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Emerald Article: Swearing at work and permissive leadership culture: When anti-social becomes social and incivility is acceptable

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Swearing at work and permissive leadership culture

When anti-social becomes social and incivility is acceptable

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to examine the use of expletives and swearing in the workplace. It proposes to challenge leadership style and to suggest ideas for management best practice.

Design/methodology/approach – Case studies and qualitative analysis were applied, methods that fit well for this sensitive topic.

Findings – This paper identifies the relevance, and even the importance, of using non-conventional and sometimes uncivil language in the workplace.

Research limitations/implications – Sample size and representativeness present limitations.

Practical implications – There is a need for leaders to apply, under certain circumstances, a permissive leadership culture. This paper advises leaders on how it may lead to positive consequences.

Originality/value – The paper is an original contribution to an area where research is scarce. A certain originality element stems from the fact that, focusing on swearing language, the paper found it necessary to use swear words (avoiding usage of the explicit form); bearing in mind the purpose of the paper, the paper hopes that this will not cause offence to the readership of the journal.

Keywords Leadership, Linguistics, Employee behaviour, Problem employees

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Much of the literature in organizational psychology and management has focused on the positive side of people management. Conceptual frameworks have emphasized positive elements in terms of both attitudes (satisfaction, commitment, and involvement) and behaviour (performance and citizenship). Studies of negative behaviour (such as misconduct and aggression) exist too. A growing literature has emerged on adverse behaviour in the organizational context (Ackroyd and Thompson, 1999). Studies typically focused on the negative outcomes of physical or verbal misbehaviour.

We have developed a model which suggests that under certain circumstances, negative behaviours may end with positive outcomes for individuals, groups, and consequently their organizations. Our aim is to explore the use of swearing in the workplace, not merely in its dysfunctional, aggressive form, but rather focusing on its possible positive aspects. These aspects can be swearing that enables employees to

As this paper deals with swearing language it was found necessary to use swear words (not in their explicit form). Bearing in mind the purpose of the paper, the authors hope that this will not cause offence to the readership of the journal.

better express their feelings (such as frustration), to develop social relationships, or to signal solidarity.

We wish to apologize to readers who may find the use of swear words offensive. Such usage is not typical in academic writing. Nevertheless, in making certain academic points within this paper, it was necessary to use some swear words, although we avoided their explicit form. Bearing in mind the purpose of the paper, we hope that this will be accepted.

Theory development

We approach workplace swearing from two distinct perspectives: managerial and linguistic. Regarding the managerial, we examine how far societal norms, in particular those associated with misbehaviour, should be allowed to penetrate the workplace. We highlight a specific case where apparent misbehaviour can serve an organization well. The question of whether or not to be permissive to this phenomenon is a clear leadership challenge. From the linguistic perspective, we examine the nature of swearing and its relevance in society. We explore varying norms across gender, occupation, and seniority (see Callahan *et al.*, 2005, for gender leadership differences).

Studies of negative behaviours in organizations suffer from a lack of a clear definition. "Deviant behaviour" (Robinson and Bennett, 1995); "Misbehaviour in organizations" (Sagie *et al.*, 2003; Vardi and Weitz, 2004); "Dysfunctional behaviour" (Griffin *et al.*, 1999) are some of the many taxonomies used to reflect negative, antisocial, and sometimes destructive behaviours. Studies have produced ample evidence for the negative outcomes of such behaviours, both for individuals and their employing organizations.

Not all swearing, of course, may manifest positive outcomes. For example, bullying is a verbal aggressive behaviour (Adams, 1998), which was found to carry adverse effects on organizational dynamics (Glendinning, 2001; Baruch, 2005). Abusive behaviour and swearing is detrimental even when staffs are not physically harmed. Repeated occurrences of swearing, threats and verbal abuse can lead to depression, stress, reduced morale, absenteeism, retention problems, reduced productivity, and damage the image of the organization (Swallow, 2004). However, we argue that such behaviour may emerge in the form of self-expression, socialistic mechanism, and even be instrumental for release of stress.

