this, low-performing employees are likely to become dissatisfied and seek employment elsewhere. Given that organizations vary widely in the extent to which they reward on the basis of performance, this would certainly account for the weak performance-turnover relation. Furthermore, in one meta-analysis of the performance-turnover relation (Williams & Livingstone, 1994), the average correlation

between performance and turnover was strongest in studies conducted in organizations where rewards were tied to performance.

A third factor that may impact the performance-turnover relation is the form of this relationship. As in most studies in organizational psychology, it has been assumed that the performance-turnover relation is linear. Jackofsky (1984), however, has argued that the performance-turnover relation may in fact be *curvilinear* and best described by a U-shaped function. This means that turnover should be highest among employees performing at very low and at very high levels. Jackofsky (1984) argued that, in most cases, very low performers are not going to be rewarded very well and thus may become dissatisfied. As performance moves toward medium levels, employees are probably being rewarded at a level that keeps them from becoming extremely dissatisfied, and thus seeking alternative employment. As performance increases, however, there is a greater likelihood that employees will have attractive alternative employment opportunities and thus may be more likely to leave an organization. This may even be true in organizations that reward on the basis of performance. Employees who are extremely talented may be receiving top salaries in a particular organization, but organizations simply may not be able to match what another organization is willing to pay in order to lure the employee away.

To date, Jackofsky's (1984) curvilinear hypothesis has not received a great deal of empirical investigation, although it has received some support. Schwab (1991) investigated the relation between performance and turnover among faculty at a large university, and found a negative relation between performance (measured by number of publications) and turnover among

nontenured faculty. In contrast, among tenured faculty, there was a positive relation between performance and turnover.

The negative relation between performance and turnover among nontenured faculty is likely due to the fact that low-performing individuals, knowing they probably will not receive tenure, leave before they are denied tenure. Among tenured faculty, those performing at low levels are more likely to remain with the organization because their jobs are secure, and they are likely to have relatively few alternatives. High-performing tenured faculty, in contrast, often have very attractive employment alternatives so they may be lured away by other universities.

In addition to Schwab's (1991) study, more direct tests of the curvilinear hypothesis have supported this relationship (e.g., Trevor, Gerhart, & Boudreau, 1997), as did the previously mentioned meta-analysis conducted by Williams and Livingstone (1994). Trevor et al. also found that this curvilinear relation is more pronounced if salary growth is low and rates of promotion are high. When salary growth is low, both low and high performers have the most to gain by seeking other employment. When rates of promotion are high, low performers are likely to be dissatisfied and look elsewhere. High performers who are promoted rapidly are going to be more marketable in the external labor market than high performers who are promoted more slowly.

A second nonaffective variable that may impact turnover is the external labor market. Most people do not leave their present job until they have secured other employment, so turnover should be highest when job opportunities are plentiful. Steel and Griffeth (1989), for example, performed a meta-analysis and found the corrected correlation between perceived employment opportuni-

ties and turnover to be positive but relatively modest ( $r = .13$ ). Gerhart (1990), however, found that a more objective index of employment opportunities (regional unemployment rates) predicted turnover better than perceptions of employment opportunities. The fact that these findings are at odds suggests that the objective state of the external labor market, and individuals' perceptions of opportunities, may operate independently to influence turnover decisions.

This issue was addressed in a somewhat different way by Steel (1996) in a sample of U.S. Air Force personnel. He examined the impact of objective labor market indexes and perceptions of employment opportunities on reenlistment decisions. The results of this study showed that reenlistment decisions could be predicted with a combination of perceptual and objective labor market variables. Turnover was highest among individuals who reported that they had strong regional living preferences and believed there were a large number of employment alternatives. The one objective labor market measure that predicted reenlistment was the historical retention rate for each Air Force occupational specialty in the study. Those in occupational specialties with high retention rates were more likely to re-enlist.

Although Steel's study is quite useful in combining perceptual and objective data, its generalizability may be limited by its use of a military sample. In civilian organizations, employees are not bound to a certain number of years of service; thus, they may leave the organization at any time. One might surmise that labor market conditions (both objective and perceptive) might be more salient for military personnel because they have a window of opportunity; they can choose between staying and leaving the organization. As with any finding, generalizability is ultimately an empirical issue. Thus,



these findings must be replicated in a non-military setting.

A final variable—job tenure—may directly and indirectly impact turnover. As discussed in the previous chapter, longer job tenure is associated with higher levels of continuance commitment and, hence, lower levels of turnover (Meyer & Allen, 1997). Job tenure may also have an indirect effect because turnover may be influenced by different variables at different points in an employee's job tenure. Dickter, Roznowski, and Harrison (1996) examined both job satisfaction and cognitive ability as predictors of quit rates in a longitudinal study conducted over a period of approximately 4 years. Their findings indicated that the impact of job satisfaction on turnover is strongest when employees have been on the job about 1 year, and this effect gradually decreases over time. It was also found that a high level of cognitive ability was associated with decreased risk of turnover. However, as with job satisfaction, this relationship diminished over time.

The results of Dickter et al. (1996) suggest that job satisfaction may drive turnover decisions early in an employee's job tenure. However, as an employee builds up job tenure, the costs associated with leaving one's employer become greater. Also, as job tenure increases, it is likely that a greater number of nonwork factors will come into play when one is deciding whether to leave one's present employer. For example, employees with children in school may not wish to change jobs if doing so involves a geographical move.

The fact that cognitive ability has less impact on turnover over time is also significant. Cognitive ability is associated with job performance (e.g., Schmidt & Hunter, 1998), and this supports the notion that the relation between performance and turnover is nonlinear only among those who have

been employed a relatively short period of time. Performance may not be related to turnover among longer-tenured employees for a number of reasons. For example, the level of performance among those who stay in an organization may be restricted, and this may prevent performance from being related to turnover among this group. This essentially represents a *self-selection effect*.

