Protecting Their Turf: When and Why Supervisors Undermine Employee Boundary Spanning

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Abstract

The benefits boundary spanners offer organizations by bridging information silos are well documented. However, informational boundary spanning also implies crossing organizational territories, as employees seek advice from others outside their supervisors' control. Applying a territoriality theory lens, we develop new insights about when and why supervisors may view their subordinates' informational boundary spanning activities unfavorably and attempt to undermine boundary spanners. We argue that undermining results from supervisors perceiving the boundary spanning of their employees as weakening their control over their organizational territory. We further argue that subordinates who seek advice across organizational boundaries without also seeking advice from their supervisor are more likely to be seen by their supervisors as having negative intentions when engaging in boundary spanning, which increases their risk of being undermined. We find support for our arguments in a field study and in a scenario experiment. Our results provide new insights into the potentially negative reactions from supervisors towards employees who engage in boundary spanning. We discuss how these insights contribute to the boundary spanning literature, to territoriality theory, and to the leadership literature.

Keywords: Boundary spanning, supervisor undermining, territoriality, advice seeking.

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Informational boundary spanning, that is, advice seeking across intra-organizational boundaries, enables employees to link information clusters within organizations (Ancona & Caldwell, 1992). This exposure to diverse information and opportunities enhances the performance, creativity, and innovation of boundary spanners, their teams, and their organizations (e.g., de Vries et al., 2014; Hargadon, 2002; Mell et al., 2020; Shah et al., 2018; Tortoriello et al., 2014; Tortoriello & Krackhardt, 2010). Accordingly, considerable attention has been bestowed on the question of how to foster more of this productive behavior (Joshi et al., 2009; Marrone, 2010). Supervisors have been shown to play a key role here. Through strategic direction and supportive coaching, supervisors are able to encourage and support employee boundary spanning (Ancona, 1990; DeChurch & Marks, 2006; Marrone et al., 2021). While extant research has focused on what supervisors can do to foster employee boundary spanning, it has failed to ask whether supervisors actually *want* to foster it.

Although there are many benefits associated with boundary spanning, there are also reasons why supervisors may not necessarily endorse it, encourage it, or remove the barriers faced by boundary spanners in their groups. Considering only the informational benefits of boundary spanning ignores the fact that boundary spanning also implies crossing organizational territories. This, in turn, can trigger territorial dynamics resulting in a counterintuitively negative reaction of supervisors towards boundary spanners. Taking a supervisor's perspective and analyzing the territorial implications of employee boundary spanning is therefore critical in order to create a better understanding of when and why supervisors, rather than celebrating employee boundary spanning, might seek to undermine it.

Territoriality theory views organizational life as fundamentally territorial (Brown et al., 2005), where managers conceive their group of direct subordinates as a territory over

which they develop a sense of control. We argue that supervisors can perceive their subordinates' boundary spanning activities as weakening their control over their territory because they diminish supervisors' control over the group's exposure to information, its external representation, and its boundaries. Although supervisors may consider such control loss as harmless, they may also attribute a harmful intent to the boundary spanner's behavior. In this case, they are more likely to attempt to regain control and dissuade this behavior by undermining the boundary spanning employee. We further argue that this attribution of harmful intent depends on whether boundary spanners seek their supervisor's advice, thereby conforming to the normative expectations embedded in hierarchical relationships (Ibarra, 1992; McEvily et al., 2014). When boundary spanners fail to engage in upward advice seeking, supervisors are more likely to attribute a harmful intent to the activities of the boundary spanners and undermine them.

We test our theoretical predictions in two complementary studies. In Study 1, we take the employee's perspective and show that employees in the field experience more supervisor undermining when they engage in more boundary spanning without also seeking their supervisor's advice. In Study 2, we take the supervisor's perspective and, in a scenario experiment, tease out the mechanisms – control loss and attribution of harmful intent - linking employee boundary spanning, upward advice seeking, and supervisor undermining.

This study makes several contributions. First, it articulates the territorial dimension of informational boundary spanning and challenges the implicit assumption that supervisors have a positive attitude towards boundary spanning. We complement existing lines of research that focused on the challenges associated with boundary spanning for the boundary spanner (Kahn et al., 1964; Katz & Kahn, 1978; Marrone et al., 2007) by highlighting that supervisors themselves, whose support is critical for boundary spanning, might be a source of these challenges. Second, the leadership literature has traditionally studied leaders as focal

agents shaping follower behavior (Bass, 1985; Conger & Kanungo, 1987; van Knippenberg & Sitkin, 2013). We complement this perspective studying how leaders react to follower actions, which also contributes to emergent research that examines why leaders may react negatively to positive employee behaviors (Fast et al., 2014; Halbesleben et al., 2010; Khan et al., 2018). Finally, we contribute to territoriality theory by theorizing about how attributions about the intentions underlying behaviors that weaken territorial control are shaped.

Theoretical Background and Hypotheses

Boundary spanning refers to employee behaviors that span intra-organizational group boundaries, engaging with stakeholders, coordinating with other groups, and seeking information from outside experts (Ancona & Caldwell, 1992; Marrone et al., 2007). Among these, we focus on *informational boundary spanning* ("boundary spanning" hereafter)*,* an individual's seeking advice from actors outside of their group (Tortoriello et al., 2012; Tortoriello & Krackhardt, 2010; Tushman, 1977). By linking information clusters, boundary spanners promote information flow, catalyzing performance and innovation (Marrone, 2010; Shah et al., 2018; Tortoriello & Krackhardt, 2010).

