

# Does Despotic Leadership cause help Seeking Behavior? The Mediation of Feed Back Avoidance in Health Sector

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## Abstract:

Drawing on conservation of resources theory (COR), the current study investigates how despotic leadership cause help seeking behavior in health sector. Additionally, it investigates, the mediation of feed-back avoidance between despotic leadership and help seeking behavior. The data was collected through convenience sampling from Junior doctors having less than one year experience working in public sector hospitals and was analyzed through Structural equation modeling in PLS 4. The findings revealed a positive association between despotic leadership and help seeking behavior. Additionally, it was also found that feedback avoidance mediated the positive relationship between despotic leadership and help seeking behavior.

**Keywords:** Despotic leadership, Help seeking behavior, Feedback avoidance.

## Article History

Received: 21-10-2025  
Accepted: 18-11-2025  
Online: 26-12-2025

## 1. Introduction

Today's organizations face dynamic business challenges and worldwide competition. In order to survive and grow, leadership plays a crucial role. Positive supervisory behaviors bring out the best in employees (Chen et al., 2015). Whereas destructive supervisory behaviors negatively affect employees' attitudes and behaviors (Liu et. al., 2012). Therefore, there is an increasing trend to investigate the negative side of leadership (Rossetti and Choi, 2005; Morrison et al., 2004). Despotic leadership is one of the most prominent negative leadership styles (Naseer et al. (2016)). Despotic leaders have the desire to control and manipulate things and people around them (Carstarphen, 2018), are bossy (Aronson, 2001; De Hoogh and Den Hartog, 2008), require unquestionable obedience to their orders, exploit others for their personal gains (Schilling, 2009), are low on moral standing (Naseer et. al., 2016), want supremacy (Erkutlu and Chafra, 2018), are aggressive (Soran et. al., 2017), have low concern for the wellbeing of subordinates rather they are only concerned about personal interest and supremacy (S.B.Shah et., al., 2021).

There are handful of studies on despotic leadership (Schyns and Schilling, 2013). Naseer et. al., (2016) conducted a study where despotic leadership negatively affected job performance, organizational citizenship behavior and creativity. Erkutlu and Chafra (2018) found a positive relationship of despotic leadership with organizational deviance via mediation of organizational identification. S.B.Shah et al., (2021) found a positive association of workplace stress experienced by managers with employees' unethical behavior via displaced aggression where despotic leadership played a moderation role. When the leaders are despots, the subordinates engage in deviant behavior as a coping mechanism (Erkutlu and Chafra, 2018). The argument is supported by conservation of

resources (COR) theory (Hobfoll, 1989). According to COR theory, individuals when faced with a stressful situation, they protect the remaining valuable resources by avoiding actions that further consume the resources thus avoiding oneself from falling into "loss spiral". Another way is to invest the remaining resources for future benefits or attempting to acquire additional valuable resources from some other sources and achieve "gain spiral" When employees are led by a despotic supervisor who is selfish and manipulative might engage in coping mechanism to conserve the remaining resources. The coping mechanism might not always be retaliatory. Shah et. al., (2022) found that supervisors' stress causing employees' unethical behavior was stronger when there was a despotic leader. The employees can be involved in negative workplace behaviors as coping mechanisms to protect or conserve the remaining resources when the leader is despotic as found by various researchers (Chaudhary, 2022; Iqbal et. al., 2022, Erkutlu and Chafra, 2018, Shah et al., 2022). Employees sometimes may choose to conserve the remaining resources by engaging in less retaliatory behaviors (Tepper, Duffy, & Breaux-Soignet, 2011). This is the gap in the literature that the current study aims to fill. It investigates the positive behavior resulting from despotic leadership i.e., help seeking behavior. When the leadership is despotic, the employees would feel a need for social support from other sources thus they might indulge in seeking help from the coworkers.

The current study is novel in a way that it has investigated the positive side of despotic leadership. From the lens of COR (Hobfoll, 1989), we propose that when employees are supervised by a despotic leader, it consumes sufficient resources. In order to protect the remaining resources, they avoid from any feedback from them (feedback avoidance behavior). Additionally, they

acquire new resources by seeking help from their coworkers (help-seeking behavior).