The language and other forms of expression people use are part of the style applied in an organization (Westwood and Linstead, 2001). Expressive style forms part of what makes and maintains distinct identities within organizations (Scherer, 2003, p. 327), and forms organizational culture (Schein, 1985). The way we use and interpret language, expression, and other symbols is part of the creation of cultural assumptions (Hatch, 1993). Interpretation of swearing, rather than its simplistic literal meaning, might be relevant.

Language in the workplace

Organizations place great importance on their public image and their customer service, in order to create a competitive advantage. They are therefore keen to align with their customers' expectations, which are usually closely linked to prestigious societal norms. Consequently, organizations avoid revealing their internal culture if it contrasts or challenges societal norms, so they present a prestigious "public face". Taboo language

should therefore be unacceptable for staff working in areas where they can be heard (or overheard) by customers.

However, the majority of employees do not have direct contact with the public. Workplace language may therefore evolve to suit the culture and needs of particular groups of employees. Different domains, such as operational meetings or informal workplace discourse, dictate the use of different speech modes. They sometimes include the use of swearing.

Swearing in society

Modes of language, and the reactions they bring about, are part of the power strategies used for defining interpersonal relationships, and alignment (or otherwise) with societal norms. However, "powerful" speech styles vary between cultures. For example, confrontational language that violates taboos is seen as a powerful style in the West, but would be viewed as immature and weak in Japan (Wetzel, 1988).

Taboos in society are usually defined, upheld, and avoided by the dominant and socially powerful. Linguistic taboos, in the form of swearing, usually focus on sex, excretion, and anything else that has a sacred place in the belief systems of a community (de Klerk, 1991). People are expected to discuss matters without using taboo words. Nevertheless, swear words are not always considered offensive because of their denotative meaning, but because of the affectation and reactions they arouse (Paivio and Begg, 1981). Social class acts as a further intervening variable, as linguistic norms vary across social classes. In the Western model, swearing is considered powerful because it challenges the societal class codes. This is particularly the case with interactions between the working class and the middle and upper classes (Chaika, 1982). However, working class people who use taboo language may not intend to shock; they may simply consider it to be an everyday norm (Hughes, 1992).

Overall, the amount of profanity used in conversation has increased dramatically during the past few decades (DuFrene and Lehman, 2002). This has been attributed to a number of factors (McGrath, 1994):

- increasing social informality and freedom since the 1960s;
- a decrease in the importance of religion to many Western cultures; and
- the relaxing of profanity codes in movies and on television.

The trend is continuing, and is indicative of a shift in societal norms. Swearing has now become so commonplace and pervasive in the mass media, that it has become almost a new norm, and has largely lost its ability to shock (Peterson, 2000). To a certain extent there has been a backlash against this trend. Its effect can particularly be seen in relation to workplace language in the USA. Many management consultancies proclaim that firms should eradicate swearing in this environment. Associations such as the Cuss Control Academy try to stem the flow of taboo language. However, some see the backlash as the over-application of political correctness (Freedman, 2000).

A question remains concerning the direction of influence. Does the increased use of profanity in society penetrate organizations, or does profanity within organizations spread to the wider society? Based on the discussion above, we assume that organizational phenomena follow societal norms, rather than organizations influencing society.

Types of swearing
Montagu (2001) classifies swearing into social swearing and annoyance swearing. We
will now discuss both to better understand how they may fit into workplace language.

Social swearing
Social swearing is used conversationally in order to help define interpersonal
relationships. It may signify membership of a social group (or social class, in context),
or to signal or develop in-group solidarity. This may be part of ingratiatory behaviour
(Kipnis *et al.*, 1980), where people use a variety of linguistic ways to increase their
attractiveness and influence other's behaviour (Liden and Mitchell, 1988). This may
take the form of humour manipulation (Cooper, 2005). Swearing will typify certain
sub-groups, and even within these sub-groups, swearing would usually be contingent
on contextual situations or scenarios. An organization as a whole tends to have
an identifiable culture, and a number of sub-cultures, formed spontaneously and
informally. The characteristics of each sub-culture are defined by the patterns of
interaction between its members, and their shared ways of working.