However, in seeking advice from other groups, employees cross not only information clusters, but also organizational territories. Territories are organizational domains over which individuals have feelings of possessiveness (Pierce et al., 2001, 2003). For individuals in supervisory positions, the group they oversee – for example, the team or department they manage – is a highly salient domain to which they attach a strong sense of psychological ownership. Psychological ownership over a domain is the result of three major experiences: investing the self into the domain, developing detailed knowledge of the domain, and exercising control over the domain (Pierce et al., 2003). Supervisors experience all of these elements with respect to the group they manage. First, because managerial performance is

often linked with group performance (Meindl et al., 1985; Meindl & Ehrlich, 1987), the group becomes a key aspect of a supervisor's professional identity. Second, supervisors develop deep knowledge of their employees' goals, needs, skills, and activities (Peterson & Kim, 2012). Finally and crucially, managers are expected to reach goals through the exercise of control over their group (Kniffin et al., 2019).

Why Do Supervisors Undermine Employee Boundary Spanning?

Territoriality theory maintains that individuals use territorial defense behaviors to maintain or secure their control over a valued organizational territory, particularly when their control is contested (Brown et al., 2005, 2014; Brown & Robinson, 2010; Gardner et al., 2018). We argue that when an employee engages in boundary spanning by seeking advice outside their group, this weakens their supervisor's *group territorial control,* that is, the supervisor's perception that they have control over the group that they manage: its boundaries, its external image, and its members' activities and knowledge. This *control loss* occurs for several reasons. First, boundary spanning weakens the supervisor's control over group members' exposure to information. Boundary spanners access information that may be not only novel but also possibly inconsistent with information and priorities transmitted by their supervisor (Aldrich & Herker, 1977; Burt, 1992; Pettigrew, 1972; Soda & Zaheer, 2012) and they are often in a good position to diffuse it among the other group members (Tushman, 1977). Second, supervisors lose control over information leaving their group as boundary spanners could divulge sensitive information about the group to outside parties. Third, supervisors lose control over the group's external image given that boundary spanners are often perceived by outside parties as representing their group (Ancona & Caldwell, 1992). This can dilute outsiders' understanding of who is "in charge" of the group. Fourth, supervisors may sense that they are losing control over who is part of their group (Gardner et al., 2018). As group members spend more time outside the group, the group's membership

7

and boundaries become increasingly blurred (Mortensen, 2014; Mortensen & Haas, 2018).

As a response to the control loss arising from employee boundary spanning, supervisors may engage in *supervisor undermining* towards this employee in order to protect and restore their organizational territory. Supervisor undermining, that is, "behavior intended to hinder, over time, the ability to establish and maintain positive interpersonal relationships, work-related success, and favorable reputation" (Duffy et al., 2002, p. 332), encompasses behaviors characteristic of a territorial response including expressing negative emotions, reasserting control over the territory, and deterring future employee actions that can further reduce the supervisor's group territorial control (Brown et al., 2005; Brown & Robinson, 2010).

When Do Supervisors Undermine Employee Boundary Spanning?

While control loss resulting from employee boundary spanning can trigger supervisor undermining as a territorial defense mechanism, territoriality theory suggests that such a reaction is more likely when an individual interprets the behavior as an intentional act aiming to inflict harm upon them (Brown et al., 2005). This is important because from a supervisor's perspective, employee boundary spanning is laden with ambiguity. It might be perceived as in line with the supervisor's interests, for example, as reflecting an employee's genuine desire to contribute novel insight to the group. Yet, it might also be perceived as an attempt to harm the supervisor's interests, for example, by increasing the employee's reputation at the expense of the supervisor's reputation. While the boundary spanning behavior weakens the supervisor's control in either scenario, it is in the latter scenario that supervisors are more likely to react to control loss by undermining the employee. A key question, then, is what shapes a supervisor's attributions of an employee's boundary spanning behavior.

Supervisors will make attributions based on their understanding of the motivations underlying an employee's boundary spanning behavior. Because these motivations are

difficult to uncover directly, supervisors may rely on multiple sources of information and on observing and interpreting the employee's behavior. While employee boundary spanning may lead to a supervisor's experience of control loss over their territory, we argue that it is more likely to be attributed to a harmful intention when other cues suggest that the employee is trying to undermine the supervisor in other ways. On the other hand, when other cues do not support this impression, the control loss implied by the employee's boundary spanning is less likely to be seen as an attempt to purposefully inflict harm on the supervisor.