It is also possible that true performance differences exist among longer-tenured employees, but other factors are at work. For example, when employees have been employed in an organization for several years, managers may be reluctant to highlight their performance differences. It is also possible that, over time, the experience employees gain may compensate for what they may be lacking in cognitive ability.

### **An Alternative Turnover Model of the Turnover Process**

As discussed in the previous chapter, Mobley's (1977) model of the turnover process, and variants of it, have dominated the turnover literature for the past 25 years. Although there are some differences among these models, they all basically have two things in common. First, all propose that employee affect (mainly job satisfaction) plays a key role in the turnover process. That is, a lack of satisfaction or feelings of low commitment set in motion the cognitive processes that may eventually lead an employee to quit his or her job. Second, because of the emphasis on employee affect, an implicit assumption in most turnover models is that employee turnover is usually due to willingness to get away from the present job rather than attraction to other alternatives.

According to Lee and Mitchell (1994), the dominant process models in the turnover

literature have been useful, but they have also ignored some basic properties of human decision-making processes. Based largely on behavioral decision theory (Beach, 1993), they developed the *Unfolding Model* of the turnover process. A basic assumption of the Unfolding Model is that people generally do not evaluate their job or job situation unless forced to do so. Lee and Mitchell refer to events that force people to evaluate their jobs as "shocks to the system." Shocks may be negative events (e.g., a major layoff), but they are not necessarily. A shock is simply any event that forces an employee to take stock and review his or her job situation (Holtom, Mitchell, Lee, & Interrieden, 2005). For example, a promotion may also be a shock to the system, according to Lee and Mitchell's definition.

Once an employee experiences a shock to the system, a number of outcomes are possible. One possibility is that the employee may have a preprogrammed response to the shock, based on previous experience. For example, an employee may have previously worked in a company that was acquired by a competitor, and decided it was best to leave the company. If this same event happens in later years, the employee may not even have to think about what to do; he or she may simply implement a preprogrammed response.

Where a preprogrammed response does not exist, an employee would engage in *controlled cognitive processing* and consciously evaluate whether the shock that has occurred can be resolved by staying employed in the current organization. To illustrate this point, Lee and Mitchell (1994) provide the example of a woman who becomes pregnant unexpectedly (a shock to the system). Assuming that this has not happened before, this woman would probably not have a preprogrammed response (quit or stay), and

most likely would not have a specific job alternative. Rather, she would be forced to evaluate her attachments to both the organization and her career. Such an evaluation may also involve deciding whether continuing to work in the organization is consistent with her image of motherhood.

A third type of situation involves a shock to the system without a preprogrammed response, but with the presence of specific job alternatives. An example of this situation would be where an employee receives an unsolicited job offer from another organization. This job offer may be considered a shock to the system because it forces the employee to think consciously about his or her job situation and to compare it to the outside job offer. Note that, in this type of situation, the employee may be reasonably happy in his or her job but may ultimately leave because another job is simply better.

A final alternative is where there is no shock to the system but turnover is *affect initiated*—that is, over time, an employee may simply become dissatisfied with his or her job for a variety of reasons. For example, the job may change in ways that are no longer appealing to the employee. Alternatively, the employee may undergo a change in his or her values or preferences, and may no longer see the job as satisfying. According to Lee and Mitchell (1994), once a person is dissatisfied, this may lead to a sequence of events, including reduced organizational commitment, more job search activities, greater ease of movement, stronger intentions to quit, and a higher probability of employee turnover. This proposed sequence of events is very consistent with dominant affect-based models of the turnover process (e.g., Mobley, 1977).

Lee and Mitchell's (1994) Unfolding Model is relatively new, so it has not received nearly the empirical scrutiny of more

traditional affect-based process models. However, empirical tests of this model have met with some success (Lee, Mitchell, Holtom, McDaniel, & Hill, 1999; Lee, Mitchell, Wise, & Fireman, 1996). As with any model, it is likely that further refinements will be made as more empirical tests are conducted. Nevertheless, the Unfolding Model does represent an important development in turnover research.

In recent years a major concept that has come out of work on the Unfolding Model of turnover is that of *embeddedness*. Mitchell et al. (2001) define embeddedness as the combination of forces (in one's both personal and professional life) that keep a person from changing his or her employer. A person would be highly embedded in a professional sense, for example, if he or she had a large social role in his or her current organization. A high level of embeddedness in one's personal life may result from one's family situation and perhaps a high level of community involvement. Research has in fact shown that embeddedness is a fairly good predictor of voluntary turnover, as well as behaviors (e.g., Lee, Mitchell, Sablinski, Burton, & Holtom, 2004).

## Accidents

Accidents represent a very serious and costly form of counterproductive behavior in organizations. For example, in the United States alone, the most recent estimate is that there were 4.7 million recorded workplace injuries in the United States in 2002, and in this same year 5,524 of these were fatal (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2004). Furthermore, it has been estimated that accidents cost organizations \$145 billion per year (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2002)). Another indication of the importance of safety in the workplace is that many

nations have enacted legislation dealing with safety standards, and many have also created government agencies to oversee compliance with these standards. In the United States, for example, the Occupational Safety and Health Act provides employers with a set of legal standards regarding safety in the workplace. This legislation also led to the creation of the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) to enforce employment safety and health standards.

## Determinants of Accidents

As one might imagine, accidents are more common in certain types of work settings than in others. Employees who work in agriculture and mining are particularly at risk, while those who work in sales or service industries are least likely to be involved in accidents (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2004). Work settings, however, do not completely explain variation in accident rates. Because of this, considerable effort over the years has been devoted to gaining a better understanding of other causes of accidents, and, perhaps more importantly, how organizations can take proactive steps to make the workplace safer.