The group identity of sub-cultures within an organization aligns with the
community of practice model, and their mode of language can become one of their
defining features (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 1999). Within each community of
practice, communication is likely to feature the use of linguistic politeness strategies.
A speech act that reinforces the positive face or self-image of the addressee is an
example of a positive politeness strategy (Brown and Levinson, 1987, p. 61). Within a
close-knit work group, swearing has been shown to often be used as a form of positive
politeness (Daly *et al.*, 2004).

Swearing can serve to manifest and signal solidarity. In some organizations,
swearing is tolerated either formally, or due to permissive control leadership approach.
Within such organizations, sub-cultures may exist that have a lively, boisterous
communication style, with friendly insults and a witty use of coarse, casual profanity.
Swearing is then seen to be a mark of solidarity within the group. This is particularly
the case with all-male or male-dominated sub-cultures, due to the competitive nature of
men's speech (Coates, 2002). Daly *et al.* (2004) found many clear instances of swearing
aimed at signalling solidarity in all-male factory sub-cultures. The same politeness
strategy is used both in direct complaints, where the speaker expects the addressee to
rectify matters, and whinges, where the speaker seeks sympathy from an addressee
who is not directly responsible for the perceived offence.

Annoyance swearing
Annoyance swearing provides a "relief mechanism" for the release of stress and
tension (Montagu, 2001, p. 67) and is valued as such because it replaces primitive
physical aggression (Jay, 1999, p. 59).

Levels of social and annoyance swearing are correlated with stress (Montagu, 2001).
When there is no or little stress, social swearing can dominate. As stress levels rise,
social swearing tends to decrease, while annoyance swearing increases. Further,
increases in the stress level cause social swearing to cease, while annoyance swearing
continues, up to a point. In situations of unbearably high stress, swearing tends to stop
altogether. In high-stress workplaces where swearing is permitted, this can be a
valuable signal. As long as the employees are swearing, they may not be happy, but

they are coping. A cessation of swearing indicates that intervention is required, as there is a risk to employees' health (Montagu, 2001) (Figure 1).

Taking this point to the extreme, Wajnryb (2003) offers advice for executives who have to make staff redundant: "If you're worried about which laid-off employee is going to show up with a semi-automatic and shoot up the office, be wary of the non-swearers".

Impact of swearing

Social swearing provides stress release for individuals, and helps to develop group norms and cohesion. This subsequently improves both individual and group well being. Conversely, annoyance swearing tends to increase stress for individuals, and hinders positive group norms and cohesion, hampering both individuals' and groups' well being.

Moderating factors

Two different types of factors may interfere with the spread of profanity from the society into organizations. One type is individual characteristics such as gender (our focus here), age, religion and ethnic background. The other factor relates to group characteristics including sector of activity, such as industrial, retail, office-based, academic, etc.

Gender and swearing

We will discuss two issues – societal norms relating to gender and the double standard applied to males and females. One of the most significant societal norms about swearing is the stereotypical difference in the way that men and women use taboo language. Interaction may exist between swearing and gender, variety of cultural norms, and different professions. A traditionally held norm implies that women tend to use a more prestigious style of speech than men, and avoid swearing (Jespersen, 1922). Other norms indicate the higher tendency of male leaders to be expressive (Callahan *et al.*, 2005). However, it is wrong to simply position speech styles into two mutually
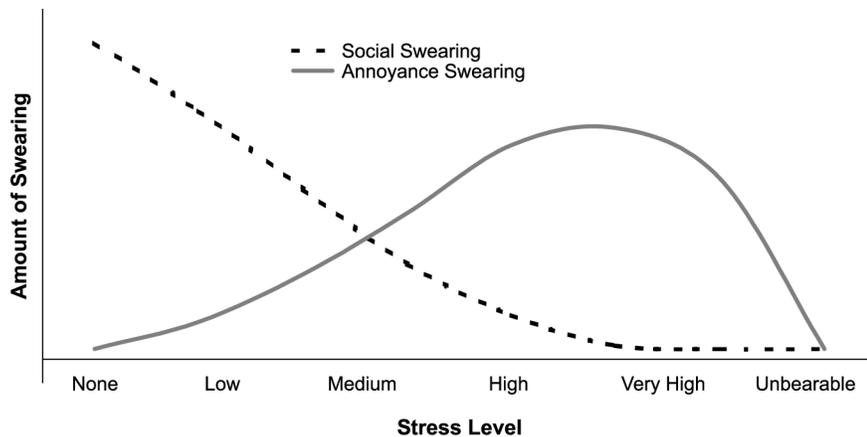