A particularly salient and informative contextual cue a supervisor might attend to when interpreting an employee's boundary spanning behavior is *upward advice seeking* - that is, the employee's advice seeking from the supervisor. Advice seeking and giving is an important component of workplace relationships that has not only a practical but also a symbolic function. Beyond the exchange of information, the act of seeking advice also acknowledges the advisor's expertise and conforms to the normative expectations embedded in hierarchical relationships (Agneessens & Wittek, 2012; McEvily et al., 2014). By seeking the supervisor's advice, the employee reinforces the status hierarchy and recognizes the supervisor in their managerial role, thus affirming their control over the group (DeRue & Ashford, 2010). Conversely, the absence of upward advice seeking appears to ignore the supervisor's seniority despite the formally "prescribed" hierarchical relationship (Ibarra, 1992; Magee & Galinsky, 2008). These behavioral cues form the background before which the supervisor will view the employee's boundary spanning behavior. Arguably, it is in the second situation – when the employee deviates from the normative expectations associated with the hierarchical relationship by not seeking advice from their own supervisor – that the supervisor will attribute more harmful intent to boundary spanning. Hence, we expect that employee upward advice seeking will affect how supervisors respond to employee boundary spanning: Supervisors will be more likely to engage in undermining behavior in response to

employee boundary spanning when the employee does not seek their supervisor's advice.

We present our full conceptual model in Figure 1. In summary, we argue that employee boundary spanning can trigger territorial behavior in supervisors because it weakens a supervisor's territorial control over their group. Supervisors who experience control loss as a result of employee boundary spanning are likely to attempt to protect their organizational territory and recover control by engaging in undermining behaviors towards a boundary spanning employee, especially when they attribute harmful intentions to the boundary spanning behavior. Finally, boundary spanners can reduce their supervisor's attribution of harmful intent (and thus the potential undermining associated with boundary spanning) by seeking their supervisor's advice. We derive the following formal hypothesis:

Hypothesis. The association between employee boundary spanning and supervisor undermining is moderated by upward advice seeking, such that it is more positive in the absence of upward advice seeking than in the presence of it.

We tested this hypothesis from the perspective of the employee using a field study (Study 1). In Study 2, we examined this hypothesis from the perspective of the supervisor using a scenario experiment. This offered a test of the assumed mechanisms of control loss and attribution of harmful intent that link the endpoints of our theoretical model.

Insert Figure 1 about here

Study 1

Sample

We recruited 327 full-time employees though the online research platform Prolific for a compensation of £0.70 (approved by Erasmus Research Institute for Management IRB, protocol number 2020/03/22-48388jme). After excluding 25 participants who failed attention

or consistency checks, we retained 302 employees in our final sample (146 women, 156 men). Most participants resided in the UK (49%) or the USA (23%). Average age was 34.7 years ($SD = 8.8$) and average organizational tenure was 5.5 years ($SD = 5.2$).

Measures

Advice Seeking

Participants listed up to ten contacts from whom they had sought *advice on important work matters* in the preceding six months. Next, participants indicated for each contact whether they were their supervisor, a colleague reporting to the same supervisor, a colleague reporting to a different supervisor, or a person outside the participants' organization.

Boundary Spanning

To measure boundary spanning we used the E-I-index (Krackhardt & Stern, 1988) calculated as *E-I-index = (E − I) / (E + I)*, where *E* stands for the number of a person's connections outside the focal group (here, all advice ties crossing an intra-organizational boundary by going to colleagues within the organization but reporting to another supervisor) and *I* stands for the number of a person's connections inside the focal group (here, all advice ties to colleagues who report to the same supervisor). Seven participants did not report any ties to colleagues. As these participants had no ties spanning intra-organizational boundaries, we set their E-I index to -1. Our results are robust to the exclusion of these cases.

Upward Advice Seeking

We captured upward advice seeking with an indicator variable that took the value of 1 when a participant's list of advice givers included their direct supervisor and 0 otherwise.

Undermining Behavior

We measured undermining behavior with Duffy and colleagues' (2002) 13-item scale ($\alpha = 0.92$). In order to reduce demand effects, we presented the items of the undermining scale mixed with items drawn from the supervisor support scale (Eisenberger et al., 1986).

Control Variables

We controlled for participants' *gender*, *age*, *organizational tenure*, and *total number of advice ties* given that these could influence both the pattern of an individual's advice ties (e.g., Agneessens & Wittek, 2012; Krackhardt, 1990; Li et al., 2018; Shah et al., 2018; Shea & Fitzsimons, 2016) and their supervisor's behavior towards them (Aryee et al., 2007; Duffy et al., 2006; Lian et al., 2014). Our results are robust to the exclusion of control variables.

Results

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics and correlations. Table 2 presents the results of three OLS regressions conducted in the R statistical software (R Core Team, 2016) of supervisor undermining on the control variables (Model 1), employee boundary spanning and upward advice seeking (Model 2), and the interaction between employee boundary spanning and upward advice seeking (Model 3). Consistent with our Hypothesis, we found a significant interaction between employee boundary spanning and upward advice seeking on supervisor undermining ($B = -0.23$, $SE = 0.09$, $p = 0.01$; see Figure 3). When employees did not engage in upward advice seeking, employee boundary spanning had a significant positive association with supervisor undermining ($B = 0.15$, $SE = 0.07$, $p = 0.03$). Conversely, when employees engaged in upward advice seeking, employee boundary spanning was not associated with supervisor undermining ($B = -0.07$, $SE = 0.06$, $p = 0.18$).