Research on accidents has a long history, although much of it has not been conducted by organizational psychologists. For example, industrial engineers have focused on the design of machinery and the physical layout of the workplace as possible causes of workplace accidents (Wickens & Hollands, 2000). Within psychology, early accident research focused largely on developing a profile of "the accident-prone employee." This research identified a number of characteristics that were occasionally correlated with accidents, but researchers were never able to consistently document a cluster of characteristics

that were consistently associated with accident prevalence (see Hansen, 1988). This is not surprising, given that much of this research was largely devoid of any theoretical underpinnings.

Research examining personal characteristics associated with accidents has become more theoretically grounded over the years, and, in fact, has yielded some useful results. For example, Hansen (1989) studied predictors of accident frequency among employees of a large petrochemical processing company and found that accidents were most frequent among employees who were younger, highly distractible, and who scored high on a measure of general social maladjustment. More recently, Frone (2003) found similar personality traits to predict accidents among high-school-age employees, so there does appear to be some consistency in characteristics that lead to accidents.

In recent years, there has been a noticeable shift in accident research, from investigating characteristics of individual employees, to characteristics of group and organizational climates. According to Griffin and Neal (2000), *safety climate* consists of employees' perceptions of the policies, procedures, and practices relating to safety in an organization. Others (e.g., Zohar, 2003) view safety climate as more of an aspect of an organization's culture with regard to safety. Regardless of the definition, two fundamental questions are at the core of safety climate: Is employee safety considered a high-level organizational priority? And does this get communicated to employees through formal organizational policies and managerial actions?

In the past 10 years a considerable amount of research has been done on the relationship between safety climate and both accident frequency as well as behaviors associated with safety. Clarke (2006) recent-

ly summarized much of this literature in a meta-analysis of 32 studies and found that a positive safety climate was associated with lower accident involvement, compliance with safety procedures, and participation in more proactive safety behaviors. The strongest of these relationships was between positive safety climate and participation in proactive safety behaviors.

This recent shift in emphasis toward safety climate is important for a number of reasons. At a general level, it offers a productive departure from a long history of accident research that has clung rather dogmatically to individual characteristics as predictors. This is not to say that individual characteristics have no bearing on accidents; for example, the results of Hansen's (1989) and Frone's work would suggest otherwise. However, given the considerable effort that has gone into the investigation of individual predictors, the actual insight gained about accidents and accident prevention has been rather disappointing.

Safety climate research also represents a recognition that employees work in a social context and that this impacts safety (Neal & Griffin, 2006). Thus, information communicated via the social environment may have a powerful impact on employees' behaviors. Granted, research on safety climate is still in its infancy and a number of issues are still to be resolved (e.g., Does safety climate operate equally at the group and organizational levels? How does safety climate develop in the first place? Do personal characteristics of employees interact with safety climate to impact actual safety behavior?). Despite these unresolved issues, safety climate represents a fruitful new approach that may yield considerable insight into safety and ultimately provide organizations with concrete guidance on reducing the incidence of workplace accidents.

## Accident Prevention

Given the research reviewed, an organization can take one of four different approaches to the prevention of accidents. First, based on human factors and industrial engineering research, an organization may choose to focus on physical factors. For example, an effort might be made to design equipment so it is easier to use and make other features of the physical environment safer for employees. This approach can be quite useful, given that some accidents can be prevented by better equipment design. It may also be quite costly, depending on the modifications that may be needed within the physical environment.

A second approach, and one that is used frequently, is *behavior modification* (see Chapter 9) that encourages employees to use safe work practices and discourages employees from being unsafe. This involves the use of reinforcements for safe behaviors and the use of sanctions or punishment for unsafe behaviors. An organization, for example, might offer cash bonuses to employees who have the best safety records in a particular year. This is an approach that has been used successfully in a number of organizations (e.g., Komaki, Barwick, & Scott, 1978; Komaki, Heinzmann, & Lawson, 1980). On the negative side, organizations may take disciplinary actions (e.g., written reprimands, suspensions) against employees who engage in unsafe work practices or who consistently have poor safety records.

A third approach is to use selection as a means of screening out employees who are likely to be unsafe. If unsafe behavior is viewed as part of a general pattern of deviant antisocial behavior, then organizations may have a number of useful predictors at their disposal. For example, based on Hansen's (1989) study, described earlier, general social maladjustment and distractibility would

appear to be two predictors that organizations could use to screen out employees who may have poor safety records. On the positive side, organizations may consider the use of personality traits such as conscientiousness in selection as a positive step toward improving safety (Barrick & Mount, 1991; Tett, Jackson, & Rothstein, 1991).

A final method of preventing accidents is by changing or improving the safety climate of the organization. Some possible ways of doing this might be publicizing the importance of safety within the organization and making supervisors and managers accountable for the safety records within their units (Hofmann & Morgeson, 1999; Zohar, 2000). Over time, as more research on the safety climate construct is conducted, organizations will likely be provided more guidance in their efforts to improve safety climate.

## LESS COMMON FORMS OF COUNTERPRODUCTIVE BEHAVIOR

Up to this point in the chapter, we have covered the most common forms of counterproductive behavior in organizations. Most organizations must deal frequently with ineffective employee performance, absenteeism, turnover, and employee safety issues. These, however, are clearly not the only forms of counterproductive behavior in organizations. In this concluding section, we explore less common forms of counterproductive behavior in organizations. These include employee theft, workplace violence and mistreatment, substance use, and sexual harassment.

