

# Does change incite abusive supervision? The role of transformational change and hindrance stress

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## Abstract

To remain competitive, organizations tend to change their established ways of working, their strategy, the core values, and the organizational structure. Such thorough changes are referred to as transformational change. Unfortunately, transformational change is often unsuccessful because organizational members do not always welcome the change. Although organizations often expect their supervisors to be successful role-models and change-agents during the transformational change process, we argue that initiating transformational change could increase supervisors' hindrance stress levels, which may result in abusive behaviors towards employees. More specifically, in a multi-source survey and an experimental study, we find evidence that transformational change is associated with supervisors' experienced hindrance stress, which subsequently led to more abusive behaviors towards employees.

## KEYWORDS

abusive supervision, cognitive theory of stress, hindrance stress, transformational change

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Change shapes the organizational landscape. The advance of technology, competition, and globalization are just a few forces that push organizations to engage in transformational change, which are modifications in the organization's core systems such as its values, structure, and goals (Rafferty & Griffin, 2006; Robinson & Griffiths, 2005). Change scholars argue that effective change implementation requires employees' engagement, well-being, change acceptance, as well as perceived supervisor support (Neves, 2011; Oreg et al., 2011; Stouten et al., 2018). Because

## Practitioner notes

### What is currently known?

- In today's competitive work environment, organizations undertake transformational change.
- Organizations expect supervisors to be role-models and to embrace change.
- Transformational change is often unsuccessful because organizations do not train supervisors enough for the change process.

### What this paper adds?

- This study shows that transformational change is associated with supervisors' hindrance stress.
- The study shows that supervisors' hindrance stress is related to supervisors' abusive supervision.
- This study identifies hindrance stress as a mediator in the transformational change—abusive supervision relationship.

### Implications for practitioners

- Transformational change can increase supervisors' hindrance stress and consequently trigger abusive supervision.
- Organizations should organize change in a way that limits supervisors' hindrance stress.
- Organizations should support supervisors to be better prepared for the change regarding their own stress-related emotions and behaviors and the leadership skills required for a healthy change implementation.

employees' attitudes and acceptance towards the change are crucial, how supervisors treat and interact with their employees plays a key role in effective change implementation. For example, supervisors need to communicate the change, but they also need to involve and motivate the employees in the change process (Oreg & Berson, 2019). Yet, transformational change is often unsuccessful (Burke, 2002; Burnes, 2009). In this manuscript, we argue that transformational change often fails because organizations may not pay sufficient attention to preparing and supporting supervisors in the change process (Stouten et al., 2018). Because supervisors lack sufficient support to handle change stressors, we contend that this triggers them to behave in an abusive way towards their employees, ironically weighing negatively on change implementation.

Most organizations implicitly expect their supervisors to act as successful change-agents (Caulfield & Senger, 2017). For example, organizations expect supervisors to communicate the changes effectively, to motivate employees to embrace the change, and to adjust their workplace behaviors as they are expected to welcome and facilitate the change (e.g., Burnes, 2009; Ford et al., 2021). Overall, many organizations assume that supervisors are ready to implement the change in a coordinated and engaging manner (Oreg & Berson, 2019). By assuming that supervisors will fulfill their role as a change-agent, organizations may pay less attention to transformational change's negative and stressful impact on supervisors (Neves & Schyns, 2018; Oreg & Berson, 2019; Oreg et al., 2011) and subsequently on how change could elicit supervisors to show undesirable (e.g., abusive) behaviors towards their employees. In other words, the prevailing focus on supervisors as change-agents puts less attention on how change could hinder supervisors, and how this impacts supervisors' behaviors towards employees.

Research, however, suggests that transformational change—such as changes in an organization's values, structures, and goals that move away from the status quo to an entirely new system—brings many accompanying demands and requires supervisors to have the ability and perseverance to deal with these demands (Robinson & Griffiths, 2005). As such, transformational change is an impactful organizational event and is often associated with change-related stressors such as felt disruption and uncertainty (Ashford, 1988). Therefore, transformational change may be expe-

rienced by supervisors as a hindrance. Especially applicable in this context is the concept of hindrance stress, which is defined as “stress associated with job demands or work circumstances that involve excessive or undesirable constraints that interfere with or hinder an individual's ability to achieve valued goals” (Cavanaugh et al., 2000, p. 67).

By taking a stress perspective from supervisors' lens and building upon the cognitive theory of stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), we suggest that supervisors may experience considerable hindrance stress because they are expected to coordinate and facilitate transformational change projects. Supervisors might be “victims” of these changes as they may stress about how they will be able to motivate and get change-acceptance from their employees, or about other demands or extra workload these changes will incur. In sum, transformational change—typically associated with increased workload and demands for supervisors—may result in hindrance stress, which could ultimately affect supervisors' interactions with their employees. More specifically, recent research suggests that under stressful circumstances, supervisors may treat their employees in an undesirable and rather abusive way (e.g., Mawritz et al., 2014; Ng et al., 2021). Such behavior would be highly problematic as abusive behavior towards employees may be detrimental for employees' well-being, their change acceptance, and ultimately a successful change implementation.

The aim of the present study is to examine the relation between transformational change, hindrance stress, and abusive supervision, which is defined as “subordinates' perceptions of the extent to which supervisors engage in the sustained display of hostile verbal and nonverbal behavior, excluding physical contact” (Tepper, 2000, p. 178). Specifically, we propose that transformational change is associated with supervisors' hindrance stress, and that this subsequently incites supervisors' abusive behavior.