Figure 1.
Dichotomy of types of swearing

Source: Montagu (2001)

exclusive groups by gender (Hughes, 1992; Stapleton, 2003). Research has found that to describe "women's speech" in universal terms is an overgeneralization (Cameron and Coates, 1988, p. 7). Scholars should avoid stereotypical classification of gender-based apparent language use, and instead, examine each case for the potential difference.

While the traditional assertion is not totally false, it is perhaps more a description of how earlier writers felt that women ought to talk (Coates, 1986). Significantly, such hypotheses were not supported by empirical research (Limbrick, 1991). The use of swearing by women has been found to be more widespread than many previously believed (de Klerk, 1992; Limbrick, 1991). In an informal social setting, female swore slightly less than the males in single-sex groups, but slightly more than males in mixed-sex groups (Limbrick, 1991).

Western society has many deep-seated norms related to taboo subjects and gender. Often, the taboos conceal a double standard. A particular example is societal attitudes towards promiscuity, in which males who are promiscuous are revered, but promiscuous women are considered to be in some way immoral. Attitudes towards language represent a similar double standard by gender, as female swearers are often perceived to be of a low moral standing. Swearing is associated with the working classes, and working class women tend to be thought of by the middle and upper classes as being more promiscuous. Consequently, there is evidence to suggest that avoidance of swearing by middle and upper class women is based on their desire to avoid being thought of as promiscuous (Gordon, 1997).

Men are indeed likely to swear less in the company of women. This may be an attempt to prevent offence, rather than mirroring the perceived female style as a form of linguistic accommodation. The norm of women swearing less is not empirically supported. Women speaking in informal single-sex groups tend to swear far more than men perceive that they would (Limbrick, 1991). Women tend to swear more in mixed company, but that is not because men's swearing is considered to be a linguistic style worth emulating. Instead, women use swearing to add emphasis to their speech, in order to assert their presence in a mixed-sex group and prevent the conversation from being male-dominated (Limbrick, 1991).

Sector of activity and professions
We argue that at the group level, both sector of activity and professions are decisive factors that can prevent or enable the spread of swearing language from society to organizations. For example, although an academic environment can have high stress levels (Caplow and McGee, 1958; Baruch and Hall, 2004), it is generally not permissive to swearing language. However, in the construction or food industries, swearing may prevail and be generally accepted. Thus, the spreading of swearing language will be moderated by sector of activity and type of professions. Some will still regard swearing as a taboo, whereas others are open to accept and apply swearing language within the workplace boundaries.

Model development
Following the above discussion, we developed the following emergent model (Figure 2).

We propose that the way swearing permeates the workplace will be subject to workplace characteristics and other moderating factors. The model refers to the distinction between social swearing and annoyance swearing, and how their impacts