The current research responds to following research questions:

1. Does despotic leadership affect feedback avoidance behavior?
2. Does feedback avoidance affect help seeking behavior?
3. Does feedback avoidance mediate the relationship between despotic leadership and help seeking behavior?

## **2. Literature Review**

The conceptual framework of the study is based on conservation of resources (COR) theory (Hobfoll, 1989). The theory postulates that individuals attempt to protect and acquire resources. Resources could be any objects, energies, conditions or characteristics that are valued by individuals for the achievement of certain goals or objectives. There are two basic principles of COR theory. First one is to retain or protect the existing valuable resources from depletion. Thus avoiding oneself from falling into "loss spiral". Second is to acquire additional resources to cope with future anticipated resource depletion and achieving "gain spiral". COR provides a justification about employees' behavior where they not only attempt to conserve the existing valuable resources but acquire additional resources in order to compensate for the resource loss occurred (Hobfoll & Shirom, 1993; Hobman, Restubog, Bordia, & Tang, 2009; Halbesleben, Neveu, Paustian-Underdahl, & Westman, 2014).

Previous literature demonstrate that supportive supervisors are valuable resources for the employees (Whitman, Halbesleben, & Holmes, 2014). They assist them, develop them, understand their needs and help them achieve personal and organizational goals. When these highly desirable characteristics are missing in the form of a despotic

leader, this may trigger employees to protect the remaining resources. As working under a manipulative and morally corrupt leader cause sufficient resource depletion. Hence they would strive to protect existing resources and also acquire additional resources as compensation for resource depletion (Hobfoll & Shirom, 1993; Tepper, 2000). In order to protect existing valued resources, the employees can either retaliate directly to vent out the frustration or they get involved in negative behaviors. This would be an active coping strategy as witnessed by some researchers (Erkutlu and Chafra 2018; SB. Shah, 2022; Arooba Chaudhry, 2022; Iqbal et. al., 2022). Instead, employees sometimes may choose to behave passively and engage in feedback avoidance (Hobfoll, 2001; Whitman, Halbesleben, & Holmes, 2014). The passive coping strategy would be most likely to be preferred by employees than active aggressive retaliation as the supervisors have the authority to allocate the rewards, evaluate performance, and provide training and promotion opportunities (Whitman, Halbesleben, & Holmes, 2014).

### **Despotic leadership and Feedback avoidance behavior**

Feedback avoidance behavior, which refers to: "the extent to which employees use strategies that are designed to either totally avoid their supervisors or divert their supervisor's attention so that their poor performance is not acknowledged and they do not receive negative verbal feedback" (Moss *et al.*, 2003, p. 493). Feedback avoidance behavior include avoiding contact and interaction from the supervisors or any other source. When employees perceive that their supervisor is selfish, aggressive, and manipulative (Naseer *et. al.*, 2016), they would avoid direct retaliation from him because of power differences. The preferable option for the subordinates would be sometimes to avoid feedback and contact from him because of their

aggressive and manipulative nature. Under the negative supervisory style, the employees would be reluctant to get performance related information from the supervisor (Moss et al., 2003). This happens particularly when the employees' performance is not upto standard, they try to avoid contact from the supervisor regarding their poor performance (Moss et al., 2003).

Extant literature shows that employees become involved in avoiding feedback when they are facing negative leadership styles (Tepper, 2007; Whitman et al., 2014, Arain et al. 2018). When employees perceive a lack of support from their supervisors, they would attempt to avoid interaction regarding their performance from them (Moss et al., 2009). Feedback is an essential component of job performance that can highlight problems. Based on the feedback, certain strategies and solutions associated with performance deficiencies could be designed (Ericksen and Dyer, 2005). Feedback avoidance behavior negatively affects the employee well-being and performance (Moss et al., 2009). Destructive leadership styles are found to be important antecedent of feedback avoidance behavior (Arain et al., 2018). Moreover, Waheed Akhter et al., (2021) found leader knowledge hiding behavior causing feedback avoidance in hotel employees which further impeded performance and creativity. Shen et al., (2021) argued that abusive supervision hinders help seeking behavior of employees via organization based self-esteem. Arain et al., (2018) found that abusive supervision resulted in feedback avoidance behavior. Similarly, we propose that when employees face despotic leaders, it causes sufficient resource loss. In order to conserve existing resources, they will indulge in feedback-avoiding behavior.