Our research contributes to the literature in three ways. First, although most research emphasizes that supervisors are essential for the successful implementation of change, and thus focuses on supervisors' role as a change-agents, a more limited stream of research acknowledges that supervisors should also be viewed as change-recipients (e.g., Oreg & Berson, 2019; Ozawa, 2020). Whereas most of this research specifically focuses on supervisors' attitudes and behaviors towards the change, for example, resistance to change (Giangreco & Peccei, 2005), sense-making of change (Lüsher & Lewis, 2008), change cynicism (Barton & Ambrosini, 2013), or change-specific behaviors (Lundmark et al., 2020), we examine how transformational change affects supervisors' experience of hindrance stress, an aspect of organizational change that is not well understood. Second, we examine the relationship between transformational change and supervisors' undesirable behaviors towards their employees, more specifically abusive supervision. By doing so, we answer the call of Neves and Schyns (2018) who argued that the current literature so far shows little about how the change context itself can contribute to different types of destructive leadership, and that examining these undesirable forms of leadership in times of change is urgently needed (see also Otto et al., 2018). More specifically, we conduct the first research to our knowledge that specifically addresses the impact of transformational change on abusive supervision. Moreover, by drawing on the cognitive theory of stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), we propose increased levels of hindrance stress as an important underlying mechanism connecting transformational change with abusive supervision. Third, we identify transformational change as a contextual antecedent of abusive supervision, which remains “an absolutely new area for research” (Zhang & Bednall, 2016, p. 446, see also Tepper et al., 2017). Research on abusive supervision antecedents has primarily focused on supervisor-related or subordinate-related antecedents such as, for example, supervisor perceived procedural justice (Tepper et al., 2006), but only a few studies have focused on features of the context (Zhang & Bednall, 2016). Indeed, a recent review showed that until now, only five studies focused on contextual antecedents, more specifically: 1.) highly aggressive norms in the organization, 2.) hostile climates, 3.) HR values, 4.) size of the organization, and 5.) abusive behavior of the supervisor's manager (Fischer et al., 2021). We extend this research by focusing on transformational change as a contextual antecedent, and by doing so, we are the first to link transformational change to abusive supervision. In sum, we look at how highly disruptive changes in an organization affect supervisors' hindrance stress levels, which may consequently trigger abusive behaviors towards employees.

## 2 | TRANSFORMATIONAL CHANGE AND HINDRANCE STRESS

While some changes involve incremental or small modifications to ongoing business processes, other changes are more disruptive in nature. Rafferty and Griffin (2006, p. 1155) define transformational change as “an individual's perception regarding the extent to which change has involved modifications to the core systems of an organization including traditional ways of working, values, structure, and strategy.” Specifically, transformational change entails changes in the organization's core structure or goals. Because transformational change involves major disruptive changes, it creates uncertainty and fear about its consequences and is therefore often regarded as highly stressful for organizational members (Ashford, 1988).

For this reason, research has particularly highlighted the importance of supervisors as “change-agents” in helping employees as change-recipients through transformational change (e.g., Fischer & Pollock, 2004). For example, supervisors are expected to be attuned to the fears and the concerns of their employees and to mitigate employees' undesirable reactions towards the transformational change, such as employees' negative emotions, attitudes, or behavioral outcomes (e.g., employees' resistance to change). While trying to promote a successful change implementation is of crucial importance during transformational change, it also highlights the increased demands that supervisors are confronted with (e.g., Rafferty & Griffin, 2006; Szamosi & Duxbury, 2002). Organizations assume that supervisors have sufficient capacity to motivate their employees to accept change, and that supervisors can deal effectively with the personal impact of change. The demands of implementing change (e.g., by motivating employees) coincide with the personal demands that change creates (e.g., less time to achieve personal goals), causing stress for supervisors.

The cognitive theory of stress argues that when individuals are confronted with a stressor—such as the demands of transformational change—they engage in a process of cognitive appraisal in which they evaluate the situation regarding their well-being. This is known as primary appraisal (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, 1987). A situation is appraised as hindering when the stressor has the potential to threaten or harm personal growth and desired goals (Cavanaugh et al., 2000; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Lepine et al., 2005). Research has illustrated that transformational change imposes huge demands on individuals and is perceived as a stressful event by those involved (e.g., Ashford, 1988). More specifically, transformational change increases uncertainty which makes individuals feel less in control over both the process and the outcome (Ashford, 1988; Rafferty & Griffin, 2006; Robinson & Griffiths, 2005). The increased demands, pressures, and feelings of uncertainty and lack of control affect organizational members' well-being as is evidenced in increased stress (Schweiger & DeNisi, 1991).

While organizations expect supervisors to promote effective organizational change and to function as a change ambassador who motivates employees to enact and cope with the change, little is known about how supervisors themselves react to transformational change. That is, the change literature has focused primarily on the role of low-ranking organizational members (such as employees) in dealing with change initiatives and its resulting consequences. Although some research started to focus on supervisors' own attitudes and behaviors towards the change, (e.g., Barton & Ambrosini, 2013; Giangreco & Peccei, 2005; Lundmark et al., 2020; Lüscher & Lewis, 2008), a focus on how supervisors' change experience impacts their behavior towards employees is needed (cf. Fischer & Pollock, 2004; Neves & Schyns, 2018; Oreg & Berson, 2019).

The change literature indeed highlighted that organizations assume supervisors are ready and motivated to implement change whereas supervisors' personal experience of the change is not often recognized (Stouten et al., 2018). In the present study, we argue that when supervisors go through transformational change, they experience increased demands such as extra workload and pressure as they are expected to guide their employees through the uncertain and stressful events of the change initiative. Supervisors are expected to not only be the messenger and motivator for change, but to also cope with the change themselves. For example, supervisors are expected to not only communicate the reasons for the change, but to also set the example of what is appropriate conduct in the new and uncertain environment, especially in situations where new frameworks replace existing ones (e.g., Ford et al., 2021). Moreover, in setting an example, they are also expected to be enthusiastic “ambassadors” of the change and to respond in a

desirable way to the needs of employees (Kotter, 1996). These research findings signal that particularly supervisors carry change-related demands and responsibilities during transformational change, which are likely to be appraised in terms of hindrance stress, given the uncertain and turbulent environment in which supervisors have to perform during a transformational change process.