Figure 2.
An emergent model for the consequences of swearing at workplace
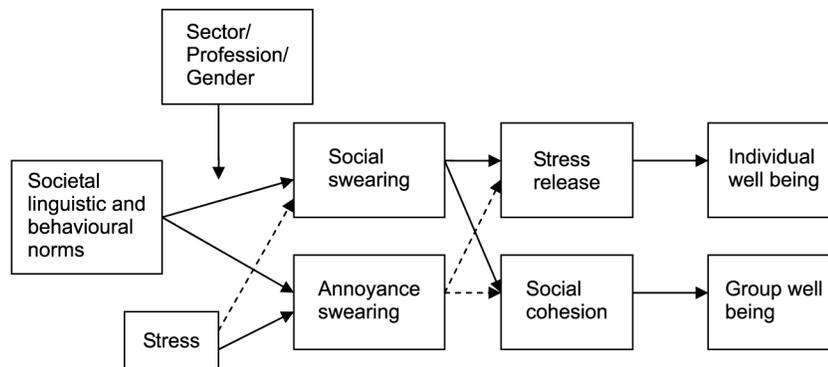
Note: Dotted lines represent negative relationships

manifest themselves. Social swearing is seen to correlate to positive outcomes on stress release and group cohesion. This model combines individual and group levels of analysis, with implications to the organizational level (Klein and Kozlowski, 2000).

The study design examined whether swearing follows societal norms, and whether the two forms of social swearing and annoyance swearing exist separately in organizational settings. In addition, we examined further aspects of gender and culture. We did not target a wide variety of professions, as pilot studies and anecdotal evidence indicated that in some professions (e.g. high-end retail) swearing would not exist.

Method

While the model presented above fits well with a positivist approach of listing and testing an explicit set of hypotheses, the nature of the subject would not allow for using a conventional quantitative method (e.g. questionnaires). Collecting first-hand data on swearing is a challenging task, and needs to follow guidelines for conducting research on sensitive topics (Lee, 1995). Firms tend to be reluctant to admit that swearing characterizes part of their operation. A direct, "front door" approach is troublesome for a number of reasons (Stubbe, 1998):

- The study will potentially be intrusive, time-consuming, and disruptive to the individuals or organizations involved. The firm may expect some consideration in return for their investment of staff time.

- Obtaining accurate data requires a long time frame. Participants may initially be shy about their conversations being recorded, and will tend to modify their behaviour in order to create a good impression.

- Research of this type is an ethical minefield. The firm will be concerned about its reputation and image, whereas the employees will be concerned about control of the data in order to maintain good relationships with their colleagues and employer.

A more relevant and feasible way to collect sensitive data is action research (Jankowicz, 2005), where the researcher is engaged in the organization as a participant. This helps to overcome the above mentioned issues, and enables discussion of real life

in organizations (Dutton, 2003). The data collection for this study was conducted while the second author was employed in a temporary position in a mail-order warehouse. Using this ethnographic approach was advocated by Analoui and Kakabadse (1993) and Hodson (2005). Further, data was collected in focus groups of part-time workers in a variety of organizations in the southern USA and in England.

Participative case study: a mail-order warehouse
The second author had the opportunity to observe workplace swearing while working in a small British retail enterprise. The firm is a mail-order operation employing 14 people, equally divided between office and warehouse environments. The premises featured an office/administrative department at one end of a large building, and a goods in/goods out department at the other end. These two departments had unique sub-cultures, based on the features shown in Table I.

The two groups maintained an "us & them" mentality, which reinforced within-group solidarity. Their physical separation meant that there was no danger of the packers' swearing being overheard by customers. While using the same staff canteen, breaks were taken at different times and it was rare for the office and packing staff to mix in an informal setting.

The packers did not swear in the presence of female office staff. This aligns to the popular view that men use few expletives in the company of the opposite sex, and that this phenomenon is a pervasive societal norm (Bailey and Timm, 1977). If a female office worker walked past the packing floor on the way to the rest-room, this would immediately produce a cessation of any expletive-laden conversation about taboo topics.

Initially, although the second author was classified within the organization's cultural setup as being part of the packers' sub-culture, as a new temporary employee he was not accepted as part of the close-knit social group of long-standing, permanently employed packers. This was attributed to the firm's relatively high turnover of temporary agency staff. He initially either used traditional "polite" language, or social swearing which was directed at inanimate objects rather than a particular person.