H1: Despotic leadership is positively related to employees' feedback avoidance behavior.

### **Despotic leadership, feedback avoidance behavior, and help-seeking behavior**

Acquiring feedback is crucial for maintaining up-to-standard performance (Lam et al., 2017). It keeps them informed whether they meet the performance goals. Feedback can help employees' performance (Lam et al., 2017) and creativity (Sijbom et al., 2018). When there is positive leadership, it decreases feedback avoidance and enhances the feedback-seeking behavior of employees (Nifadkar et al., 2012). Whereas a negative leadership style can enhance feedback avoidance behavior (Arain et al, 2018).

The most important feedback sources are the supervisors who monitor the individual and organizational performance (Nifadkar et al., 2012; Been et al., 2017), therefore the supervisors have got researchers' attention as valuable source of feedback (Nifadkar et al., 2012; Been et al., 2017)

The rude treatment and criticism from a despotic leader can make the employees reluctant to seek feedback from them, in this way they try to conserve the resources and avoid "loss spiral". Shen et al., (2019) found that abusive supervisors can hurt employees' organizational-based self-esteem by criticizing and ridiculing them hence they avoid feedback from their abusive supervisors.

Help seeking behavior can be described as soliciting emotional or instrumental help from a colleague for the problems that an individual is unable to tackle on his own (Bamberger, 2009). Employees sometimes face trouble or difficulty at the workplace, for that they need assistance from either internal sources (i.e., colleagues) or external sources (i.e., family members). Research shows that when employees were mistreated by abusive supervisors, they sought help from their coworkers (Arain et. al., 2018). This happens because when an individual loses support from one source, the individual seeks support from other source (Lepore,

1992; Duffy, Ganster, & Pagon, 2002, Arain et. al., 2018). This is supported from the help-seeking literature (Bamberger, 2009) and social support literature (Lepore, 1992; Duffy, Ganster, & Pagon, 2002). Hence, when employees are mistreated by despotic supervisors, they are not given the required attention, counseling and help, they turn to their co-workers for seeking assistance. Employees most of the time seek help from those who are close to them in proximity at the workplace such as their colleagues (Bamberger, 2009; Arain et. al., 2018). They indulge in help-seeking behavior as an attempt to acquire resources that they perceive might be needed in face of resource loss.

Drawing on the conservation of resources theory (Hobfoll 1989), employees' resources are drained working under a despotic supervisor, they would attempt to conserve remaining resources by avoiding feedback from them. Feedback avoidance from a despotic supervisor would provide them with a temporary relief and help them protect remaining resources. Although feedback avoidance can help them a little in coping with the difficult situation (despotic leadership), still they need assistance and guidance, for that they would turn to their colleagues for sharing ideas, information and work related guidance (Bamberger, 2009). Hence, we argue that they would acquire these valuable resources for anticipated future resources loss by indulging in help-seeking behavior (Hobfoll & Shirom, 1993). They would prefer to acquire support from their coworkers working with them as they are proximate to them working in the same organization. The support, guidance and feedback from coworkers would help them perform better when the supervisory feedback is missing.

Arain et. al., (2018) found that when employees were supervised by an abusive supervisor, it caused feedback avoidance behavior from the abusive supervisor to protect valuable resources.

Help-seeking behavior refers to This happens because working under an abusive supervisor causes exhaustion and resource depletion (Hobfoll, 1989). Moreover, in order to gain new resources, employees indulged in help-seeking behavior from their coworkers (Arain et. al., 2018).

Similarly, when the leader is manipulative, selfish, and aggressive (Naseer et. al., 2016), it depletes the employees' resources. The employees would avoid feedback from such a morally corrupt and selfish leader. However, they would attempt to acquire new resources in the form of social support from their coworkers (help seeking behavior).

H2: Feedback avoidance is positively associated with help seeking behavior.

H3: Feedback avoidance mediates the relationship between despotic leadership and help seeking behavior.



### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1 Research Context

There are increasing incidents of negative behavior including bullying and abusive supervision by the managers. Past research (Arain et al., 2018, Estes, 2013) has proved the occurrence of abusive supervision in health care sector. Due to stressful and demanding work responsibilities, lack of resources and health related policies, political interference (Shaikh & Hatcher, 2004), the incidents of bullying faced by the junior employees by the senior ones is a growing concern that needs attention (Imran et al., 2010). The consequences that result from aggressive and despotic leadership are very severe in health sector as the particular sector is concerned with saving human lives (Arain et al., 2018). Therefore, the current study is focused

on investigating the impact of despotic leadership over help seeking behavior of the employees in hospitals.