In sum, although previous research has not examined the relationship between transformational change and hindrance stress in supervisors directly, we expect—drawing upon the cognitive theory of stress—that supervisors experience extra demands and experience threats of losing their valued resources (e.g., increased lack of control due to the uncertainty) during times of transformational change, which will be appraised by supervisors as a hindrance.

**Hypothesis 1** *Transformational change is positively related to supervisors' hindrance stress.*

### 3 | HINDRANCE STRESS AND ABUSIVE SUPERVISION

Many change initiatives fail in their ambitions, particularly because the actors involved (employees, supervisors) exhibit behaviors that do not contribute to a successful transformation (Burke, 2002). As we discussed, in the case of transformational change, hindrance stress is expected to be high for supervisors because they have to guide employees during the change processes. Due to these hindrances, however, supervisors are likely to end up in a situation where they will exhibit their frustrations and stress by displaying abusive behaviors and ultimately demotivating those whom they are expected to guide through the change—their employees.

We contend that transformational change complicates supervisors' jobs by eliciting hindrance stress, which we expect to translate into abusive supervision. Following the cognitive theory of stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), we argue that if a situation is appraised as a hindrance, it is likely to be associated with undesirable responses. For example, previous research has shown that stressors that are appraised as being hindering trigger aggressive behavior and counterproductive work practices (e.g., Hershcovis et al., 2007; Rodell & Judge, 2009).

Furthermore, supervisors who experience hindrance stress (as part of the primary appraisal) will make a judgment about which actions to take to ameliorate the situation or which coping strategies are the most suitable for use (as part of the secondary appraisal process; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Coping involves the cognitive and behavioral efforts adopted by a person to manage encounters that are appraised as stressful (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Robinson & Griffiths, 2005). Yet, coping in a desirable way is an effortful process, which—in stressful circumstances appraised as hindrances—is likely to fail because supervisors have fewer resources at their disposal. Indeed, research has shown that when individuals experience hindrances, they are likely to use undesirable coping strategies, and sometimes use aggression as an outlet for venting their stress (Mawritz et al., 2014).

More specifically, supervisors may fail to regulate their hindrance stress in a desirable way, as the experience of hindrance stress can decrease the inhibition of their aggressive intentions. When a supervisor's aggressive intentions are not suppressed, the supervisor may show abusive behaviors as a means to cope with the stressful situation (e.g., Burton et al., 2012; Ng et al., 2021). The act of abusive supervision is often framed as displaced aggression, the “redirection of a [person's] harm-doing behavior from a primary to a secondary target or victim” (Tedeschi & Norman, 1985, p. 30). Indeed, when supervisors are frustrated by organizational circumstances, which are either hard to define or hard to confront, they may redirect (i.e., displace) their aggression towards easy targets (i.e., their subordinates) who are not likely to retaliate back due to the power imbalance (Hoobler & Brass, 2006). To sum up, drawing on the cognitive theory of stress, we expect that higher levels of supervisors' hindrance stress will translate to higher levels of abusive supervision.

**Hypothesis 2** *Supervisor's hindrance stress is positively related to abusive supervision.*

Tied to the fact that supervisors experiencing transformational change will encounter hindrance stressors which are consequently associated with abusive supervision, the experience of hindrance stress should underlie the relationship between transformational change and abusive supervision. Some indirect evidence for this proposed relationship has been found by Mawritz et al. (2014) who demonstrated that the supervisors' experience of stress partly mediated the experience of facing difficult goals and the subsequent display of abusive supervision. Furthermore, stress theories (e.g., Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) also assert that stressors can induce hindrance stress, which will direct subsequent behaviors.

**Hypothesis 3** *Transformational change is indirectly related to abusive supervision through supervisors' hindrance stress.*

## 4 | PRESENT RESEARCH

We conducted three studies to test our main predictions using different methods. First, we conducted a multi-source field study (Study 1) to test the overall model and provide external validity. Next, we used an experimental causal-chain approach (Spencer et al., 2005) to verify the causality of the proposed relations and to enhance internal validity (Study 2a and Study 2b).

## 5 | STUDY 1: METHOD

We used a multi-source design, a method where ratings from multiple sources are assessed. That is, both employees and their matched supervisors responded to different measures. This procedure is often used to reduce same-source method bias (Podsakoff et al., 2003).

### 5.1 | Participants and procedure

We recruited participants from a variety of different organizations in Belgium via a snowballing sampling process. We received 146 complete employee responses who worked at a variety of industries including government, health care, technology, finance, manufacturing, and transport. Once employees finished their survey, we asked them to give us contact details of their direct supervisor, which we then contacted to fill out their part of the survey. In total we received 128 complete supervisor responses, a matching rate of 88%.<sup>1</sup> Focal employees were matched with their supervisor using a specific code allowing for anonymous participation. The questionnaires were preceded by an online introduction and instructions from the researchers explaining that participation was completely voluntary. All participants were assured an anonymous processing and confidential treatment of their responses. Participants were asked to answer each question as honestly as possible and were assured that there were no right or wrong answers.

The focal employees had an average age of 37.62 years ( $SD = 10.13$ ). In the employee sample, 0.8% only finished elementary school, 35.9% finished high school, 45.3% obtained a bachelor's degree, 15.6% obtained a master's degree and 2.3% had a postgraduate degree. Employees had an average organizational tenure of 9.80 years ( $SD = 9.30$ ) and 60.2% were women.

The supervisors had an average age of 42.55 years ( $SD = 8.72$ ). Of these supervisors 13.3% finished high school, 50.8% had a bachelor's degree, 28.9% obtained a master's degree and 6.3% had a postgraduate degree (0.8% did not indicate their highest education). Supervisors had an average organizational tenure of 14.54 years ( $SD = 9.18$ ) and 44.5% were women.

## 5.2 | Measures

Both supervisors and employees answered questions concerning demographic variables. Further, supervisors responded to questions regarding transformational change and hindrance stress, whereas focal employees completed questions about abusive supervision. All items were rated on a 5-point Likert-scale ranging from 1 (= *strongly disagree*) to 5 (= *strongly agree*).