### Employee Theft

*Employee theft* may be defined simply as employees taking things from the organization

that don't belong to them. Based on this definition, theft could range from relatively minor acts, such as employees taking inexpensive office supplies, to more serious forms, such as a government employee's theft of classified documents. Most of the literature on employee theft has focused on what could be described as *moderate* forms of employee theft: retail store employees stealing merchandise, or convenience store employees skimming money from the cash register.

Research on the frequency of employee theft has shown that it does occur with enough frequency to be problematic for many organizations. For example, it has been estimated that approximately 35% of employees steal from their employers, and the financial losses from theft are in the billions (Kuhn, 1988). In a more recent estimate, it was found that 52% of people reported taking property from work without permission, and 25% reported falsifying receipts to get reimbursements for money they didn't spend (Bennett & Robinson, 2000). Unfortunately, because the costs of employee theft are often passed on to consumers, the impact of this behavior reaches far beyond the organizations in which it occurs.

A review of the literature on the causes of employee theft reveals two clear themes. The first, and by far the strongest, is that theft is due largely to characteristics of the individual (e.g., Collins & Schmidt, 1993; Jones & Boye, 1992; Ones et al., 1993). Furthermore, publishers of integrity tests have conducted much of this research. This is potentially problematic because such organizations may lack the motivation to rigorously evaluate the predictive capabilities of their products. Despite these concerns, Ones et al.'s (1993) meta-analysis showed fairly clearly that integrity tests do in fact predict employees' theft. Because most integrity tests

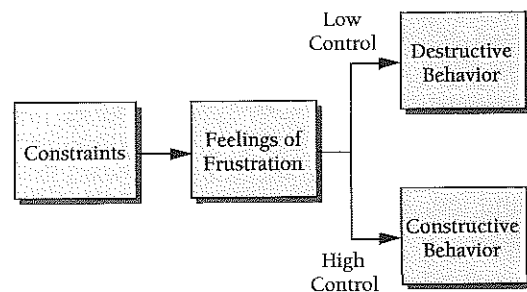
measure the personality trait of conscientiousness, this suggests that the employees most likely to steal have a low level of this trait; in other words, they are unreliable, lack self-discipline, and have a disregard for rules and authority. Other than conscientiousness, it has also been shown that theft tends to be higher among employees who have very tolerant attitudes toward theft and other forms of dishonesty (Jones & Boye, 1992).

A second theme in the literature is that theft is impacted by conditions in the environment such as unfair or frustrating organizational conditions. Greenberg (1990), for example, conducted a study in which a pay-reduction policy was implemented in two separate locations of a large manufacturing organization. In one of these locations, little explanation was provided as to why the policy was being implemented, and this explanation was given with little remorse or sensitivity. In the other location, however, management provided employees with a more extensive explanation as to why the policy had to be adopted, and did so with much greater sensitivity. This study showed that the rate of theft in the plant where the inadequate explanation was provided was significantly higher compared to the plant given the adequate explanation and a third plant where no pay reduction had been implemented.

According to Spector (1997b), employee theft is also caused by organizational conditions that induce frustration among employees. Frustration is essentially the emotion evoked in people when things in the environment are blocking their goals. In organizations, these barriers may include environmental constraints such as poor equipment, unnecessary rules and regulations, and other policies that end up wasting employees' time. Thus, Spector has proposed

**FIGURE 6.2**

**Spector's Model of the Impact of Locus of Control on the Relationship between Frustration and Counterproductive Behavior**



Source: P. E. Spector. (2000). *Industrial and organizational psychology: Research and practice* (2nd ed.). New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc. Reprinted by permission.

that employees may vent their frustrations toward the organization through acts of theft and sabotage. As with many relations, the link between frustration and theft may be influenced by other factors. For example, employees who are frustrated may feel like stealing but do not act on such impulses either because they have no opportunity or they are afraid of the consequences of such behavior. According to Spector, one variable that may moderate the relation between frustration and theft is employees' *locus of control*. Locus of control represents beliefs regarding the control people have over reinforcements in their lives (Rotter, 1966). A person described as having an internal locus of control generally believes that he or she has control over reinforcements. In contrast, an external locus of control is associated with the belief that one has little control over reinforcements.

The potential moderating effect of locus of control on the relation between frustration and theft is depicted in Figure 6.2. As can be seen, this model proposes that frustration is most likely to lead to destructive behaviors such as theft among employees who have an

external locus of control. Those with an external locus of control tend to respond to frustration through theft and other forms of destructive behavior because they do not believe that frustrating organizational conditions can be changed through more constructive means. In contrast, those with an internal locus of control are more likely to believe that they are able to change frustrating organizational conditions constructively. These individuals, for example, may choose to exert their influence through participative management practices or labor-management committees. Spector's (1997b) hypothesis has received some empirical scrutiny and in general has been supported (Chen & Spector, 1992; Spector & O'Connell, 1994; Storms & Spector, 1987).

### Workplace Violence and Mistreatment

Like employee theft, workplace violence is a relatively infrequent event. However, in recent years, there has been an alarming increase in the number of violent incidents in the workplace. For example, it has recently been estimated that in the United States nearly two million people may experience physical attacks in the workplace each year (Barling, 1996). Even more alarming is the fact that homicides are the second leading cause of job-related deaths (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 1999). In addition to overt violence, many employees experience other forms of mistreatment in the workplace such as rudeness, verbal abuse, and social exclusion. Both workplace violence and more general mistreatment are covered in the following.