All agency temps were subjected to verbal derision and minor physical abuse, particularly from Ernest (pseudonym), a permanent packer, who appeared to hold an informal seniority within the sub-culture. This often took the form of swearing insults,

	Office	Goods in/out
Gender	Almost exclusively female	Exclusively male
Customer contact	High, by telephone	None
Managerial supervision	High	Low
Visibility of operational failures	High	None
Language used	Polite, professional	Coarse, with considerable amounts of swearing
Social relationships between co-workers	Harmonious, calm	Competitive, boisterous
Background noise	None	Radio station

Table I.

semi-playful punches to the torso, tripping, etc. Ernest was seemingly "testing" the new temps to see if they were worthy of being included in the social group of permanent packers.

After a couple of months, a noteworthy incident occurred. Ernest was verbally abusing the second author, and attempting to belittle his efforts by citing that he (Ernest) had a higher workload. The second author replied in a very loud voice, "Well fxxxxxg get on with it then, you lazy cxxx".

He could hear mocking gasps of incredulity from the other permanent packers, one of whom said "That's fighting talk". Indeed, to an outsider this may have appeared to be an example of annoyance swearing. However, the second author was taking a gamble that it would be accepted as social swearing. The gamble paid off. A wry smile appeared on Ernest's face as he turned and walked away, muttering some profane insult. After this incident, the second author found himself being invited by Ernest to join in with packers' social activities from which he had previously been excluded. It seems that after demonstrating a minimum required level of skill at the work, he had identified the profane linguistic "initiation rite" for inclusion in the packers' social group, and used it successfully.

Focus groups and other evidence

The following cases, vignettes, and examples were gathered via six focus group discussions (four in a southern USA state, two in England) as well as additional anecdotal evidence. Full time and part time employees, mostly students in class discussions in groups of 10-20, were asked to reflect on both positive and negative use and "application" of swearing in the workplace. They were working in a variety of sectors, and as expected, the responses reflected certain variance amongst sectors and occupational groups (excluding affluent sectors).

Restaurants are one work environment from which a number of the cases emerged. They present a case where there is a clear separation between "working area" and "customer area" (Orwell, 1933). While we found unanimous agreement that swearing is never used when serving customers, the picture was very different for the kitchen staff. A UK restaurant worker (cook) described the situation:

> ... most chefs have quite foul mouths, even if it's to themselves, just to let off some steam. For example, if you have 5 checks on and another big one comes on, everyone will just say "Oh for fxxx's sake"... note that language will be internal to the kitchen staff, and not delivered, for example, even to the waiters unless it's in jest, or they've been very very useless.

This example features evidence of a positive politeness strategy. By mirroring each others' whinge with a whinge of their own, the chefs are displaying a classic solidarity-building response (Coates, 1996). In a different case where most swearing was by males, a part time employee suggested: "I think they use it to show their manhood". Nevertheless, swearing was not an exclusively male phenomenon. In another restaurant, a female waiter said that "... everybody from the wait-staff to bartenders to managers and cooks swear on a daily basis ... It didn't matter what gender ..." Gender was an issue, though, in a different workplace, where a female staff member indicated that: "swearing occurred usually among the men, separate from women's close proximity; and among the women, separate from men's close proximity".

A male retail sales employee from Texas also said:

> I work with people who cuss or swear all the time as regular part of their immediate vocabulary. When customers are near though, all of those foul words cease for the time being, and as soon as the customers are out of ear shot, the regular foul language starts again. It is interesting how people don't want to offend customers but they don't mind offending co-workers!

The issue of customers causing cessation of employees' foul language also came from an employee of an American bank. This was unexpected, given the relatively prestigious nature of the environment. He pointed out: "many times customers will become rude and verbally abusive. Employees never cuss directly at these customers, but when the customer leaves there is usually a lot of cussing …". Similarly, a female employee described her work as a customer service representative as one where she must be "extra nice". On hanging up the phone after dealing with an abusive customer, she and her co-workers would "… curse the person as if they were doing it to them on the phone …" Nevertheless, a number of people reported that when swearing is the norm, sometimes people "slip" and curse while customers are nearby, or even when discussing matters with customers.