### 5.2.1 | Transformational change

Supervisors' perception of transformational change was assessed through 3 items (Rafferty & Griffin, 2006). Participants were asked to keep in mind the changes that occurred in their work environment in the past six months. An example item is "to what extent have you experienced changes to the values of your work unit" (Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.80$ ).

### 5.2.2 | Hindrance stress

Supervisors' hindrance stress was measured with the 3-item measure from Bardes (2009; see also LePine et al., 2005). A sample item is "I feel that my job goals constrain my achievement of personal goals and development" (Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.79$ ).

### 5.2.3 | Abusive supervision

Employees completed Tepper's (2000) 15-item measure of abusive supervision. A sample item is "my supervisor ridicules me" (Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.95$ ).

### 5.2.4 | Control variables

We included supervisors' and employees' age, gender, organizational tenure and education as control variables for testing our model for several reasons. Prior research has shown that these demographic variables are related to stress and coping responses (e.g., Billings & Moos, 1984; Folkman et al., 1987; Hammer et al., 2004; Spielberger & Reheiser, 1994). We also measured employees' resistance to change with the six-item scale developed by Oreg (2003). A sample item is "If I were to be informed that there's going to be a significant change regarding the way things are done at work, I would probably feel stressed." (Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.85$ ).

## 5.3 | Measurement model

Before conducting our analyses, we ran confirmatory factor analyses to assess whether our constructs are statistically distinct from each other. Given that abusive supervision is not normally distributed, we used a robust maximum likelihood estimator (Gana & Broc, 2019). The results of these analyses are shown in Table 1 and indicate that our proposed three-factor measurement model has an adequate fit and fitted the data better than nested models and a single-factor model where all items loaded onto one single factor, or a model where we incorporated an unmeasured latent methods factor (Podsakoff et al., 2003).

TABLE 1 Confirmatory factor analyses for study 1

	df	$\chi^2$	$\Delta\chi^2$	$\chi^2/df$	CFI	RMSEA	SRMR
Proposed measurement model							
AS, HS and TC treated as separate constructs	186	317.30		1.71	0.91	0.08	0.05
Two-factor models							
AS and HS combined to load onto one factor.	188	459.12	37.21***	2.44	0.81	0.12	0.09
AS and TC combined to load onto one factor.	188	424.85	139.23***	2.26	0.84	0.11	0.09
HS and TC combined to load onto one factor.	188	404.91	72.63***	2.15	0.85	0.11	0.08
Common methods bias							
All items combined to load onto one single factor	189	555.72	82.08***	2.94	0.74	0.14	0.11
Unmeasured latent methods factor for constructs filled out by same source	180	306.067	11.30	1.70	0.91	0.07	0.06

Note: This table reports Yuan-Bentler scaled chi-squares (robust maximum likelihood estimator). Chi-squared differences are corrected using the Satorra and Bentler (2001) scaling factor. As a robust difference test is a function of two standard (not robust) statistics, the difference score reported is not equal to the absolute difference between the robust chi-squares (Rosseel, 2012).

Abbreviations: AS, Abusive supervision; HS, hindrance stress; TC, Transformational change.

\*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

## 6 | RESULTS

Means, standard deviations and intercorrelations between variables are presented in Table 2.

We conducted the analyses using heteroscedasticity-consistent standard errors (HC3) to account for potential heteroscedasticity within our sample (Hayes & Cai, 2007). Following Becker's (2005) recommendations, we examined which of the control variables significantly correlated with the mediating (i.e., supervisors' hindrance stress) and dependent variable (i.e., abusive supervision). We found that supervisors' age, employee gender, employee age, and employee resistance to change met at least one of those criteria. Therefore, we also ran our model with these control variables. Because the control variables did not alter our findings (see Table 3), we followed Carlson and Wu's (2012) recommendations and report our results without including the control variables (see also Becker, 2005). Findings revealed that transformational change was related to hindrance stress ( $b = 0.22, SE = 0.07, p = 0.001$ ). This suggests that supervisors who experienced higher (rather than lower) levels of transformational change felt more stressed. Hence, Hypothesis 1 is supported.

Further, supervisors' hindrance stress was related to abusive supervision ( $b = 0.18, SE = 0.08, p = 0.020$ ). This suggests that supervisors who felt higher levels of hindrance stress were more likely to be perceived as abusive. Hence, Hypothesis 2 is confirmed.

To examine the indirect effect of transformational change on abusive supervision through supervisors' hindrance stress we used the regression-based techniques described by Hayes (2018). More specifically, we ran PROCESS Model 4, with 10,000 bootstraps, to test whether supervisors' experienced hindrance stress mediated the relation between transformational change and abusive supervision. The results are presented in Table 3. As predicted, results showed that supervisors' hindrance stress mediated the relationship between transformational change and abusive supervision (*indirect effect* = 0.04, 95% CI [0.0062, 0.0901]). Hence, Hypothesis 3 is supported.

## 7 | STUDY 2A: METHOD

Study 1 does not allow us to draw causal conclusions regarding the proposed relationships. Therefore, we tested each step of our proposed mediation model in separate experimental studies, which is often referred to as a causal