**Workplace Violence and Generalized Mistreatment.** Like other phenomena that either have been or will be covered in

this book, what is considered workplace violence is quite broad. For the purposes of this chapter, *workplace violence* is defined as physical acts of aggression by members of an organization, carried out in organizational settings. Notice that no attempt is made to specify or restrict the target of the aggression. For example, a violent act could be directed at (or instigated by) a fellow employee, one's supervisor, or even a customer. Since most research on workplace violence and aggression has focused on the violent acts of employees toward other employees (see Schat & Kelloway, 2005 for a review), the focus in this section will be on violent acts committed by employees toward other employees. However, it has been shown that clients and customers also commit many of the violent and antisocial acts against employees in organizations (e.g., Bussing & Hoge, 2004).

To explain violent acts on the part of employees, there have generally been three foci in the literature: (1) the physical environment; (2) characteristics of the individual; and (3) the organizational environment. If the focus is on the physical environment, we are able to draw on the social-psychological literature that has linked aggression to violent cues in the environment, as well as factors that induce frustration (Worchel, Cooper, Goethals, & Olson, 2000). Considerable research has also linked stress-related symptoms to monotonous machine-paced work (e.g., Broadbent, 1985). Unfortunately, neither of these characteristics has been linked to workplace violence.

Given that little empirical research has examined the link between the physical environment and workplace violence, we can only speculate that environment may play a role. However, it is interesting to note that some of the most highly publicized acts of violence on the part of employees have taken

place in work environments that many would consider somewhat noxious. In the U.S. Postal Service, for example, much of the work is highly monotonous and paced by the speed of machines. Factories and other manufacturing facilities are often noisy and hot. This link is obviously pure speculation, but over time, as more data are collected about violent incidents, it may be possible to assess more clearly the contribution of the physical environment.

A second focus in the workplace violence literature is identification of the characteristics of those who may be predisposed to violent acts. Given that workplace violence is a low base-rate event, this is obviously not an easy task. Nevertheless, research has shown that certain personal characteristics may indicate heightened risk of violence. Day and Catano (2006) summarized this literature and concluded that the primary predictors of violent behavior tend to be past history of violent behavior, alcohol and drug abuse, lack of conscientiousness, low agreeableness, and low emotional stability. There has also been evidence that individuals who are high on hostility may be predisposed to aggressive behavior in the workplace (Judge, Scott, & Ilies, 2006).

A third focus of workplace violence research has viewed the organizational environment as a possible factor precipitating violent acts. Much of what can be said here mirrors the previous section on theft. Organizations that treat employees unfairly and ignore their frustrations may be at greater risk for violence than organizations that emphasize fairness and support (Greenberg, 1990; Spector, 1997b). It has also been shown recently that leaders who are very passive and unwilling to take action may allow antisocial and aggressive behaviors to occur in their work groups (Skogstad, Einarsen, Torsheim, Aasland, & Hetland,



2007). These could potentially escalate the level of physical violence.

In considering the research on the organizational environment, it must be remembered that, even in the worst organizational environments, very few employees engage in acts of violence. Thus, a negative organizational environment will probably not have a strong main effect on the incidence of workplace violence. Rather, the best way to think of the contribution of the organizational environment is in combination with personal factors. For example, a person who is prone to aggression and violence may take out his or her frustrations through violent acts if treated in an unfair or arbitrary manner by the organization.

**Generalized Mistreatment.** While workplace violence is clearly an important form of counterproductive behavior in organizations, we also know that physical violence does not occur frequently in organizations. On the other hand, it is far more common for employees to experience rudeness, verbal attacks, invasions of their privacy, and in some cases even malicious attempts to sabotage their performance.

In organizational psychology such behaviors have received a variety of labels, including workplace incivility, bullying, mobbing, social undermining, and workplace deviance (see Bowling & Beehr, 2006). While we do not view all of these as being the same, we also believe that these all have a great deal in common and therefore discuss them collectively under the label of *generalized mistreatment*.

What do we know about generalized mistreatment in organizations? Bowling and Beehr (2006) conducted a meta-analysis on consequences of many forms of generalized workplace mistreatment that included 90 samples. One clear finding from this

study is that people react to mistreatment in a variety of negative ways, including increased depression and anxiety and decreased job satisfaction. The findings also indicated that individuals who experience high levels of mistreatment report higher levels of physical symptoms and may be absent from work more frequently.

While the effects of mistreatment are pretty clear, less research has addressed its causes. Nevertheless, it has been shown that leaders or supervisors may play a key role in whether this type of behavior occurs (Skogstad et al., 2007). Individuals who are hostile, feel they are treated unfairly by their organization, are dissatisfied, and who feel emotionally exhausted may be more likely to lash out at others (Blau & Andersson, 2005; Judge et al., 2006). These findings, though limited in scope, suggest that the way organizations treat employees is clearly a major contributing factor. Of course it has also been suggested (see Andersson & Pearson, 1999) that mistreatment in the workplace is merely a symptom of a general trend toward lower levels of civility and decorum on society in general (Comment 6.2).

### Substance Use

According to Frone (2006), approximately 14% of the U.S. work force (17.7 million workers) reports some use of illicit drugs, and approximately 3% (3.9 million) report using on the job. Use of alcohol, which is obviously legal, is undoubtedly much higher. These numbers represent a serious concern for organizations because employees who use alcohol and illicit drugs may be absent from work more frequently and may be more likely than nonusers to engage in a variety of other counterproductive behaviors (Frone, 2004). We also know that substance use is related, either directly or indirectly, to

### COMMENT 6.2

#### INCIVILITY ON TELEVISION

IN THEIR 1999 review, Andersson and Pearson (1999) both defined what is meant by workplace incivility and developed a model to explain why it occurs and how it might escalate into more serious forms of aggression. Essentially, *workplace incivility* was defined as "low intensity deviant behavior with ambiguous intent to harm the target, in violation of workplace norms for mutual respect. Uncivil behaviors are characteristically rude, discourteous, displaying a lack of respect for others." (p. 1)

While there are a multitude of factors within the workplace that may lead to incivility, Andersson and Pearson also suggest that this is a reflection of a more general societal trend. Nowhere is this more apparent than on television. In the highly popular show "American Idol," for example, contestants are not only eliminated from the competition, but they are also frequently humiliated and made fun of by the judges. Other reality TV shows often

highlight arguments and even physical confrontations among the contestants.