Insert Tables 1 and 2 and Figure 3 about here

Study 2

Study 1 provides support for our theory, as reported by employees. However, because it focuses on the experience of employees, it does not enable us to examine the mechanisms that operate in the supervisors' minds that we identified in our theory: loss of control as a

result of employee boundary spanning and the attribution of harmful intent to the employee's behavior as a result of the employee's lack of upward advice seeking. Specifically, we argued that the attributions of harmful intent resulting from a lack of upward advice seeking moderate the supervisors' undermining response to the control loss caused by employee boundary spanning. In other words, a supervisors' undermining response to employee boundary spanning is mediated by supervisor's control loss and moderated by attributions of harmful intent caused by a lack of upward advice seeking (see Figure 1 for the full model). Therefore, in Study 2, in order to test these implied mechanisms, we used a scenario experiment in which we put participants in the role of supervisors, experimentally manipulated employee boundary spanning and upward advice seeking, and measured the implied mechanisms of control loss and harmful intent (approved by Erasmus Research Institute for Management IRB, protocol number 2020/03/04-48388jme).

Sample

We recruited 612 full-time employees with managerial experience and who had subordinates in their current work through the online research platform Prolific for a compensation of £1.40. Following prior research (Berinsky et al., 2014; Fleischer et al., 2015), we excluded 202 participants who failed at least one of two comprehension checks and two attention checks. The final sample contained 410 participants (199 men, 210 women, 1 did not self-identify), aged, on average, 36.7 years (SD = 9.9), and with, on average, 4.7 direct reports (SD = 7.6). Most participants were located in the UK (76%) and the US (12%). Our final sample size was above the sample size of 387 required to identify a small effect (ΔR^2 = 0.02, Cohen, 1988, pp. 413–414) at an error probability of 0.05, two-tailed, with a power of 0.80 as estimated by the software GPower (Faul et al., 2009).

Procedure

Participants read one of four scenarios (see Appendix) in which they, in the role of a

supervisor, reflected on an employee who engaged (or not) in boundary spanning and, at the same time, sought advice from the supervisor frequently (or rarely). Then, they responded to a questionnaire containing our mediating, moderating, and dependent variables.

Measures

Undermining Behavior

We used the same measure of undermining behavior as in study 1 (Duffy et al., 2002), rephrasing the items so as to capture the intention to engage in undermining towards the employee ($\alpha = 0.93$, see Online Supplement for items). Again, we presented the items mixed with items drawn from the supervisor support scale in order to reduce demand effects (Eisenberger et al., 1986).

Loss of Group Territorial Control

To measure control loss, we developed a five-item measure based on our definition of loss of group territorial control (items in Appendix, $\alpha = 0.92$). We verified content validity following Colquitt and colleagues' guidelines (2019), see the Online Supplement for details.

Perceived Harmful Intent

To measure attributions of harmful intent, we developed a three-item measure ($\alpha = 0.93$, items in Appendix) based on Reijntjes and colleagues' scale of hostile intent attributions (2011). We verified content validity (see Online Supplement for details) and, to limit demand effects in the study, we interspersed the items related to perceived harmful intent with items capturing perceived pro-social motivation (Rioux & Penner, 2001).

A confirmatory factor analysis of the three scales (control loss, perceived harmful intent, undermining) showed a good fit ($CFI = 0.973$, $RMSEA = 0.044$, $SRMR = 0.042$).

Furthermore, we conducted supplementary analyses to explore the role of two potential alternative mechanisms to control loss: ego-threat and status threat (Burris, 2012; Fast et al., 2014). These are summarized in the Online Supplement.

Results

Table 3 shows means and standard deviations per condition and the correlations. Table 4 presents our analyses. First, we tested our main Hypothesis with a stepwise OLS regression. For ease of interpretation, we effect-coded the conditions, such that high (low) boundary spanning and frequent (rare) upward advice seeking was indicated by +0.5 (-0.5). Counter to our Hypothesis, we did not find a total interaction effect of boundary spanning and upward advice seeking on supervisor undermining (Model 2 in Table 4).

Next, we turned to testing the assumptions underlying our theory and to examining the implied conditional indirect path between employee boundary spanning and supervisor undermining. Specifically, in our theory development we argued that (a) employee boundary spanning would increase supervisor control loss, that (b) employee upward advice seeking would reduce supervisor attributions of harmful intent, and that (c) attributions of harmful intent would moderate the effect of control loss on supervisor undermining. For ease of interpretation, we mean-centered control loss and perceived harmful intent.

As expected, employee boundary spanning significantly increased supervisors' control loss (Model 3: $B = 0.86$, $SE = 0.09$, $p < 0.001$) and upward advice seeking significantly reduced perceived harmful intent (Model 4: $B = -0.53$, $SE = 0.07$, $p < 0.001$). Furthermore, as expected, there was a significant interaction between control loss and perceived harmful intent on undermining (Model 6: $B = 0.10$, $SE = 0.03$, $p = 0.001$), with control loss resulting in higher undermining when the supervisor perceived more harmful intent (see Figure 3). Finally, we tested the conditional indirect effect of employee boundary spanning on supervisor undermining through control loss using Hayes' PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2018), model 14, specifying attributions of harmful intent as a moderator in the second leg and including upward advice seeking as a covariate in the model. As expected, we found an indirect effect of employee boundary spanning on supervisor undermining through

15

control loss, moderated by perceived harmful intent (index of moderated mediation: $B = 0.09$, $SE = 0.04$, 95 % $CI = [0.01, 0.15]$). Specifically, the indirect effect was more positive when the supervisor's perception of harmful intent was higher (at 75th percentile of perceived harmful intent: $B = 0.20$, $SE = 0.04$, 95 % $CI = [0.12, 0.27]$) than when it was lower (at 25th percentile of perceived harmful intent: $B = 0.11$, $SE = 0.03$, 95 % $CI = [0.06, 0.18]$).