TABLE 2 Means, standard deviations, and intercorrelations for study 1

Variable	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1. Supervisor gender <sup>a</sup>	1.55	0.50	-											
2. Employee gender <sup>a</sup>	1.40	0.49	0.31***	-										
3. Supervisor age	42.55	8.72	0.18*	0.12	-									
4. Employee age	37.62	10.13	0.03	0.22*	0.33***	-								
5. Supervisor education <sup>b</sup>	3.28	0.78	-0.01	-0.10	0.11	0.13	-							
6. Employee education <sup>b</sup>	2.82	0.78	-0.09	-0.19*	0.17†	-0.13	0.41***	-						
7. Supervisor organizational tenure	14.54	9.18	0.01	0.15†	0.67***	0.14	-0.08	0.21*	-					
8. Employee organizational tenure	9.80	9.30	0.19	0.27**	0.28**	0.67***	-0.01	-0.13	0.14	-				
9. Transformational change	2.99	0.88	-0.18*	-0.22*	-0.16†	-0.20*	-0.15†	-0.07	-0.09	-0.17†	(0.80)	-		
10. Hindrance stress	2.09	0.70	-0.02	-0.15†	-0.24**	-0.17†	-0.03	-0.02	-0.12	-0.13	0.28**	(0.79)	-	
11. Abusive supervision	1.65	0.69	-0.002	0.07	-0.06	0.07	-0.04	0.01	0.05	0.24**	-0.06	0.15†	(0.95)	-
12. Employee resistance to change	2.64	0.70	-0.01	-0.22*	0.03	-0.05	0.08	0.08	0.05	-0.01	0.03	0.01	0.20*	(0.85)

Note: Table 2 provides Spearman's rank correlation coefficients for the correlations involving supervisor education and supervisor gender; for all other variables Pearson correlation coefficients are provided. The alpha coefficients of reliability are displayed along the diagonal in parentheses. N = 127 for correlations with supervisor's education.

<sup>a</sup>Coded 1 = female, 2 = male.

<sup>b</sup>Coded 1 = Elementary school, 2 = High school, 3 = Bachelor's degree, 4 = Master's degree, 5 = Postgraduate degree.

†p < 0.10, \*p < 0.05, \*\*p < 0.01, \*\*\*p < 0.001, N = 128.

TABLE 3 Results of the robust regression analyses of study 1

	Hindrance stress				Abusive supervision			
	<i>b</i> (SE)	<i>b</i> (SE)	<i>b</i> (SE)	<i>b</i> (SE)	<i>b</i> (SE)	<i>b</i> (SE)	<i>b</i> (SE)	<i>b</i> (SE)
Intercept	1.42*** (0.20)	2.17*** (0.38)	2.46*** (0.46)	2.57*** (0.57)	1.54*** (0.28)	1.70*** (0.44)	1.35** (0.46)	0.63 (0.64)
Transformational change	0.22** (0.07)	0.20** (0.07)	0.18* (0.07)	0.18* (0.07)	-0.09 (0.09)	-0.09 (0.09)	-0.08 (0.09)	-0.07 (0.08)
Hindrance stress					0.18* (0.08)	0.18* (0.09)	0.19* (0.09)	0.20* (0.09)
Supervisor's age		-0.02* (0.01)	-0.02† (0.01)	-0.01† (0.01)		-0.00 (0.01)	-0.01 (0.01)	-0.01 (0.01)
Employee gender			-0.13 (0.12)	-0.14 (0.12)			0.10 (0.14)	0.17 (0.15)
Employee age			-0.00 (0.01)	-0.00 (0.01)			0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)
Employee resistance to change				-0.04 (0.09)				0.23† (0.12)
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	0.08*	0.12*	0.13*	0.13*	0.04*	0.04†	0.05†	0.11

Note: *N* = 128. Unstandardized beta coefficients are reported. Robust standard errors are in parentheses.

†*p* < 0.10, \**p* < 0.05, \*\**p* < 0.01, \*\*\**p* < 0.001.

chain method. More specifically, in Study 2a, we test the first path of our mediation model by manipulating transformational change and examining the effect on hindrance stress. In Study 2b, we test the second part of our mediation model by manipulating hindrance stress and examining the effect on abusive supervision. Together, these two studies thus test our theoretical model and allows us to draw causal claims because we independently manipulated the predictor and mediating variables (Spencer et al., 2005; Stone-Romero & Rosopa, 2010).

## 7.1 | Sample and design

We recruited a total of 85 employees living in the USA through Amazon's Mechanical Turk. This is an online platform that allows researchers to collect data in exchange for a monetary compensation (Buhrmester et al., 2011). Previous research showed that data obtained via MTurk tend to yield high quality data with similar psychometric properties as data obtained using traditional convenient sampling methods (e.g., Steelman et al., 2014). Ten participants in our sample did not fully complete our study. We also included an attention check, which two participants failed to answer correctly. This resulted in a final sample of 73 working adults (33 woman and 40 men; average age = 36.44 years, *SD* = 11.45). On average, participants had 15.85 years (*SD* = 11.14) of work experience and worked 37.53 (*SD* = 10.78) hours per week. All participants were randomly assigned to either the high or low transformational change condition.

## 7.2 | Procedure

After demographics were assessed, participants were asked to read the following situation and to imagine the situation as if it were real. In this situation, we introduced the transformational change manipulation that was based on the measure of transformational change we used in Study 1.

In the high transformational change condition (*n* = 36), respondents read:

You are a manager working in a medium-sized electronics firm. Recently your unit has gone through large scale changes that significantly affected the objectives and goals that need to be achieved. These changes not only affected your goals and the objectives you have to reach but also how your unit was structured and the underlying values that determined how work was done.

In the low transformational change condition ( $n = 37$ ), the situation stated,

You are a manager working in a medium-sized electronics firm. Your unit has been very consistent and stable regarding the objectives and goals that need to be achieved. Not only your goals and the objectives you need to achieve are very stable and secure but your unit's structure and the underlying values on how you should work also remained untouched.

Then, participants completed the dependent measures, as well as the manipulation and attention check. Responses were indicated on a response scale ranging from 1 (= *totally disagree*) to 5 (= *totally agree*). To check whether the manipulation was successful, participants completed the *transformational change* scale developed by Rafferty and Griffin (2006) (Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.96$ ). *Hindrance stress* was measured with three items developed by Bardes (2009) (Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.95$ ). We also assessed hindrance stress with an eight-item scale developed by Rodell and Judge (2009). A sample item is "My duties and work objectives would be unclear to me." (Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.94$ ).

