Stooping Down to Succeed: How Female Supervisors Motivate Worker Productivity in an Indian Garment Factory

Aruna Ranganathan
Stanford University

Ranjitha Shivaram
MIT

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Using ethnographic, personnel and field experimental data from an Indian garment factory, this paper investigates whether manager gender affects worker productivity in female-typed workplaces and if so, how. We argue that female managers motivate greater worker productivity than male managers in female-typed workplaces by performing subordinate scut work, routine tasks of their subordinates, which increases subordinates’ engagement with their own work. Adopting a full-cycle research design, we first conducted eighteen months of ethnographic fieldwork, 120 interviews and surveys with workers and supervisors at this factory, which produced three hypotheses about supervisor gender, scut work and worker productivity. To test the hypotheses, we drew on personnel data on individual daily productivity using a sample of 199 female workers over a two-year period, exploiting quasi-random changes in supervisor gender for these workers. We finally conducted a lab-in-the-field experiment, where we experimentally manipulated supervisors’ ability to perform subordinate scut work in experimental sessions; each session consisted of five randomly-selected workers individually performing a uniform task under either a male or female supervisor. This field experiment gave us quantitative data on individual worker productivity as well as data on engagement with work through video recordings of the sessions. Our personnel data revealed that female supervisors elicited 5% higher productivity from their female workers than male supervisors and our experimental data showed that taking away female supervisors’ ability to perform subordinate scut work affected workers’ level of engagement with their work and resulted in lower worker productivity. This paper contributes to the literature on motivating worker productivity by drawing attention to the important role of manager gender and by highlighting how, in female-typed workplaces, female managers could outperform their male counterparts. The paper also contributes to the literature on gender and leadership by uncovering subordinate scut work as an important managerial practice adopted by female managers that fosters engagement with work and improves realized worker productivity.