Working in nursing home for elderly people in England, a member of the support staff recalled swearing among nurses of mixed gender, but not in front of the patients. During breaks, swearing would come into conversation to emphasize dissatisfaction, or create a good impression (it was fxxxxxg amazing). A similar case came from a female nurse assistant in a Texas hospital. During the breaks the female nurses would swear, especially when an incident with a patient had caused elevated levels of stress. Their most used expletive was "sxxx" perhaps corresponding to the nature of a common cause of their stress – a mess in the bathroom or bed. "The 'Oh sxxx' was just a way to tell others about your own increasing stress level" as the nurse explained.

What exactly do they say? The most prominent expletives were of the "four letter" variety, in all their forms. We will avoid use of their explicit form:

> "What the fxxx?"… "Fxxx you, man"… "This is a fxxxxxg waste of time".

> However, "sxxx" came a close second, such as in – "Ah, sxxxx, that sucks". (Sxxx was the favourite swear-word in the hospital reported by the female nurse above).

Discussion and conclusions
Swearing is an existing organizational phenomenon, but rarely studied and reported in literature (Daly *et al.*, 2004). Our contribution to these pioneering studies has explored the use of profanity in organizational settings. The data suggests regular use of profanity to express solidarity within a community of practice. It is usually restricted to low level employees, but in some environments may spread through line management to professional and executive levels.

We have developed a model for understanding the antecedents and consequences of swearing in the workplace, and applied a qualitative study to validate the model. We focused on the central section of the model, as the antecedents and the outcomes, such as the impact of stress release on well being, were already discussed in the literature. The swearing under focus represented both social and annoyance swearing. We found that employees use swearing on a continuous basis, but not necessarily in a negative,

abusive manner. Swearing came as a social phenomenon (to reflect solidarity and enhance group cohesion) or as a psychological phenomenon (to release stress). Most of the cases were reported by employees at the lower levels of organizational hierarchies. It is clear from the studies that executives use swearing language less frequently. The primary issue for management is whether or not to apply permissive leadership culture to workplace, and deliberately allow swearing.

Our findings match with the general positive outcomes of permissive culture and leadership. Indeed, members of organizations that experience high levels of stress in a hectic organizational context had a more permissive collective conception of well being (Lansisalmi *et al.*, 2000). Apart from gender, age was a factor too. The majority of our participants in the focus groups (and all the workers in the case study) were below 30. Younger managers and professionals were found to be more permissive in what they accept as ethical behaviour (Longenecker *et al.*, 1989). Therefore, age may serve as a moderator for the spreading of swearing language to the workplace.

Managerial implications
Leaders might find themselves in an uncomfortable situation in which they are not quite sure how to behave. They may be torn between applying strong leadership or permissive leadership (Tannenbaum and Schmidt, 1986), and teaching leadership in such situations can be a tricky issue (Hay and Hodgkinson, 2006). Their immediate instinct, based on their education and long-term experience with the executive levels of the organization, might lead them to consider a ban on foul language, and to demonstrate strong leadership in a strict, regulated work environment.

Our study suggests that contrary to this inclination, a permissive culture can benefit the organization. However, a permissive culture is not always the correct choice. In certain aspects where there is a physical risk, such as problem drinking, permissive norms were the strongest predictor of highly negative outcomes (Bacharach *et al.*, 2002).

A ban on swear words may represent strong leadership, as opposed to permissive leadership. However, such a ban would remove the source of solidarity that binds small communities of practice, such as that of the packers in our warehouse example. In doing so, it could work against the possibility of developing self-managed teams (Bertolotti *et al.*, 2005). This could seriously decrease morale and work motivation, and may lead to valued, skilled staff wanting to leave. A more permissive leadership would mean finding a way to bridge the gap between management and employees. This approach should acknowledge that the gap may also be age related, in line with the distinction of norms (Gattiker and Kelley, 1999). This allows the identities of organizational sub-cultures to be maintained. Attempting to change the norms of a sub-culture would take a long time (Higgins and McAllaster, 2002), and the leadership may not wish or be able to invest effort in the possibly futile exercise of eliminating non-abusive swearing.