Why has there been such a rise in the phenomenon of "incivility as entertainment"? The most obvious answer is that people seem to enjoy it. Television programming is driven largely by viewer ratings, so as long as people watch programs that highlight uncivil behavior networks will continue to put them on. Perhaps out of concern for the effect of such programs on children (or simply because these programs will get boring), people will communicate to television networks that they want to see examples of more civil behavior on television. Hopefully this will translate into more civil behavior in society in general, and the workplace more specifically.

Source: Andersson, L., Pearson, C. (1999). Tit for tat? The spiraling effect of incivility in the workplace. *Academy of Management Review*, 24, 452-471.

negative outcomes such as traffic fatalities, domestic abuse, and violent crimes. Research examining the impact of substance use in organizations has produced some fairly consistent findings. For example, it has been shown that employees who are problem drinkers and users of illicit drugs may exhibit a number of negative outcomes, such as performance decrements, increased absenteeism, greater frequency of accidents, greater job withdrawal, and more antagonistic behavior toward others (Frone, 2004; Roman & Blum, 1995). Given these findings, the more pressing issues appear to be (1) identifying those who may have substance use problems, and (2) deciding what to do when employees show signs of substance use problems.

The prediction of substance use has been addressed in two basic ways. As with theft and violence, substance use is seen by many as part of a more general pattern of antisocial behavior (e.g., Hogan & Hogan, 1989). Given this conceptualization, efforts have been made to predict substance use based on personality traits more generally associated with antisocial behavior. McMullen (1991), for example, found that the reliability scale from the Hogan Personality Inventory (HPI; Hogan & Hogan, 1989) was negatively related to self-reports of both off- and on-the-job substance use among college students. Interestingly, in this same study, in an applicant sample, this scale distinguished those who passed and those who failed a urinalysis drug screening.

Other than personality, research has also investigated personal characteristic predictors in the form of personal history. Lehman, Farabee, Holcom, and Simpson (1995) investigated a number of personal background characteristics as predictors of substance use among a sample of municipal workers, and produced a number of meaningful findings. Those at the greatest risk for substance use were young males who reported low self-esteem, had a previous arrest history, came from a family with substance use problems, and tended to associate with substance-using peers.

Another line of inquiry has examined environmental predictors of substance use. In this line of research, the variable that has been examined most is stressful job conditions. For the most part, this research has shown that although holding a stressful job may increase one's risk of substance use, this effect does not appear to be large (e.g., Cooper, Russell, & Frone, 1990). A more recent line of inquiry has examined the social norms surrounding substance use in organizations. Recall that this idea has also been explored, with some success, in the study of both absenteeism and accidents. An example of this type of research can be seen in a study by Bennett and Lehman (1998), in which the impact of a workplace drinking climate was measured. It was found that in groups where a drinking climate was positive, individuals reported higher levels of both their own and coworkers' drinking activity. These findings suggest that social factors within work groups, and perhaps even within professions, may contribute to problem drinking.

More recent findings seem to be consistent with the idea that the social environment plays a key role in substance use. Frone (2006), for example, found that the preva-

lence of substance use differed considerably by occupation, which suggests that some work environments or occupational cultures differ with regard to norms surrounding substance use; this could also reflect differences in availability. This was also shown in other research on substance use among high-school-aged employees as well (Frone, 2003).

Based on the empirical research, what can organizations do to prevent substance use among employees? As with prevention of theft and violence, research on substance use suggests that organizations should focus on both screening out potential substance users and creating a social environment that does not promote substance use. When screening out potential employees, employers must take into account the fact that recovering alcoholics are protected under the Americans With Disabilities Act of 1990 and cannot be discriminated against. Given the multitude of counterproductive behaviors that are associated with low conscientiousness (e.g., Hogan & Hogan, 1989; Ones et al., 1993), assessing this trait would appear to have some merit. A thorough preemployment background check would also seem to be a logical step toward preventing substance use problems (Lehman et al., 1995). As stated earlier, organizations obviously must make sure that such checks do not violate the rights of applicants.

Another method of preventing substance use has become increasingly popular: requiring applicants, and even current employees, to submit to drug screening, most typically through urinalysis. Drug screening is both expensive and controversial (Rosen, 1987), so organizations must think very carefully about its use. Nevertheless, research has shown that people are not strongly opposed to the use of preemployment drug testing for jobs in which the safety of others could be put at risk by a drug-using employee

### COMMENT 6.3

#### JUICING THE GAME: BASEBALL AND STERIODS

WHEN MOST PEOPLE think about substance use in the workplace, they think about alcohol and illicit drugs such as marijuana. In major league baseball, however, the primary substance use issue in recent years has been players' use of anabolic steroids. In his 2005 book *Juicing the Game: Drugs, Power, and the Fight for the Soul of Major League Baseball*, journalist Howard Bryant provides an informative and insightful account of this issue. As Bryant explains, steroid use presented major league baseball with a very difficult dilemma. Despite the well-known dangers of steroid use, it is also true that offensive production (e.g.,

home-runs) in baseball increased considerably when steroid use was the heaviest. Increases in offensive production, of course, translate into greater attendance and revenues. Given the increased publicity surrounding anabolic steroids in the past 5 years, major league baseball has instituted mandatory testing for anabolic steroids, and increased the penalties for those caught.

Source: Bryant, H. (2005). *Juicing the game: Drugs, power, and the fight for the soul of major league baseball*. New York: Viking.