Insert Table 3, Table 4 and Figure 3 about here

Discussion

The present study examines supervisor reactions to employee boundary spanning through a territoriality lens. In two complementary studies we showed that employee boundary spanning can lead to supervisor undermining because it weakens a supervisor's territorial control over their group, and that this negative reaction is particularly likely when supervisors attribute harmful intent to employee behavior. In turn, employees' upward advice seeking could counter this negative interpretation and, thus, reduce supervisor undermining.

Theoretical Implications

This paper builds on the insight that while boundary spanning generates benefits for boundary spanners, their teams, and organizations it also involves employees crossing territorial boundaries. To understand the implications of this territorial dynamic, we adopted a leader focused analysis. This shifts the focus from existing boundary spanning literature that has a long trajectory in examining boundary spanning from the individual (Tushman, 1977; Tushman & Scanlan, 1981), the team (Joshi et al., 2009; Marrone, 2010), or the organizational perspective (Dollinger, 1984), but not from the perspective of the supervisors of boundary spanning employees. This leader-focused analysis is important as it shows why behaviors that break down silos and enable idea dissemination, cross-fertilization, and better

coordination also pose challenges for those who engage in them as well as those who manage them. Prior work taking a leadership perspective on boundary spanning examined how leaders can foster boundary spanning of their subordinates (Ancona, 1990; DeChurch & Marks, 2006; Marrone et al., 2021). Our study complements this work by shedding light on psychological processes that can shape supervisors' motivation to foster or, conversely, to undermine employee boundary spanning.

A core insight that territoriality theory brings into the boundary spanning domain is the role of a supervisor's attributions of intent to the employee's boundary spanning behavior for the supervisor's territorial response. The territoriality perspective emphasizes the subjective nature of observers' attributions and, by implication, their context dependence. This implies that supervisors may display different reactions to the same behavior exhibited by different employees, depending on the intentions they attribute to different employees' behavior. The critical question then becomes what shapes such attributions. Our study offers one explanation – though, as we discuss later, surely not the only answer. Attributions depend on the relationship between supervisor and employee, specifically, the extent to which the employee seeks advice from the supervisor.

Our study also contributes to leadership research. Leadership research has traditionally been a study of how leaders influence followers (Bass, 1985; Conger & Kanungo, 1987; van Knippenberg & Sitkin, 2013). A considerably smaller literature examines how follower activities impact leaders and how leaders process and respond to follower-initiated actions. Yet, there are many aspects of organizational life where employees create positive opportunities, e.g., propose creative ideas (Lu et al., 2019) or voice suggestions for improvements (Sherf et al., 2020) and the translation of such initiatives into positive organizational impact is contingent on the leaders' response to them. A territoriality-focused analysis could not only explain supervisors' negative reactions to employee

boundary spanning, but also provide alternative or additional explanations to leaders' negative reactions to, e.g., employee voice (Fast et al., 2014), organizational citizenship behavior (Halbesleben et al., 2010), or exemplary performance (Khan et al., 2018).

This study also contributes to territoriality literature. We generalize the applicability of territoriality theory by providing empirical support of its relevance to the crossing of formal organizational boundaries. We also go beyond prior work by explicitly theorizing about how a specific contextual cue alters the subjective interpretation of harmful intent. Importantly, the contextual cue we focused on - upward advice seeking - is a cue that is under the employee's control, providing an example for how organizational actors may navigate the territorial landscape by shaping others' interpretations of their activities. A further contribution to the territoriality literature is the development and validation of two scales to measure group territorial control loss and perceived harmful intent, which can easily be adapted to contexts other than boundary spanning in future research.

Practical Implications

If prior research has underlined the importance of leader training in facilitating employee boundary spanning (DeChurch & Marks, 2006), our study shows that they do not necessarily wish to encourage it. On the contrary, under some circumstances they may be motivated to suppress and undermine it. This is a critical insight because it means that interventions aimed at helping leaders to better facilitate employee boundary spanning may miss the mark if they focus only on skills and behaviors (e.g., supportive coaching as suggested by Marrone et al., 2021). Rather, effective leader interventions may need to first address leaders' attributions around employee boundary spanning.

A second insight resulting from our study is the agentic role that employees can have in shaping supervisor attributions and thus creating the space for themselves to pursue boundary spanning activities. This suggests that leader training may also be complemented

with employee training highlighting the potential pitfalls and risks involved in engaging in boundary spanning as well as recommending strategies to guard against such risks such as maintaining a close communication link with their supervisor throughout.

Limitations

Our study has several limitations. First, although the conditional indirect effect found in Study 2 is logically consistent with the total interaction effect in Study 1, we do not find a total interaction effect in Study 2. One reason for this could be methodological differences. While Study 1 uses employee reports of experienced supervisor undermining, Study 2 uses supervisors' self-reports of undermining intentions. Because undermining is a socially undesirable behavior, it is possible that the self-report design underestimates the effect. An alternative explanation could be that upward advice seeking elicits multiple parallel mechanisms which interact with boundary spanning and which, in the field, compound into a significant total interaction effect, but only some of which are activated in our vignette study. A second limitation is that both studies rely on samples recruited through online panels which limits our control over participants' attention. An increasing body of research suggests, however, that online samples are suitable for behavioral research as long as appropriate measures (e.g., attention and consistency checks) are taken to safe-guard data quality (Keith et al., 2017; Mason & Suri, 2012; Paolacci & Chandler, 2014).