Of course, abusive and offensive swearing should be eliminated in any organizational context. It generates greater levels of stress, rather helping to dissipate it. If an employee feels that they have been the subject of a strongly worded offensive outburst by their supervisor which belittles their conduct or capability, they may be seriously de-motivated. In extreme cases, they may interpret the outburst as a dismissal, and bring a law suit against the organization, citing constructive dismissal.

For example, in one case a manager described his personal assistant to her face as being "an intolerable bitch on a Monday morning". The PA immediately resigned, sued for constructive dismissal, and won (Pallot, 2002).

In the warehouse case, one may argue that co-location and better integration of the departments could lead to improvements in operational performance. The most probable result of such a change is that the linguistic style of each group would evolve, as the cultural boundaries shifted in an informal setting. To generalize within the limitations explained earlier, the men would tend to swear less, and conversely the women would tend to swear more. This could be superficially explained as being compliant with accommodation theory (Bell, 1984), in which speakers tend to change their linguistic style to mirror that of the addressee, in order to gain approval.

From managerial philosophy to policy and practice
Managers have many responsibilities, including protecting the welfare of their employees, protecting the public with whom they interact, and upholding the reputation of the organization. Management is not an accurate, natural science, and in many ways can be seen as an "art". When applying this philosophy to workplace language, it is not sufficient to interpret management responsibility as a reason to introduce a draconian code of conduct which bans swearing outright. The challenge is to master the "art" of knowing when to turn a blind eye to norms of communication that, do not confer with their own standards.

Certainly in most scenarios, in particular in the presence of customers or senior staff, profanity must be seriously discouraged or banned. However, our study suggested that in many cases, taboo language serves the needs of people for developing and maintaining solidarity and as a mechanism to cope with stress. Allowing an official "no swearing" policy to be informally ignored in some contexts may be a sensible outcome. However, we do not suggest that organizations should deliberately adopt profane language.

Evidence has been presented which demonstrates that allowing employees to use swearing as part of their workplace discourse can have identifiable social benefits. Leaders should analyze the wants and needs of all the parties involved, in order to balance the effects of:

- Strong versus permissive leadership.
- Cross-gender workplace interactions.
- Identifying features of sub-cultures or communities of practice.
- The need for employees to verbally "let off steam".
- The risk of litigation.

In a litigious society, such as that prevailing in most Western environments, it is important to differentiate witty profanity that is consensual within all the members of a group, from offensive profanity which can contravene legislation, or lead to civil law suits. If swearing is to be allowed, firms must be aware of the dangers posed by language which causes discrimination or harassment. In controlling non-discriminatory taboo language, or "equal opportunity swearing" (Risser, 1996), managers need to understand how their staff feel about swearing. This awareness allows the formation a policy which defines the linguistic standards for the workplace

environment, and exactly what language, when used by employees, constitutes gross misconduct (Pallot, 2002). Smaller companies, where managers know their staff well, lend themselves to relatively uninhibited workplace talk. In larger corporations, executives cannot possibly know the tolerances of each employee; consequently they must be more restrictive in prohibiting taboo language.

The law is not always consistent in relation to workplace profanity. Language commonly used in comparable situations may not always be a suitable guide to defining the limits, as constructive dismissal cases have been won by ex-employees of an industry where swearing was the norm (Robins, 2003). However, some judges have taken the opposite view, and ruled that there is no case to answer in workplace profanity law suits, on the basis that the employee should "accept a certain amount of boorish behaviour or workplace vulgarity as normal" (Trigaux, 2001). A further "trap" is that a company's language policy must be applied equally to all employees, or they will be open to discrimination law suits (Tahminicioglu, 2001).

We hope that this study will serve not only to acknowledge the part that swearing plays in our work and our lives, but also to indicate that leaders sometimes need to "think differently" and be open to intriguing ideas. Addressing the issue head-on with positive strategies represents a way forward.

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