(Murphy, Thornton, & Reynolds, 1990), but have less favorable attitudes in jobs without these characteristics. Research has also shown that attitudes toward drug-screening programs are more positive when such programs are seen as procedurally fair (Konovsky & Cropanzano, 1991). Important procedural issues in drug testing include the basis on which employees or applicants are required to submit to such tests, as well as whether retesting is allowed.

Perhaps the most critical issue surrounding drug testing is an organization's response to confirmed employee substance use. An organization essentially has two choices in deciding how to respond to such employees: punishment or treatment. Some organizations have what could be described as *zero tolerance* policies with respect to drug use. In the military, for example, evidence of illicit drug use will automatically disqualify a recruit and will result in immediate disciplinary action against active duty personnel. In other cases, when substance use problems among employees are discovered, organiza-

tions seek to provide these individuals with treatment—typically, through Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) and referrals. This is obviously a difficult issue. A recent example of this is the difficulty major league baseball has had in deciding how to respond when players are caught using anabolic steroids (see Comment 6.3).

Although cogent arguments can be made for either approach, research suggests that drug testing is viewed more favorably if those identified as having substance use problems are provided with at least some form of treatment (Stone & Kotch, 1989). The provision of treatment makes a drug-testing program appear to have a greater level of fairness compared to programs that have only punitive outcomes. A possible downside to treatment is that an organization may run the risk of conveying an overly tolerant attitude toward substance use. In dealing with substance use, an organization is best served by pursuing a policy that combines clearly stated consequences with compassionate options that assist with treatment and recovery.

## Sexual Harassment

Sexual harassment has become a highly visible issue in organizations ranging from corporations to universities. *Sexual harassment* is defined as “unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, and other verbal or physical contact when (a) submission to the conduct is either explicitly or implicitly a term or condition of an individual’s employment, (b) submission to or rejection of such conduct by an individual is used as a basis for employment decisions affecting that individual, and/or (c) such conduct [that] has the purpose or effect of unreasonably interfering with work performance, or creating an intimidating, hostile, or offensive working environment” (Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, 1980). The term *quid pro quo sexual harassment* is often used to denote situations in which an employee’s advancement or performance is adversely impacted by refusing the sexual advances of a supervisor or other employee who exerts power over the employee. This form would apply primarily to the first two parts of the definition provided previously.

The second form of sexual harassment, often referred to as *hostile work environment*, refers primarily to the third part of the definition. In this form, there is no overt attempt to manipulate or threaten. Rather, the existence of sexual harassment is based on the general behavior of others in the workplace. Vulgar comments, telling “off-color” jokes, the display of pornographic images, and even nonverbal gestures that elicit discomfort may provide the basis for sexual harassment based on the hostile work environment argument. This category is important because it highlights the fact that even behavior intended to be for fun can be perceived as offensive to others. Destructive intent is not a prerequisite for sexual harassment.

Given the variety of behaviors that may constitute sexual harassment, estimating its prevalence is a challenge. In a recent review of the sexual harassment literature, Bates, Bowes-Sperry, and O’Leary-Kelly (2005) report that, in 2002, the number of formal sexual harassment charges handled by the U.S. Equal Opportunity Commission was 14,396, which was a 37% increase from 1992. Interestingly, these authors also report that some studies have shown that nearly 75% of women surveyed report unwanted sexual attention, and nearly 50% have experienced gender-related harassment. Thus, a logical conclusion one may draw is that very blatant sexual harassment is not a common occurrence in organizations. On the other hand, more subtle forms of sexual harassment occur quite frequently.

Organizational research on sexual harassment has examined a number of issues, including prevalence (Fitzgerald, Drasgow, Hulin, Gelfand, & Magley, 1997), causes (Gruber, 1998; Gutek, Cohen, & Konrad, 1990), ways to respond to sexual harassment allegations, and methods of prevention (Fitzgerald, 1993). Consistent with government estimates, this research suggests that sexual harassment is quite prevalent, it is much more likely to be experienced by women than men, and that victims are often in positions of unequal power and heightened visibility in relation to the perpetrators (e.g., women who work in largely male groups).

More recent research on sexual harassment suggests that sexual harassment is part of a more general pattern of mistreatment and harassment in organizational settings. For example, Lim and Cortina (2005) found that sexual harassment and more general incivility in the workplace tend to be positively associated. It has also been shown that minority women tend to experience higher levels of sexual harassment than do white

women (Berdahl & Moore, 2006). These findings suggest that organizations wishing to reduce sexual harassment need to focus not only on sexual harassment, but also on the more general social climate of the organization.

Probably the most effective way for organizations to prevent sexual harassment is to have in place a clearly articulated sexual harassment policy (Bates, Bower-Sperry, & O’Leary-Kelly, 2005). Such a policy serves the dual purposes of letting employees know what is considered sexual harassment, and the steps an organization will take if harassment occurs. Letting employees know what is considered sexual harassment is often easier said than done. Given the wording of sexual harassment statutes, employees may often be confused as to what is and what is not sexual harassment. However, based on the authors’ experience, getting people to agree on what is appropriate and inappropriate behavior in mixed-gender company may not be nearly as difficult as it may seem. Given common sense and knowledge of the prevailing societal codes of morality, the vast majority of adults know what is and what is not proper behavior in mixed-gender company. Ignorance is not a viable defense against charges of sexual harassment.

Sexual harassment policies also need to communicate to employees that sexual harassment is a serious matter, and that those who engage in such behavior will encounter severe consequences. Ultimately, however, the most powerful way to communicate an organizational sexual harassment policy is through an organization’s response to such behavior. If organizations respond to such behavior in a manner that is consistent with their policy, and do so regardless of the parties involved, this sends the powerful message that the organization will not tolerate such behavior.