## 8 | RESULTS

### 8.1 | Manipulation check

A one-way ANOVA with transformational change as between-subject factor revealed a significant effect on the transformational change manipulation check,  $F(1, 71) = 97.04, p < 0.001, \eta^2 = 0.58$ . Participants in the high transformational change condition reported higher levels of transformational change than those in the low transformational change condition ( $M = 4.36$  vs.  $2.21, SD = 0.66$  vs.  $1.14$  respectively).

### 8.2 | Hypothesis testing

A one-way ANOVA on hindrance stress revealed a significant effect for transformational change,  $F(1, 71) = 11.39, p = 0.001, \eta^2 = 0.14$ , showing that at high levels of transformational change, participants are more likely to report higher levels of hindrance stress than at low levels of transformational change ( $M = 2.88$  vs.  $2.13, SD = 1.00$  vs.  $0.91$  respectively). Similarly, a one-way ANOVA on Rodell and Judge's hindrance stress measure revealed a significant main effect for transformational change,  $F(1, 71) = 33.55, p < 0.001, \eta^2 = 0.32$ , showing that at high levels of transformational change, participants are more likely to experience hindrance stress than at low levels of transformational change, ( $M = 3.31$  vs.  $2.25, SD = 0.71$  vs.  $0.84$  respectively).

## 9 | STUDY 2B: METHOD

### 9.1 | Sample and design

We recruited 150 working adults through Prolific. Five respondents failed the attention check and were removed from subsequent analyses. This resulted in a final sample of 145 working adults out of which 61 were men and 84

women. On average, respondents were 38.37 ( $SD = 9.70$ ) years old, had 18.05 ( $SD = 9.94$ ) years of work experience and worked 40.11 ( $SD = 6.35$ ) hours per week. All participants were randomly assigned to either a high or low hindrance stress condition.

## 9.2 | Procedure

After demographics were assessed, participants were asked to read the following situation and to imagine that they experienced it themselves. In this situation, we introduced the hindrance stress manipulation that mimicked the hindrance stress measure in Study 1 and 2a.<sup>2</sup>

All respondents read:

You work as a manager in a medium-sized electronics company. In the last six months, your company has undergone significant changes in order to maintain a competitive advantage. These changes have affected the goals, structure and values of your team.

In the high hindrance stress condition ( $n = 73$ ), the text continued:

As a result, you are experiencing a lot of stress at work. You do not fully understand what is expected of you in light of these changes. In fact, the objectives you have been given are very unclear. You also receive many conflicting requests from various stakeholders within the company. You constantly feel that you do not have sufficient resources and materials to work with. Therefore, you feel that you are unable to achieve and develop your personal goals.

In the low hindrance stress condition ( $n = 72$ ), the text continued,

Yet, you are not experiencing a lot of stress at work. You fully understand what is expected of you in light of these changes. In fact, the objectives you have been given are very clear. You also do not receive conflicting requests from various stakeholders within the company. You feel that you have sufficient resources and materials to work with. Therefore, you feel that you are able to achieve and develop your personal goals.

Then, respondents completed the manipulation and attention checks, as well as the dependent measures. All questions were answered on a 5-point scale (1 = *totally disagree*, 5 = *totally agree*).

To check whether the manipulation was successful, participants completed the same two hindrance measures as in Study 2a (Bardes, 2009; Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.95$ ; Rodell & Judge, 2009, Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.97$ ). Next, participants indicated the extent to which they would engage in abusive supervision using the 15-item scale developed by Tepper (2000) as a self-rated measure. A sample item is "I would ridicule my followers" (Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.96$ ).

## 10 | RESULTS

### 10.1 | Manipulation check

Two one-way ANOVAs on the hindrance manipulation checks showed a significant effect of the hindrance stress manipulation (Bardes:  $F(1, 143) = 369.98, p < 0.001, \eta^2 = 0.72$ ; Rodell and Judge:  $F(1, 143) = 1027.47, p < 0.001, \eta^2 = 0.88$ ). Participants reported higher levels of hindrance stress in the high hindrance stress condition (Bardes:

$M = 3.99, SD = 0.69$ ; Rodell and Judge:  $M = 4.35, SD = 0.40$ ) compared to the low hindrance stress condition (Bardes:  $M = 1.80, SD = 0.68$ ; Rodell and Judge:  $M = 1.81, SD = 0.55$ ).

## 10.2 | Hypothesis testing

A one-way ANOVA on abusive supervision revealed a significant effect of hindrance stress,  $F(1, 143) = 9.92, p = 0.002, \eta^2 = 0.06$ . Participants—who imagined to be a manager in a company that had undergone transformational changes—indicated that they would engage in higher levels of abusive supervision when they experienced high levels of hindrance stress ( $M = 1.51, SD = 0.74$ ) compared to when they experienced low levels of hindrance stress ( $M = 1.21, SD = 0.34$ ).

In sum, results from both Study 2a and 2b using an experimental-causal-chain approach show a consistent pattern of findings with Study 1, which was a field study demonstrating that transformational change results in hindrance stress, and subsequently inciting abusive supervision.

## 11 | DISCUSSION

The results of our field study as well as our experimental studies showed that supervisors appraise transformational change as hindering, and that this, in turn, is related to abusive supervision. Consistent with Hypothesis 1, transformational change was positively related to supervisors' hindrance stress. Supervisors who reported higher levels of transformational change experienced higher levels of hindrance stress. Further, consistent with Hypothesis 2, hindrance stress was positively related to abusive supervision. Lastly, transformational change indirectly related to abusive supervision, through supervisors' hindrance stress. This result confirmed Hypothesis 3. Below we discuss theoretical and practical implications of these findings.