### **3.2 Participants and procedure**

The current research employs quantitative research design with self-administered questionnaires. Data was collected from junior doctors that were either the interns or those fresh graduates having experience less than a year. The sample was selected through convenience sampling from different public sector hospitals of Pakistan. The questionnaires were filled by visiting the employees in person as the response of online questionnaires was too low due to busy and hectic schedule of the doctors. A total of 360 questionnaires were distributed. Out of this, we got 300 questionnaires that were completely filled and were considered for the analysis.

### **3.3 Measures**

Despotic leadership: It was measured using De Hoogh and Den Hartog (2008) scale. The scale consist of six items and was measured on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from “1=not at all” to “5=great extent”. The reliability of the scale in the current study is 0.85. Its sample item is “My direct supervisor is punitive, has no pity or compassion”. Feedback avoidance: It was measured by using 6-item scale of Moss, Valenzi, and Taggart (2003) on a five point Likert scale ranging from “1=not at all” to “5=great extent”. Its sample item is “I would try to schedule outside appointments to avoid my supervisor”. The reliability of the scale for the study is reported to be 0.83.

Help seeking behavior: It was measured using 12 item scale developed by Greenglass, Schwarzer, Jakubiec, Fiksenbaum, and Taubert (1999) on a 5-point Likert scale that ranges from “1=not at all” to “5=great extent”. The reliability of the scale for this study is found to be 0.8. Its sample item is “He/She

tries to talk and explain her/his stress to get feedback from colleagues”.

## **4. Data Analysis and Findings**

The data analysis was done in Smart PLS 4.0 software (Ringle et al., 2012). The raw data went through normality test ((Tabachnick et al., 2007), multicollinearity test (Hair et al., 2010) and common method variance through Herman's single factor test (Podsakoff and Organ, 1986). After that, the data was imported in PLS-4.0 software for analysis through measurement and structural modelling process.

### **4.1 Reliability and Validity test**

The items having minimum loading of 0.5 are retained to assess the indicator reliability of the scale following Hair et al. (2013). Five items of help seeking behavior (FSB) were deleted. Internal consistency was assessed from composite reliability (CR) value for each construct which is suggested to be greater than 0.7 Hair *et al.*, 2016). Convergent validity was assessed from the average variances extracted (AVE) which should be 0.5 or above (Chin, 1998). The results of reliability and validity are presented in Table.1. The empirical distinctiveness of a variable as related to other variables is measured by discriminant validity according to Fornell and Larcker (1981) criterion. The results of discriminant validity are presented in Table 2.

**Table. 1 Reliability and Validity**

Constructs	Loadings	$\alpha$	CR	AVE
DL1	0.75	0.855	0.892	0.57
DL2	0.761			
DL3	0.789			
DL4	0.758			
DL5	0.749			
DL6	0.755			

FBA1	0.732	0.838	0.881	0.55
FBA2	0.771			
FBA3	0.768			
FBA4	0.706			
FBA5	0.741			
FBA6	0.739			
HSB1	0.688	0.829	0.872	0.54
HSB2	0.735			
HSB3	0.687			
HSB4	0.74			
HSB5	0.742			
HSB6	0.659			
HSB7	0.664			

**Table. 2 Discriminant validity (Fornell-Larcker criterion)**

Latent variables	DL	FB	HSB
DL	0.743		
FBA	0.573	0.73	
HSB	0.343	0.263	0.715

#### 4.2 Path Coefficient Assessment

Path coefficients' significance was assessed with 5000 bootstrap samples (Hair et al., 2016; Henseler et al., 2009). Results indicate that H1 (Despotic leadership is positively related to employees' feedback avoidance behavior) was empirically supported ( $\beta = 0.608$ ;  $t=13.494$ ;  $p=0.000$ ). Similarly, results indicate that H2 (H2: Feedback avoidance is positively related to help seeking behavior) was also found to be empirically supported ( $\beta=0.347$ ;  $t=5.966$ ;  $p=0.000$ ). Path coefficient results are presented in Table.3.

