

If a supervisor or a subordinate has a disability, who fares worse?

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If two employees in an organisation had a disability, “the umbrella term for impairments, activity limitations and participation restrictions” (WHO) – one in a supervisory role, the other in a subordinate role – which employee do you think would face greater negative consequences? You might not expect the supervisor, whose higher status might buffer against the potential negative effects associated with having a disability. Yet, that’s exactly what our research shows: supervisors with disabilities fared worse than subordinates with disabilities in terms of relationship quality.

Subsequently, the lower relationship quality between supervisor and subordinate led to worse subordinate performance. We also found that, although supervisors with disabilities are the ones whose relationships might suffer the most, they are the ones who might have the power to prevent such negative effects through fostering an inclusive team climate.

Workforce diversity is growing due to mega-trends like globalisation and population aging, making it more likely that supervisors and subordinates will differ along demographic lines. As we know from prior research, such incongruence in supervisor-subordinate dyads negatively affects relationship quality and individual outcomes such as performance.

More specifically, we know that subordinates with disabilities experience more [negative affect](#), less loyalty from their supervisors, and less professional respect if they work for a supervisor without a disability. However, due to population aging in many Western societies, and the fact that supervisory role assignments are often based on seniority and tenure, it is likely that the number of supervisors who experience health problems is quite significant and continues to grow (e.g., approximately 13 per cent of supervisors in the sample used for this study have a disability).

Our study is the first to investigate the effects of disability (in)congruence on relationship quality between supervisor and subordinate, as well as subordinate performance, in all four possible scenarios: 1) neither the supervisor nor

the subordinate has a disability, 2) both the supervisor and the subordinate have a disability, 3) only the supervisor has a disability, and 4) only the subordinate has a disability.

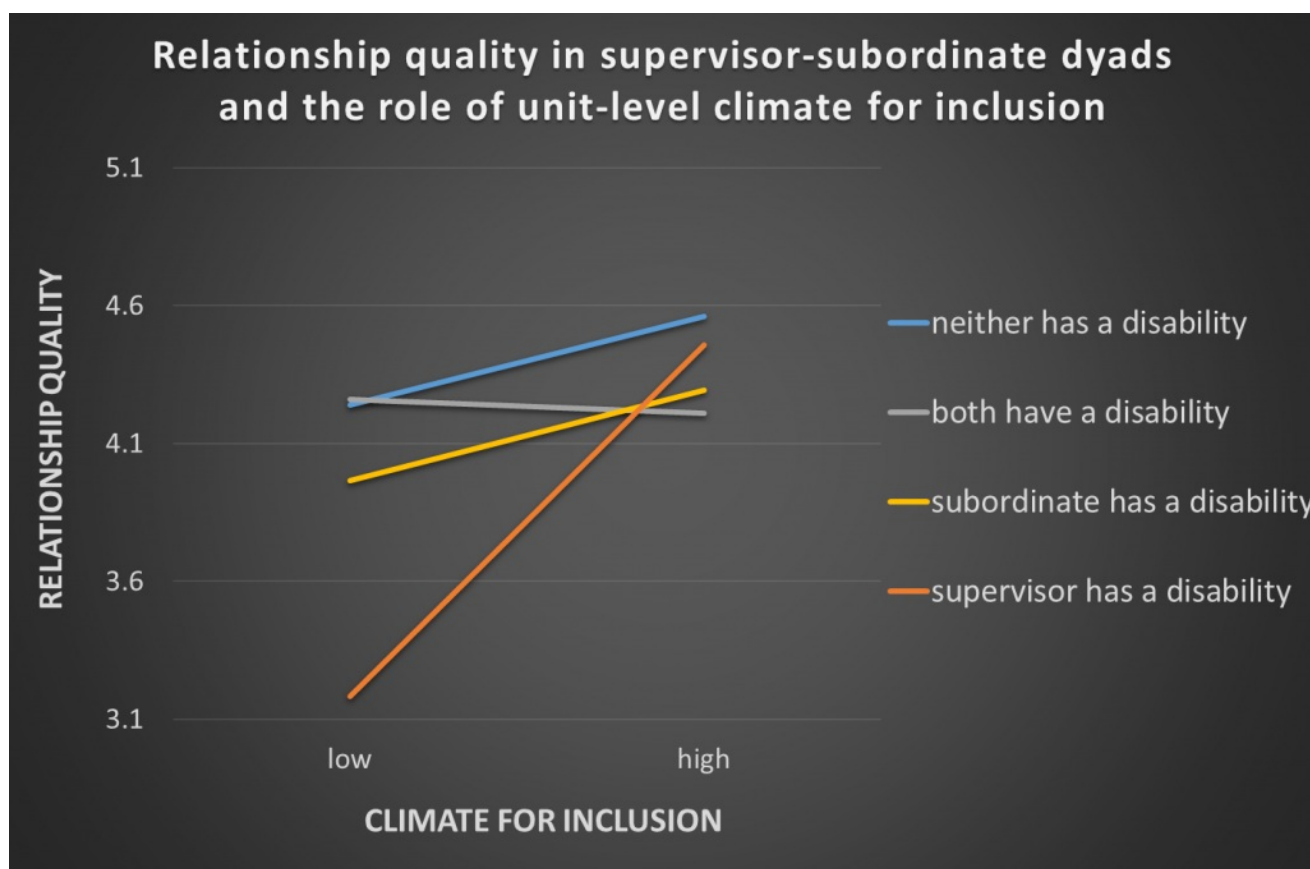
In line with prior findings, our analyses revealed that relationship quality and subordinate performance are lower in incongruent dyads in which only one person has a disability when compared to congruent dyads in which both members or neither member has a disability.

Surprisingly, the outcomes were the worst when the supervisor had a disability. We explain this effect based on differences in expectations for supervisors (high expectations, high skills, high performance, etc.) and people with disabilities (lower expectations, lower skills, lower performance, etc.).

Basically, the expectations and stereotypes that people hold about supervisors and about people with a disability do not match. Subordinates are likely to perceive such a misfit and react negatively. Furthermore, people with disabilities are often stigmatized in society and the workplace as being less productive and competent.

These stigmas are not only limited to the person with the disability but can also spill over to colleagues or subordinates who are close to that person. Subordinates often form relationships with managers in order to gain respect, support, and, ultimately, sponsorship to move up the organizational ladder. If the supervisor is stigmatized due to his or her disability, subordinates may exhibit distancing behavior. Taken together, status differences leading to a mismatch in characteristics and the threat of stigma-by-association effects seem to play an important role in explaining the asymmetric effects on relationship quality that we found.

Figure 1: Relationship quality in supervisor-subordinate dyads and the role of unit-level climate for inclusion



Moreover, our analyses also reveal that the negative effect of supervisor disability is less strong in teams with an inclusive climate. Inclusive climates, which are defined as shared social norms about how to treat people who are

different from you, work as a buffer. Supervisors can foster inclusive climates by clearly communicating their expectations, intervening in situations in which team members violate expectations, and acting as role models. Thus, while supervisors are at specific risk to face negative consequences based on disabilities and health issues, they are also well-equipped to prevent such negative effects. Given the fact that most Western societies are aging, which will increase the amount of health issues in the workplace, the capability to create inclusive climates has become a crucial skill for leaders.



Notes:

- This blog post is based on [Status matters: The asymmetric effects of supervisor-subordinate disability incongruence and climate for inclusion](#), *Academy of Management Journal*, February 1, 2016 vol. 59 no. 1 44-64
- The post gives the views of its authors, not the position of LSE Business Review or the London School of Economics.
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