### 11.1 | Theoretical implications

Our research contributes to the organizational change literature by examining supervisors' reactions to transformational change and their behaviors towards employees. Even though the literature has already shown that transformational change is a stressful event for employees (e.g., Ashford, 1988; Robinson & Griffiths, 2005), less is known about how change affects supervisors, who are expected to act as role-models during organizational change (for exceptions see e.g., Barton & Ambrosini, 2013; Giangreco & Peccei, 2005; Lüscher & Lewis, 2008). Indeed, the change literature argued that organizations tend to overestimate both supervisors' abilities to manage the personal change-implications as well as their ability to motivate their employees to change (Stouten et al., 2018). We reasoned that transformational change instead overwhelms supervisors and prevents them from acting properly, ultimately leading them to engage in inappropriate behavior, that is, abusive supervision. We tuned in on the relationship between transformational change and supervisors' hindrance stress. Consistent with the cognitive theory of stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), our findings revealed that transformational change indeed was associated with supervisors' hindrance stress, which in turn related to abusive supervision.

Our findings are in line with Rafferty and Griffin (2006) that the impact of change is an important change characteristic that influences an individual's attitudes and behaviors. A specific contribution offered by this research is that the influence of transformational change is not limited to employees, but also impacts supervisors. Although the recent literature has acknowledged that supervisors are also change recipients, it has primarily focused on supervisors as sources of support and enablers of change efforts in employees. To date, the implicit assumption is that supervisors should remain unaffected by the change and act as a motivating force for employees (Oreg & Berson, 2019).

Yet, transformational change may have widespread effects on how supervisors experience their job and how they manage their employees. The uncertainty of transformational change is unlikely to be viewed as trivial by supervisors (see also Barton & Ambrosini, 2013; Giangreco & Peccei, 2005).

We contribute to the change literature by showing that transformational change can result in supervisors' hindrance stress, and consequently its detrimental consequences, more specifically abusive supervision. Even though the organizational change literature has emphasized the crucial role supervisors have in implementing changes (see Stouten et al., 2018), we still know little of how these changes impact supervisors. In our study, we show that taking supervisors' role in change processes more seriously is highly needed. Future research would need to turn to how supervisors can be better equipped to cope more adequately with transformational change, for them to be able to a true motivator for employees.

Our findings also have implications for prior leadership theories and constructs in the domain of organizational change. Transformational and ethical leadership are viewed as beneficial during times of change (Burnes, 2009; Rahaman et al., 2020). This kind of leadership requires supervisors to serve as role models and to inspire their subordinates. However, our research suggests that transformational change might undermine such positive supervisor behavior, as it may elicit hindrance stress and subsequently provoke abusive behavior. Hence, being inspiring as a supervisor in times of change is not a given, as supervisors could struggle to deal with the hindrances that the changes create. Future research is needed to examine the role of supervisors in organizational change efforts, to better understand how supervisors are change-agents and recipients at the same time. Especially in times of change, supervisory support is crucial for change implementation (Burnes, 2009). Moreover, it is necessary to examine how supervisors can overcome the psychological barriers resulting from transformational change, and at the same time remain a source of inspiration for their employees.

The findings also shed new light on the field of abusive supervision. More specifically, our findings offer insights into the possible antecedents of abusive supervision (Fischer et al., 2021; Zhang & Bednall, 2016). We add to this research by showing that contextual factors such as transformational change can be important antecedents of abusive supervision. Hence, transformational change is a particular situational factor that indirectly elicits abusive supervisory behavior. This research adds to a more context-based view on abusive supervision, indicating that the organizational situation (i.e., transformational change) has a share in the prevalence of abusive behavior. Further, by replicating the finding that hindrance stress is an antecedent of abusive supervision (e.g., Mawritz et al., 2014; Ng et al., 2021), we add to the research linking hindrance stress with the display of dysfunctional behavior (Rodell & Judge, 2009).

Finally, this research links the cognitive theory of stress to the transformational change literature, as well as to the abusive supervision literature. The cognitive theory of stress proposes a stressor-appraisal-emotion-outcome sequence (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). The current research can be interpreted as a view on the unfolding of this process, in that transformational change is a stressful event associated with supervisors' appraisal of hindrance stressors, which are associated with behavioral outcomes in the form of abusive supervision. Within the change management literature, the cognitive theory of stress provides promising avenues to help us better understand supervisors' experience of the change process and how such changes will subsequently affect supervisors' conduct and their relationship with employees. It also highlights that supervisors may not automatically embrace the changes, but that they also struggle to deal with the impact of the change themselves. In our study, we did not test the whole stressor-appraisal-emotion-outcome sequence in detail as we did not measure supervisor emotions. Future research could add by measuring supervisors' cognitive and emotional appraisals in more detail. In this regard, recent research on transformational change has shown that the sequence—and relative salience—of cognitive and emotional change appraisals may differ (Reiche & Neeley, 2019). Future research should examine under which circumstances cognitive appraisals precede emotional appraisals (which is an underlying assumption in the cognitive theory of stress), and when affective responses could precede cognitive reactions to change.

Although we built upon the cognitive theory of stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), and more specifically on hindrance stress as the underlying mechanism connecting transformational change with abusive supervision, future research should examine other mechanisms through which transformational change wields its effects on abusive

supervision. For example, another theoretical lens is the Conservation of resources (COR) theory (Hobfoll, 1989, 2018). COR theory posits that individuals have limited self-regulatory resources. Applied to our study, COR theory suggests that transformational change and the hindrance stress caused by it could drain supervisors' self-regulatory resources, which makes them less likely to counteract abusive tendencies (e.g., Li, He, Sun, et al., 2020). Alternatively, affective events theory posits that hindrance stressors increase abusive supervision through negative affective experiences (e.g., Li, He, & Sun, 2020). As such, future studies could test which underlying mechanism best explains the link between transformational change and abusive supervision.

## 11.2 | Practical implications

Our study shows that supervisors are vulnerable to experience hindrance stress due to transformational change, and that they might inappropriately cope with the stress by behaving abusively towards their employees. This finding is important for HR, as middle managers are often seen as key change facilitators, and not as a hindering factor towards change (Beck & Plowman, 2009). HR officers should thus be wary that the supervisors who are expected to facilitate change initiatives, are coping well with the change and do not experience the change as a hindrance (Szamosi & Duxbury, 2002). Our study shows that supervisors' levels of hindrance stress in transforming organizations are relevant and play a role in the likelihood that outbursts of abusive supervision occur. This invites the following practical implications.