**Table.3 Path coefficient assessment**

Relationship	$\beta$	SD	t-values	p values	Decision
DL-->FBA	0.60 8	0.045	13.494	0.000	Supported
FBA-->HSB	0.34 7	0.058	5.966	0.000	Supported

#### 4.3 Mediation Analysis

Following guidelines of Preacher and Hayes (2008), results indicate empirical support for the mediating effect of feedback avoidance in the relationship between despotic leadership and help seeking behavior (H3) ( $\beta=0.211$ ;  $t=5.649$ ;  $p=0.00$ ).

#### Results of mediation are tabulated in Table. 4.

Coefficient of determination (R square) explains variation in dependent variable in relation to independent variable (Hair et al., 2016; Henseler et al., 2009). According to Falk and Miller (1992), the minimum value of 0.1 for the dependent variables in management research is acceptable. Results indicated R square (0.36) for FBA and 0.47 for HSB.

Relationship	$\beta$	t-values	p values	Decision
DL-->FBA-->HSB	0.211	5.649	0	Supported

Table :4

#### 5. Discussion

The majority of the studies on despotic leadership are concerned with its negative effects (Shah S. B. et al., 2021, Naseer et al., 2016, Erkutlu and Chafra, 2018). This study is novel in a way that it investigates the positive aspect of despotic leadership. Despotic leadership, though is a negative leadership style, but it results in a positive work behavior i.e., help seeking behavior. this process is supported by COR theory. The results indicate that despotic leadership cause employees to conserve resources by avoiding feedback from their despotic leaders and consequently they engage in help seeking behavior. in this way, feedback avoidance is a significant underlying mechanism that cause the victims of despotic leadership to feel motivated to get engaged in help seeking behavior. Apart from the indirect effect despotic leadership over help seeking via feedback avoidance, the results also indicated support for direct effect of despotic leadership over help

seeking behavior.

This study is novel in a way that despotic leadership has been specifically studied with feedback avoidance and help seeking behavior previously. Additionally, we do not have previous studies in despotic leadership literature that investigates the mediation of feedback avoidance between despotic leadership and help seeking behavior. However, past literature (Arain et al., 2020) highlighted the effect of feedback avoidance on help seeking behavior. Additionally, the research offers novelty in a way that it focuses on a positive outcome (help seeking behavior) of a negative leadership style (despotic leadership).

## 6. Practical Implications

Establishing and maintaining a healthy and supportive work relationship with the colleagues or the co-workers is regarded as one a significant characteristic of a productive workplace (Shellenbarger, 2000). Hence, maintaining a healthy relationship with coworkers may decrease chances of receiving aggression and manipulative behavior from the leaders or the managers, hence it would result in better productivity and less conflicts.

However, it is worth mentioning that despotic leadership should be promoted in order to produce help seeking behavior. Rather, help seeking behavior is an unintentional by-product of despotic leadership. Employers should be cautious enough that such leadership practices should be completely discouraged as it may lead to severe negative consequences. A thorough feedback system should be promoted in order to enhance access of the employees to numerous channels of feedback that may improve their performance and productivity.

Moreover, strict policies should be implemented against the manipulative and unethical practices of the employees. When proper policies and protocols

are followed, the chances of exhibiting aggressive, manipulative and unethical actions could be reduced. Moreover, a supportive culture should be fostered that believes in helping others.

## 7. Limitations and Future Research Directions

The current study has some limitations like other studies that may be addressed by future research. This research was conducted in a context that is high on power distance (Hofstede, 2011). Individuals in such a culture are less likely to show retaliation against any negative supervisory/leadership (Shah et al., 2021). Hence, they engage in certain other behaviors to channelize their frustration such as feedback avoidance according to the findings of current research. Hence, future research may be replicated in other contexts such as the one low on power distance to investigate how the employees react to a negative leadership style. Moreover, the current research is carried out in hospital sector, future research may be extended including other sectors.

Moreover, the theoretical model does not incorporate any boundary condition that may influence the relationship of the study. Hence, future researchers may consider certain individual factors i.e., personality or organizational factors i.e., coworker support that may influence the relationship.

Finally, the data for the study was collected from one source that may have caused common method bias. Hence, future research may consider triangulation of the data from multiple sources so that the chances of common method bias and social desirability may be reduced.

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