Future Research

In the present research we focused on establishing a first general understanding of when and why employee boundary spanning may lead to supervisor undermining. Our framework is by no means exhaustive. Rather, it serves as a scaffold that can help to theorize about other conditions that may exacerbate or alleviate negative reactions to employee boundary spanning. For example, supervisor personality traits such as Machiavellianism (Castille et al., 2017) could influence the likelihood of a negative attributions or moderate the

link between negative attributions and undermining behavior. Another avenue for future research is the role of the organizational context (culture, climate, structure) in affecting a supervisor's response to boundary spanning, potentially by affecting attributions of the intentions of the boundary spanner or the association between boundary spanning and sense of control. Finally, while we focused on the mechanisms suggested by territoriality theory leading to negative responses to boundary spanning, it is likely that multiple mechanisms operate in parallel in order to shape supervisors' perceptions of and reactions to employee boundary spanning, some of which may also lead to positive reactions.

Conclusion

Our analysis provides insight into why organizations, and managers within them, are prone to undermine the very activities beneficial to their operation. Although informational boundary spanning offers critical avenues for information flow it also challenges territorial control. Simply seeking advice from others external to the team is sufficient to trigger territorial defenses and end up on the receiving end of supervisor undermining behavior. At the same time, we find that employees have agency in managing their bosses' interpretation of and, consequently, response to their boundary spanning behavior by seeking advice not only outside, but also from their boss.

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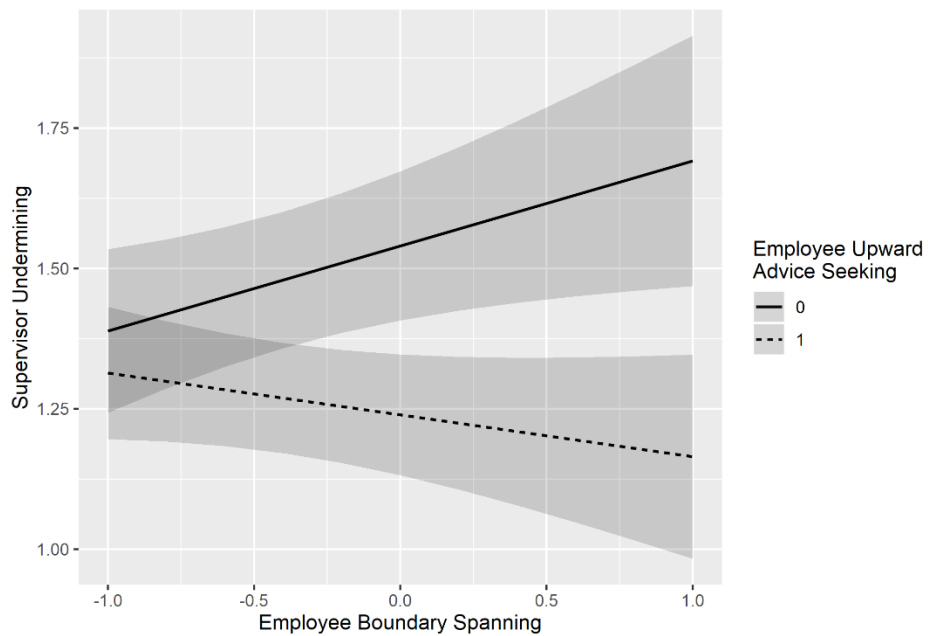
Figure 1

Theoretical Model
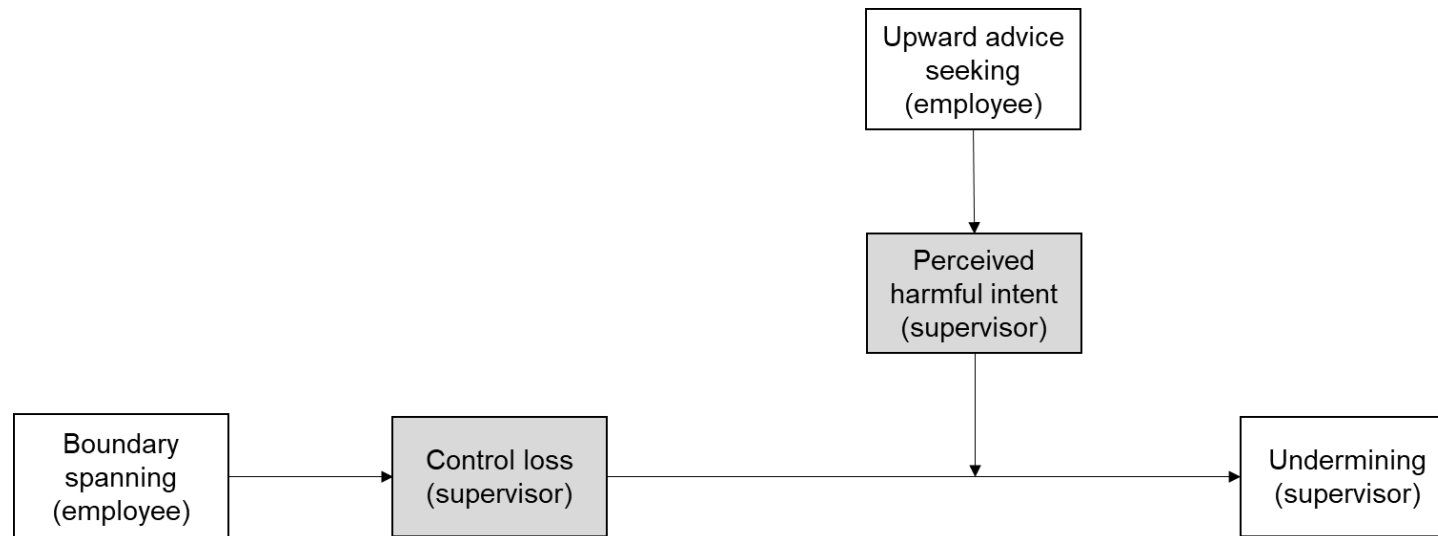
*Note*: Constructs in shaded boxes are only measured in Study 2.

