

# Beware the hot and cold manager: How inconsistency can hurt employees and what can be done to overcome this

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## Key digested message

This study investigates the relationship between inconsistent management relationships and employee wellbeing. Inconsistency is essentially a working relationship in which a manager blows ‘hot and cold’ with their reports. Above and beyond the quality of working relationships, a lack of consistency in managers’ relations with their employees was found to be detrimental to wellbeing.

The study is the first to investigate the relationship between inconsistent leadership relationships and employee wellbeing. It was found that the greater the degree of inconsistency, the poorer an individual’s wellbeing. This effect was worsened when employees ruminated on negative experience but was somewhat mitigated when they took a problem-focused approach to work demands, lessening their reliance on their manager.

## Background

**E**MPLOYEE wellbeing has not received serious attention in previous research (Inceoglu et al., 2018). The current research therefore makes wellbeing the key focus and looks at it in terms of job satisfaction, life purpose and emotional and physical fatigue to gain broader understanding of wellness at work.

Leader-Member Exchange describes the relationship between manager and employee (Dansereau et al., 1975). High-quality relationships have been found to predict better

wellbeing, while low-quality relationships have been found to predict poorer wellbeing. The association of relationship quality and wellbeing is not completely linear, however, and there are some grey areas. For example, positive and negative elements of relationships can simultaneously coexist in working relationships, as in Ambivalent Leader-Member Exchange. We can think of Ambivalent Leader-Member Exchange as inconsistency in working relationships, otherwise known as someone blowing ‘hot and cold’ in their relationships with their reports and colleagues.

One can think about this in an everyday context, in which a manager may be really interested in you at certain times, but then entirely distant or standoffish at other times. This violates typical Social Exchange Theory (Homans, 1961) as it prevents a cost-benefit analysis of an employee’s relationship with their manager. Being unable to achieve consistency from a manager can leave a person feeling unsure of their standing. This effect is thought to be worsened by cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1962) because, when an employee is treated in a conflicting way, they could have conflicting attitudes towards their hot and cold manager. Such dissonance can lead to employees feeling insecure about both their working relationship and their own performance at work (Newby-Clark et al., 2002).

Understanding how hot and cold managers can affect employees is important, but beyond this, being able to make sense of risk and protection factors related to this effect can improve workplace wellness for everyone. One such factor is rumination – which involves being stuck on a thought – and is typically considered to be a negative action. However, Cropley and Zijlstra (2011) identified a distinction between types of rumination. They suggest that negative rumination will worsen the extent that hot and cold relationships affect wellbeing, as it prevents employees from switching off from harmful work experiences. On the converse, they proposed that another variation of rumination – problem-solving – may be protective, as it may lessen employee reliance on the manager who has left them feeling unsure of themselves.

In this study, our particular focus was on three hypotheses, as well as a qualitative question:

1. Greater inconsistency in managers’ relationships with their employees will lead to a decline in employee wellbeing.
2. Negative rumination will worsen this effect.
3. Problem-solving will alleviate this effect.

The qualitative question we explored was: What is your experience of inconsistent management?

## **Method**

A longitudinal mixed-methods design was employed to control for same-source variance and investigate quantitative and qualitative aims in the study. Online self-report questionnaires were completed by 114 participants from a number of different industries. Confirmatory factor analysis determined moderation was appropriate, subsequently, moderated regression was conducted with negative and problem-solving rumination, management inconsistency and employee wellbeing.

Three follow-up semi-structured interviews were conducted. Critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1995) was used to analyse verbatim transcripts of interviews regarding how inconsistent manager-employee relationships are experienced. Data were approached from a social constructivist perspective (Eddy, 2004) as both wellbeing and relationships can be seen as highly subjective, experiential matter.

## Results

Inconsistent management has been found to significantly negatively predict job satisfaction and life purpose and positively predict emotional and physical fatigue, which supports the first hypothesis.

Additionally, negative rumination was found to lessen the effect of inconsistent leadership in all dimensions of wellbeing, which supports the second hypothesis.

Finally, when employees focused their repetitive thoughts on finding solutions to work issues, they lessened their reliance on unsupportive leaders and protected their wellbeing, which supports the third hypothesis.

All findings were statistically significant at the  $p < .05$  level with small to moderate effect sizes ranging between  $r = .16$  and  $r = .37$ .

Inconsistent managers worsened employee wellbeing. Negative rumination exaggerated this effect and problem-solving protected all wellbeing elements.

One super-ordinate theme was drawn from the follow-up interviews: 'feeling like a nuisance'. This is consistent with the quantitative outcomes. Poor wellbeing was found to stem from cognitive dissonance and violated social exchanges brought about via inconsistent managers. Therefore, the insecurities which became apparent from the interviewees help to illustrate what the quantitative findings actually mean to a person's experience.

One subtheme of 'feeling like a nuisance' that arose was that some people are left feeling so downcast from their working relationships that they 'hate going back... hate Monday'. To impart such a strong sense of dread strongly illuminates the role managers play in their employees' wellbeing and the responsibility that needs to be taken in better understanding one's own management style.

Moreover, an integral part of these findings is the weight that is placed in the hands of employees to also look after their own wellbeing. Addressing negative rumination and engaging in ways to switch off from work as well as practising problem-solving thinking can help to protect wellbeing, empowering employees to take control of their own wellness.

## Conclusions

The current study investigated wellbeing in a serious way operationalising employee wellbeing as job satisfaction, life purpose, emotional and physical fatigue. Additionally, it is the first study to investigate inconsistent manager-employee relationships in relation to employee wellbeing.

A future research direction could be to investigate the factors which contribute to less consistent relationships, what makes a leader inconsistent towards a direct report and how could this be addressed?

In terms of practice, the impact of inconsistent managers outlines the need to address consistency in leadership. This could start with taking stock of your own workplace style, considering not only what your preferred behaviours are, but how consistent you are within these behaviours. This highlights the great value of behavioural assessments in development and the rich conversations which go alongside them.

In addition, employees are empowered to psychologically disengage from work to limit the negative effect of rumination. Instead, they are encouraged to practise problem-solving thinking. Learning how to, 'switch off' is a process and one which requires checking in with yourself to see what works for you. What do you really enjoy which mentally takes you away from work? I struggle to sit still and just meditate, although I know others who swear by it, so instead I practice, 'mindful cooking' and this really helps

me to unwind at the end of the day. When it comes to problem-solving, you could devote 10 minutes to considering methods you might try to solve a workplace problem or people you could ask for support. This then gives you an alternative plan of action aside from reaching out to a manager who may negatively impact your wellbeing.

### The author

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