## CHAPTER SUMMARY

This chapter examined counterproductive behaviors, or those actions on the part of employees that explicitly run counter to the goals of an organization. The most common form of counterproductive behavior is ineffective job performance. Nevertheless, ineffective performance is often difficult to detect due to external constraints on performance and deficiencies in organizational performance measurement systems. Based on models of job performance, ineffective performance may be due to characteristics of the employee as well as environmental factors. Organizations may respond to poor performance in a number of ways, including training, coaching, and, if all else fails, punishment. A key issue in deciding the response to poor performance is the underlying causes of performance difficulties.

Absenteeism and turnover are the other two most common forms of counterproductive behavior in organizations. Absenteeism has long been viewed by organizational psychologists as a behavioral response to negative feelings about one’s job or job situation. Over time, however, this somewhat narrow view has given way to a broader view of the causes of absenteeism. The most promising of these appears to be group norms regarding absenteeism. This is due largely to the recognition that absenteeism is a complex phenomenon and thus may be impacted by a variety of factors.

Like absenteeism, turnover has been viewed largely as a response to negative affect. Here too, more contemporary turnover research has expanded and investigated other nonaffective predictors of turnover. The external labor market, as well as employees’ job performance, are two nonaffective variables that have been shown to have an important impact on employee turnover.



Another important advance in this area is the use of findings from behavioral decision theory to model the turnover process. The concept of *embeddedness*, which has grown out of this research, appears to be a promising predictor of turnover.

Less common forms of counterproductive behavior examined in the chapter included accidents, theft, violence and mistreatment, substance use, and sexual harassment. Many years of research have failed to uncover a clear profile of the "accident-prone" employee, but more recent research in this area has provided some important insights. The "safety climate" within an organization, in particular, appears to be an important predictor of accident frequency. Attention to this climate, coupled with a focus on the physical environment and characteristics of employees, is likely to be the best strategy for preventing accidents in organizations.

Theft and violence, when considered together, can be considered *antisocial* behaviors in organizations. Although both are relatively low-frequency events, they can nevertheless be quite damaging to organizations. Lower-level forms of mistreatment, such as rudeness or verbal abuse, occur with much greater frequency. Like most forms of behavior, all of these forms of counterproductive behavior can be explained by characteristics of both the employee and the environment. With respect to theft, considerable evidence has accumulated suggesting that employees with a combination of a low level of conscientiousness and tolerant attitudes toward theft are most likely to steal. Research has been much less conclusive about personal characteristics indicative of violence and mistreatment, although it is likely that violence is often indicative of underlying psychopathology.

With respect to environmental characteristics, there is some evidence that treating em-

ployees unfairly, and failing to address frustrations, may heighten the risk of all of these antisocial behaviors. This is particularly the case when employees believe they have no control over events that impact them. Thus, organizations wishing to prevent antisocial behavior should combine thorough preemployment screening with efforts to treat employees fairly and remove barriers to performance.

Substance use is a form of counterproductive behavior that may be quite damaging, particularly when employees perform dangerous work or are entrusted with the safety of others. The causes of substance use are complex; however, it is interesting to note that personality traits predictive of other forms of antisocial behavior are also predictive of substance use. Prediction and prevention of substance use often pose a dilemma for organizations because issues of employee privacy and public relations are involved.

The final form of counterproductive behavior examined in this chapter was sexual harassment. Sexual harassment may occur in the form of direct acts, or more indirectly through behaviors that, in the aggregate, create a "hostile work environment." Research has shown that women are typically the victims of sexual harassment, and it is most likely to occur in work situations in which women are in the minority and fill positions of lower power than men. The best way to prevent this form of counterproductive behavior is to have in place a clearly articulated sexual harassment policy, and to heighten employees' awareness of the issue. More recent research also suggests that sexual harassment may be part of a more general pattern of mistreatment; thus, organizations may also decrease sexual harassment by promoting a social climate of respect and civility towards others.

## PEOPLE BEHIND THE RESEARCH

### MICHELLE DUFFY AND THE DARK SIDE OF WORKPLACE RELATIONS



I first became interested in social undermining after conducting interviews (as part of my job at the time) with a number of employees in various occupations who were experiencing a multitude of physical health symptoms such as chronic colds, flues, headaches, stomach pain, and sleeplessness. One thing that struck me was how frequently the direction of the interview turned to a focus on interpersonal workplace relationships. The power of these workplace relationships and the meaning they had in peoples' lives stayed with me. Although people would talk about positive aspects of their relationships and workplace interactions, often they seemed to strictly focus on the negative aspects of these interpersonal interactions. Across different occupations and ranks, I heard stories that were quite

similar regarding the power of *negative* workplace interpersonal interactions in peoples' work lives. People described interactions in which they were ridiculed, insulted, ignored, delayed, hampered, and misled by their own coworkers and supervisors. The power of these undermining behaviors was destructive and seemingly toxic.

At that time, much of the research focus was on positive and supportive workplace interactions. There was much less known about the impact of negative interactions on employee health and well-being. I decided to study these types of interactions for my dissertation. I found that undermining behaviors were indeed associated with a variety of undesirable employee outcomes such as lower physical and emotional well-being, lower performance and poor job attitudes. More interesting to me, however, was the fact that undermining behaviors were *more* predictive of employee outcomes than were supportive behaviors. In terms of how they affect peoples' lives, a negative workplace event carries much more weight than a positive event. Beyond this, I also found people have the most difficult time dealing with coworkers who frequently engaged in **both** positive and negative behaviors (rather than just negative behavior). With these people, you never know where you stand and the inconsistency in their behavior is very damaging to a person's well-being.

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## SUGGESTED ADDITIONAL READINGS

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