Figure 2

Interaction Between Employee Boundary Spanning and Upward Advice Seeking on

Supervisor Undermining (Study 1)

Note. For employee upward advice seeking, 0 represents no upward advice seeking and 1

represents the existence of upward advice seeking.

Figure 3

Interaction Between Control Loss and Perceived Harmful Intent on Undermining (Study 2)
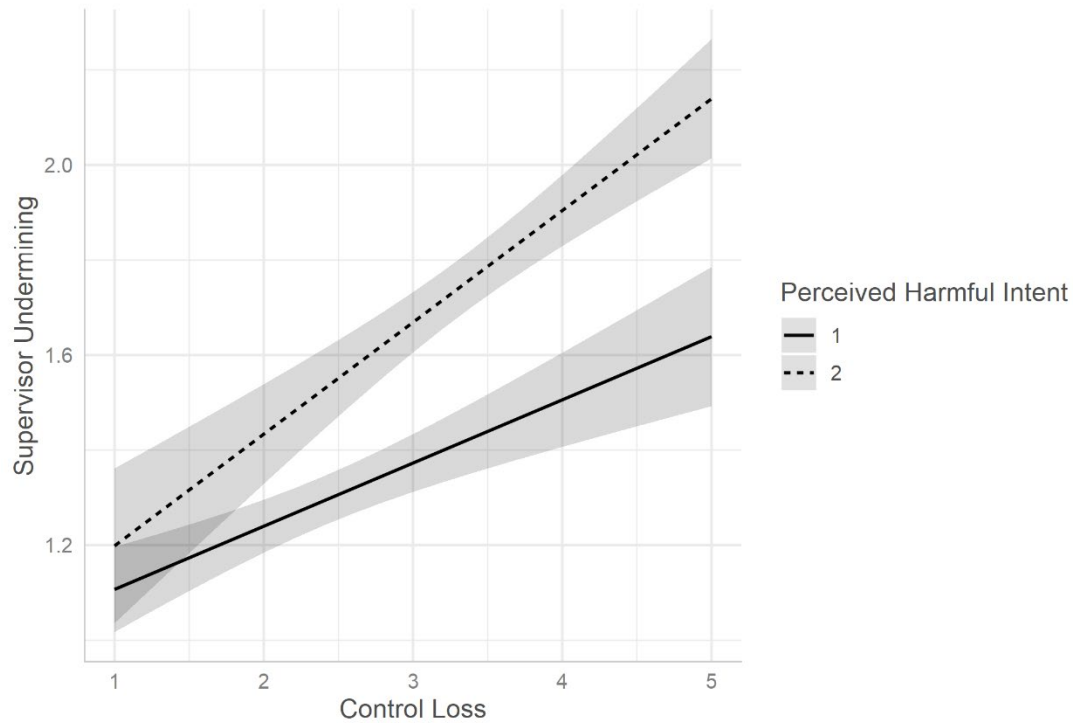
Note. For perceived harmful intent, a scale value of 1 was the 25th percentile and a scale value of 2 was the 75th percentile.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics and Intercorrelations (Study 1)

Variable	*M*	*SD*	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Supervisor undermining	1.38	0.57						
2. Employee boundary spanning	-0.39	0.75	0.04					
3. Upward advice seeking[a]	0.66	0.47	-0.18**	-0.03				
4. Age	34.6	8.80	0.02	0.00	0.09			
5. Gender[b]	0.49	0.53	0.10	0.08	0.00	-0.05		
6. Organizational tenure	5.48	5.24	0.12*	0.05	0.04	0.55**	-0.01	
7. Total number of contacts	4.34	2.16	0.00	0.18**	0.04	-0.10	0.05	-0.04

Note. $N = 302$.
[a] Yes = 1, no = 0. [b] Female = 1, male = 0.
*$p < 0.05$. **$p < 0.01$.

