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**COMMENTARY**

# COVID-19 and employee psychological safety: Exploring the role of signaling theory

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As a result of COVID-19 and the uncertainty it may force upon individuals physically reporting to work, many organizations have "frontline workers" (i.e., employees physically reporting to work) potentially experiencing a higher variation and prevalence of workplace stressors. Rudolph et al. (2021) discuss several cases in which frontline workers may experience increased strain symptoms. For example, lack of adequate protection and perceived organizational support may have a negative effect on employee well-being and even lead to posttraumatic stress symptoms. Because a pandemic poses an extreme threat to employee perceptions of organizational physical and psychological safety, using theory-based approaches to understand how organizations can reduce employee stress associated with changes spurred by COVID-19 is critical. Signaling theory may provide effective perspectives in strategy development for organizations concerned with employee well-being and, ultimately, their physical and psychological safety. The purpose of this commentary is threefold: We draw connections between health and safety as an outcome of organization and supervisor signaling, explore how signaling theory can be used to examine potential stressors for employee physical and psychological health, and briefly elaborate on research avenues and organizational changes using organizational and supervisor signaling for reducing employee stress.

Although it is clear that organizational policy and procedure can have wide-ranging effects on job demands (aspects of the job requiring physical and psychological energy) and resources (job aspects that ease the strain of job demands), instances of signaling between supervisor and subordinates are likely to provide both resources and demands to frontline workers. Signaling theory may provide a promising lens for gathering employee feedback and creating organizational communication. Signaling theory posits that during uncertain times such as the COVID-19 pandemic, organizations can signal to their employees, "We care about you," and, "We are here for you" through their proceeding actions (Xu et al., 2019) and potentially increase the perceived psychological safety among its employees. Psychological safety is the perception that it is safe to take interpersonal risks in the current work environment for the purpose of growing and learning how to communicate and perform more effectively (Frazier et al., 2017). Indeed, there are theories in multiple disciplines including sociology and psychology supporting the claim that one's intentions can be gleaned from their actions; however, using signaling theory allows researchers to explicitly operationalize how an organization's true attributes and values are reflected in the policies and procedures to which they give the most resources such as time, energy, or finances.

As international health pandemics are uniquely threatening, they carry an unexpected risk for which even frontline workers such as health care professionals are unprepared (Lateef et al., 2020). Recently, almost every individual in the world has experienced a major change in their status quo (e.g., travel restrictions, retail shutdown, a demographically undiscerning and internationally connected health threat), which is frequently associated with increases in fear and distress and

decreases in physical and psychological well-being. Because it is common for frontline workers to experience negative emotions linked to coping with stressors associated with COVID-19 (e.g., high workload, potentially hazardous working environment, unclear infection control policies, coworker negative emotions), applying leadership principles and supervisor behaviors inspired by signaling theory may help increase positive emotions among employees, which can be an extremely useful tool to inspire hope and to maintain employee trust in the organization (Kim & Niederdeppe, 2013).

Implementing effective management strategies may lead frontline workers to feel an increased sense of trust and confidence in their organization, to seek information from the organization, and to support them in return (e.g., low tardiness and absenteeism; Barnett et al., 2010; Kim & Niederdeppe, 2013). Employees may also be more likely to engage in their work as their genuine self, reducing costly resource uses such as psychological masking (i.e., using energy to hide one's true identity), allowing them to save these resources for later experiences in both the work and home domains (Xu et al., 2019). Organizational strategies inspired by signaling theory such as allocating resources to instituting childcare, implementing and maintaining a feedback platform, providing protective gear (e.g., masks), and requiring social distancing in the work environment (Gershon et al., 2010) may provide employees with methods to reduce their negative emotions and to increase their positive feelings. An empirically supported strategy to increase psychological safety includes signaling to employees that the organization values a nonpunitive environment where anyone can ask for help with their physical and psychological health in addition to everyday work tasks (Restauri & Sheridan, 2020).

During an international health pandemic like COVID-19, employees are looking to their organizations and supervisors for specific, nontraditional resources such as regular updates about how the organization plans to help slow the spread of the virus, assurances of continued organizational support in the case of infection, a platform on which to voice employee concerns, and support in both the work and family domain (Lateef et al., 2020). As stated in signaling theory, the link between messages conveyed by organizations and employee perception of the organization must be considered in our future understanding of how stress may manifest for employees working on the front lines, especially during COVID-19 and similar pandemics.

Extending the sentiment of Rudolph et al. (2021), experience sampling will allow for daily changes in worker experiences; however, long-term data collection examining changes in work and family domains, social acceptance, desensitization, and regulation conformity occurring within organizations is also important. Additionally, signaling theory may be used to explore antecedents for both physical and psychological health outcomes of employees via employee perceptions of organizational and supervisor signals that are both intentional and unintentional. In conclusion, simple signals that are followed through by organizational action and supervisor behaviors can increase the availability of job resources and decrease the amount of demands, resulting in a positive additive effect on health, safety, and well-being when larger scale changes such as training and survey analysis are not practical.

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