Key Concept
Abusive supervision can have negative effects on employee performance. However, according to this Idea, how an employee copes with such abuse and their level of conscientiousness can be determining factors as to just how deep these negative effects are. Read on to find out how to minimize the effects of abusive supervision in your organization.

Idea Summary
In recent years, there has been tremendous focus on ways to enhance employee engagement, performance and workplace outcomes. The crucial role of the supervisor has been at the centre of this focus, in particular the effects that an abusive supervisor can have on workplace outcomes, especially in the past decade. Previous research has defined abusive supervision as “the sustained display of hostile verbal and nonverbal behaviours, excluding physical contact.” This much is certainly clear that abusive supervision can negatively influence workplace outcomes; but what are the moderating factors that can affect the extent to which such abuse can be harmful? Does the victim’s (i.e. the employee’s) personality have a role to play?

In a paper by researchers from the Indian School of Business, West Texas A&M University and California State University, the role of employee conscientiousness and coping strategies is examined. Through two studies, they found the following:

- Individuals high in conscientiousness are able to maintain their job performance under conditions of abusive supervision. On the other hand, less conscientious individuals are more likely to exhibit decreases in job performance under the same conditions.
- When dealing with stress, individuals generally adopt either promotion (active) or prevention (avoidance) strategies. Those high in conscientiousness are more likely to engage in active coping strategies.
- Those individuals that react to abusive supervision with avoidance strategies experience a decline in job performance; however, reacting with active coping strategies did not seem to affect job performance.

Methodology: Nandkeolyar et al. conducted two studies in order to test their theories. In the first, they collected questionnaire data from 363 employees in a large information technology company in India, focusing particularly on their levels of conscientiousness. In addition, monthly ratings of the employees’ job performance from their supervisors were also analyzed.

In the second study, they collected data from 105 employees in a multinational
corporation in India. Again, conscientiousness and job performance was analyzed, as well as coping strategies in the face of abusive supervision.

**Business Application**
Organizations in which abusive supervision is prevalent will certainly want to minimize the negative effects it can have on employee outcomes. According to the findings of this study, abusive supervision may be rendered less impactful by a continued focus on hiring conscientious individuals. To do so, an assessment of conscientiousness can be added during the normal hiring process.

However, there is also a broader role for organizations to play; for example, reducing individuals’ inclination to rely on avoidance coping strategies can be incorporated into orientation processes for new employees. This can be as simple as informing them that behaviours associated with avoidance coping (such as mental or emotional disengagement from the work itself, or physical disengagement from colleagues and the workplace) is likely to have unintended negative effect on their performance.

Human resource managers can also take a more proactive role in detecting signs of employees’ use of avoidance coping, such as spikes in absences and emotional issues. Similarly, institutionalizing the role of an ethics officer may help by giving employees a specific individual with whom they can voice concerns about their work experiences.

**Further Reading**

**Further Relevant Resources**
Amit K. Nandkeolyar’s profile at the Indian School of Business
Jonathan A. Shaffer’s profile at West Texas A&M University
Andrew Li’s profile at West Texas A&M University
Jessica Bagger’s LinkedIn profile
Indian School of Business’ Executive Education profile at IEDP