Table 2

OLS Results Predicting Supervisor Undermining (Study 1)

Variable	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	B (SE)	*t*	*B (SE)*	*t*	*B (SE)*	*t*
Intercept	1.38** (0.16)	8.49	1.48** (0.17)	9.04	1.55** (0.17)	9.33
Age	-0.00 (0.00)	-0.90	-0.00 (0.00)	-0.63	-0.00 (0.00)	-0.85
Gender	0.11 (0.06)	1.78	0.11 (0.06)	1.77	0.10 (0.06)	1.59
Organizational tenure	0.02* (0.01)	2.33	0.02** (0.01)	2.30	0.02* (0.01)	2.28
Total number of contacts	-0.00 (0.02)	-0.07	0.00 (0.02)	0.04	0.01 (0.02)	0.38
Employee boundary spanning			0.02 (0.04)	0.36	0.15* (0.07)	2.22
Upward advice seeking[a]			-0.22** (0.07)	-3.20	-0.30** (0.07)	-4.03
Employee boundary spanning X Upward advice seeking					-0.23* (0.09)	-2.57
R^2	0.03		0.06		0.08	

Note. $N = 302$.
[a] Yes = 1, no = 0. [b] Female = 1, male = 0.
*p < 0.05. **p < 0.01.

Table 3

Descriptive Statistics per Condition and Intercorrelations (Study 2)

Variable		Low employee boundary spanning		High employee boundary spanning		Correlations	
		Rare upward advice seeking	Frequent upward advice seeking	Rare upward advice seeking	Frequent upward advice seeking	1.	2.
	N	87	105	102	116		
1. Control Loss	M	2.77	1.61	3.45	2.62		
	SD	0.96	0.73	0.92	0.94		
2. Perceived Harmful Intent	M	1.59	1.19	2.00	1.35	0.53**	
	SD	0.87	0.44	0.85	0.49		
3. Supervisor Undermining	M	1.53	1.32	1.68	1.47	0.50**	0.60**
	SD	0.62	0.41	0.62	0.48		

*$p < 0.05$. ** $p < 0.01$.

Table 4

OLS Results (Study 2)

Variable	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4		Model 5		Model 6	
	Undermining		Undermining		Control loss		Perceived harmful intent		Undermining		Undermining	
	B (SE)	t	B (SE)	t	B (SE)	t	B (SE)	t	B (SE)	t	B (SE)	t
Intercept	1.5** (0.03)	56.53	0.5** (0.03)	56.44	0.01 (0.04)	0.25	0.01 (0.03)	0.35	1.50** (0.02)	71.77	1.45** (0.02)	58.85
Employee boundary spanning[a]	0.15** (0.05)	2.79	0.15** (0.05)	2.78	0.86** (0.09)	9.67	0.28** (0.07)	4.08	-0.09* (0.05)	-1.98	-0.07 (0.05)	-1.62
Upward advice seeking[a]	-0.22** (0.05)	-4.08	-0.22** (0.05)	-4.06	-0.98** (0.09)	-11.10	-0.53** (0.07)	-7.80	0.13** (0.05)	2.80	0.12* (0.05)	2.52
Control loss									0.16** (0.03)	6.40	0.19** (0.03)	7.12
Perceived harmful intent									0.36** (0.03)	10.79	0.26** (0.05)	5.52
Control loss X Perceived harmful intent											0.10** (0.03)	3.29
Employee boundary spanning X Upward advice seeking			-0.00 (0.11)	-0.04								
R^2	0.06		0.06		0.35		0.16		0.42		0.44	

Note. $N = 410$. Control loss and perceived harmful intent are mean-centered.

[a] High = 0.5, low = -0.5.

*$p < 0.05$. ** $p < 0.01$.

Appendix

Study 2: Scenario

[Introduction for all participants]
Please put yourself in the following scenario:
You work in the sales division of a successful IT company. You joined the company as a frontline sales representative a bit over five years ago and have worked your way up to your current position of Team Leader. In your position, eight sales representatives report directly to you. You feel a high degree of personal ownership for this team – you really feel that this is YOUR team. You oversee your team closely to make sure that important work matters are managed well.
You know that everyone sometimes needs to get advice on important work matters, and you make it a habit to observe who your subordinates turn to when they need advice. Earlier today you were considering one of your subordinates, Alex.
You have observed that Alex regularly seeks advice from the other sales representatives that report to you – Alex' team mates.

[low boundary spanning]
Furthermore, Alex rarely seeks advice from people outside your team. When Alex needs advice on important work matters, Alex almost never seeks advice from people who do not also report to you.

[high boundary spanning]
Furthermore, Alex frequently seeks advice from people outside your team. When Alex needs advice on important work matters, Alex regularly seeks advice from people who do not report to you.

[rare upward advice seeking]
You also have noticed that Alex very rarely seeks *your* advice and opinion. When Alex needs advice on how to deal with an important work matter, Alex never seeks your input.

[frequent upward advice seeking]
You also have noticed that Alex regularly seeks *your* advice and opinion. When Alex needs advice on how to deal with an important work matter, Alex always makes sure to get your input.

Study 2: Developed measures

Loss of Group Territorial Control
1. Alex' behavior reduces my control over my team.
2. Alex' behavior weakens my control over the boundaries of my team.
3. Alex' behavior reduces my control over how my team members invest their time.
4. Alex' behavior weakens my control over how my team is represented externally.
5. Alex' behavior weakens my control over how we operate in this team.

Perceived Harmful Intent
1. Alex is trying to harm me.
2. Alex is trying to hurt me.
3. Alex is trying to inflict damage on me.