First, organizations should be cautious about implementing many transformative changes at once. Recent research showed that "no change is an island", and that isolated change initiatives can influence and interfere with each other (Kanitz et al., 2022). Therefore, organizations should be careful to not overwhelm supervisors with change initiatives. Specifically, organizations should limit the total number of change initiatives that impact the organization of work in the supervisor's work unit, or the change-related assignments given to the supervisor. This can be done by reflecting whether the suggested changes are necessary and useful at the current time, before handing these change-related tasks to the supervisor. Organizations could also remedy this by implementing mutually reinforcing interventions simultaneously rather than sequentially, which has been shown to improve implementation success (Shojania et al., 2004).

Second, HR managers should support supervisors by building change-related capacity and take notice of stressful experiences during organizational change. By building change capacity, supervisors are better equipped to manage the change themselves and motivate change in their employees. Also, when supervisors are given the opportunity to voice their concerns, they might prevent themselves from becoming overly stressed because they would be able to proactively signal the limits of their resilience (e.g., Brotheridge, 2003). Also, if supervisors get voice about how their work is organized and what goals they need to achieve, they should have a better sense of control when faced with stressful events (Ng & Feldman, 2012).

Third, transformational change often requires supervisors to engage in extra efforts additional to their regular tasks. HR could make a proper assessment of the objectives that supervisors are expected to attain, as this could help to signal work overload. For example, clarifying the tasks and the timeframe that is imposed on supervisors would already forewarn about the extent that this would be appraised as a hindrance. During transformational change, HR could also map other sources of hindrance stress such as unnecessary administrative strain. By removing such stressors, supervisors should experience less hindrances in times of change.

Finally, if supervisors still report higher levels of hindrance stress, organizations could help them to effectively cope with their stress. For example, HR could ensure that supervisors get social support by their peers and the organization to help them manage undesired stress (Michie, 2002). In this respect it is interesting to note that venting frustrations is found to be less effective than strategies that focus on the stressor itself, or on the troubled person-environment relation that underlies the experienced stress (e.g., Callan, 1993). Because hindrance stress could result in negative emotions which have been found to be associated with undesirable behaviors such as abusive

supervision, it is important to help supervisors monitor and regulate their emotions connected to hindrance stress (Rodell & Judge, 2009). Moreover, attention could be turned to the personal psychological resources of supervisors that play a role in the coping process, such as beliefs about maintaining control over their work environment (Callan, 1993).

### 11.3 | Limitations

Study 1 employed a multi-source design that allowed for the assessment of the variables from different sources. Such an approach reduces same-source bias (Podsakoff et al., 2003). As supervisors answered questions regarding transformational change and stress, the possibility of same-source bias cannot be eliminated. The concern that this allowed the relation between transformational change and hindrance stress to be distorted by supervisors' implicit assumptions and theories, is ameliorated by the results of Study 2 that replicate the effect of transformational change on hindrance stress using an experimental design. By doing so, we reduced same-source method bias and increased the confidence in our findings (Podsakoff et al., 2003).

Furthermore, given the nature of the data in Study 1, causal relations reversed to the suggested ones, might be in operation. For example, it might be that supervisors who experience hindrance stress perceive more transformational change. However, prior research argues that transformational change causes stress, and stress theories suggest a sequence of a stressor, leading to stress, which in turn evokes behavioral outcomes. Moreover, in Study 2a and 2b, we used a causal-chain method providing confidence in the causal nature of our results. Although experimental vignette studies as used in Study 2 allow for strong inferences regarding causality and possess high internal validity, external validity may be threatened (Aguinis & Bradley, 2014). Nevertheless, vignette studies tend to score well on common realism (Van Dierendonck et al., 2014). Moreover, we specifically opted for working adults to optimize the ecological validity of our results. Because vignette studies allow for the controlled manipulation of independent variables, they are suited to determine the nature and direction of causal relationships (Aguinis & Bradley, 2014). Furthermore, we believe that asking participants how they would behave in a hypothetical scenario is more appropriate from an ethical perspective than exposing them to a manipulation that might cause them to engage in actual abusive behavior. Finally, given that Study 1 was a field study with similar results as our experiment, we feel confident that our multi-method approach optimizes both the internal and external validity of the results.

In this study, we were mainly interested in supervisors' subjective impact of transformational change. The measure developed by Rafferty and Griffin (2006) is often used to capture subjective perceptions of transformational change (see e.g., Belschak et al., 2020). Although focusing on the subjective change experience makes theoretical sense given that changes should be perceived/experienced as impactful to experience them as causing hindrance stress, future research should confirm that "objective" or actual highly transformative changes are indeed more likely to be experienced or seen by supervisors as highly transformational. Specifically, it might be interesting to understand when and why more (vs. less) actual transformational changes are also *experienced* as being more (vs. less) transformational.

## 12 | CONCLUSION

Prior research showed transformational change to be stressful for employees and the organization as a whole. The current study extends this research by not only showing that transformational change relates to supervisors' hindrance stress, but that supervisors' hindrance stress could result in undesirable supervisor behavior towards employees, in terms of abusive behavior. It is vital for organizations going through changes to pay attention to the stressful impact that these changes have on supervisors to help supervisors overcome hindrances that they experi-



ence during the change, as well as to support them in their effort to remain a role-model and a motivational source for employees at the same time.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

We declare that none of the authors has a conflict of interest.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author.

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## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> To check whether a selection bias might have influenced our findings, we assessed whether the employee sample differed on a key variable: abusive supervision. Employees whose supervisor did not return a complete response did not indicate higher levels of abusive supervision compared to employees whose supervisor did fill out the survey ( $t = 0.913$ ,  $p = 0.363$ ).
- <sup>2</sup> We want to thank an anonymous reviewer for their helpful suggestions on how to improve the experimental design and the manipulations of Study 2b.

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