



UNIVERSITI PUTRA MALAYSIA

**THE PROCESS AND THE LEARNING OF WORKPLACE
DEVALUATION: A MALAYSIAN CASE STUDY**

CHIN YOOK KONG

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By

CHIN YOOK KONG

**Thesis Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies, Universiti Putra
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Faculty: Educational Studies

Workers recognized and appreciated overtly by the management perceive themselves as valued employees. In contrast, employees that are not rewarded or not recognized perceive themselves as either un-valued or under-valued. On the other hand, valued employees feel devalued when they are subjected to situations that symbolize that the organization is ignoring their contributions, commitment and competence.

This qualitative case study seeks to understand the experiences of six devalued managers of one Malaysian organization. They were transferred to a new post that commands reduced positional power, reduced influence and carries lower job scope and responsibilities when compared to the previous post. Data was collected through a series of in-depth interviews. Findings were



extracted through grounded theory analysis techniques of open coding, constant comparison, storyline, memos and diagrams.

The findings produced a three-phase process of workplace devaluation. “Agitation,” the first phase, was a period of suspense, anxiety, uncertainty and hope for the individuals. “Assimilation,” the second phase, was a period of intense internal self-struggle for the individuals. They experienced states of conflict, denial and rationalization. In “Acknowledgement,” the third phase, the individuals either passively accept (acknowledge) their situation or act to redress their condition.

Learning occurs across the three phases. The participants engaged in informal discussions with friends, colleagues and family members, and focused discussion with selected people such as lawyers, mentors and family members. As a result, they increased their knowledge about themselves, others and the organization. Their behavior also changed. They learned to be self-reliant; they realized it is their responsibility to project themselves to those who can reward them. They became aware of their own weaknesses and shortcomings; they saw the importance of having friends and family members to support and encourage them. They also became less trusting of their friends. They found the company to be uncaring.

Five major conclusions became apparent from the findings: (1) All participants went through all three phases of the devaluation model irrespective of their position or rank in the company; (2) not all participants were able to put the experience behind them, that is, not all participants achieved closure;



(3) workplace devaluation was not by itself sufficient to cause any of the participants to resign from the company; (4) workplace devaluation as a process parallels the stages of dying as proposed by Elisabeth Kubler-Ross; (5) all participants experienced transformational learning.



Abstrak tesis yang dikemukakan kepada Senat Universiti Putra Malaysia
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Doktor Falsafah

**PROSES DAN PEMBELAJARAN PENURUNAN NILAI
TEMPATKERJA: SATU KAJIAN MALAYSIA**

Oleh

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Pekerja yang dikenali dan dihargai dengan nyata oleh pihak pengurusan menganggap diri mereka sebagai pekerja-pekerja bernilai. Sebaliknya, pekerja yang tidak diberi penghargaan atau tidak dikenali menganggap diri mereka samada tidak bernilai atau kurang dinilai. Disamping itu, pekerja-pekerja yang bernilai sebelumnya merasakan diri mereka tidak dihargai lagi atau nilai mereka telah berkurangan apabila situasi telah berubah dengan menunjukkan organisasi tidak menghargai lagi sumbangan, komitmen dan kecekapan mereka.

Kajian ini menggunakan kaedah pembelajaran kes secara kualitatif untuk memahami pengalaman enam pengurus yang diturunkan nilai oleh sebuah organisasi di Malaysia. Mereka ditukarkan ke jawatan yang baru yang tidak memerlukan mereka memberi arahan dan kurang berpengaruh serta

mempunyai skop tugas dan tanggungjawab yang lebih rendah. Pengumpulan data dilakukan melalui beberapa siri temubual. Penemuan diperolehi melalui teknik analisa teori kod terbuka, perbandingan berterusan, jalan cerita, memo dan gambarajah.

Daripada proses penemuan tersebut, telah menghasilkan tiga fasa. “Hasutan,” fasa pertama, merupakan tempoh kegelisahan, kebimbangan, tidak menentu dan harapan bagi individu. “Penyerapan,” fasa kedua, adalah merupakan tempoh perjuangan dalaman yang sengit bagi individu-individu. Mereka mengalami keadaan konflik, penafian dan penjelasan secara rasional. “Pengakuan,” fasa yang ketiga, menunjukkan bahawa individu-individu yang membuat keputusan untuk menerima secara pasif situasi mereka atau bertindak untuk membetulkan keadaan mereka.

Peserta-peserta akan melalui proses pembelajaran daripada ketiga-tiga fasa tersebut. Mereka akan terlibat secara tidak formal didalam perbincangan dengan rakan-rakan, rakan sekerja dan juga ahli keluarga. Selain daripada itu mereka juga terlibat didalam perbincangan fokus dengan orang-orang tertentu, seperti peguam, mentor dan ahli-ahli keluarga mereka. Hasilnya ialah dimana mereka meluaskan atau menambahkan pengetahuan mereka berkenaan diri mereka sendiri, orang lain dan juga organisasi. Perlakuan mereka juga berubah. Mereka belajar menjadi lebih berdikari; mereka sedar bahawa adalah menjadi tanggungjawab mereka untuk menonjolkan diri mereka kepada pihak yang boleh memberi ganjaran. Mereka menjadi prihatin terhadap kelemahan-kelemahan dan kekurangan-kekurangan. Mereka harus sedar dan harus

menerima hakikat bahawa betapa pentingnya mempunyai rakan-rakan dan ahli keluarga untuk menyokong dan memberi galakan. Mereka juga menjadi kurang mempercayai rakan-rakan. Mereka mendapati syarikat tidak prihatin.

Lima kesimpulan utama boleh dibuat daripada penemuan-penemuan yang diperolehi: (1) Setiap peserta menjalani ketiga-tiga fasa model penurunan nilai tanpa mengira kedudukan atau peringkat di dalam syarikat; (2) tidak semua peserta boleh meletakkan pengalaman di belakang mereka, iaitu tidak semua peserta mencapai “penutupan”; (3) penurunan nilai tempatkerja tidak mencukupi untuk menyebabkan mana-mana peserta meletak jawatan di syarikat; (4) penurunan nilai tempatkerja sebagai proses selaras dengan peringkat-peringkat kematian seperti yang dicadangkan oleh Elisabeth Kubler-Ross; (5) setiap peserta mengalami pembelajaran transformasi (transformasional learning).

A prayer:

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This thesis submitted to the Senate of Universiti Putra Malaysia has been accepted as fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

MEC	Malaysian EduCare
MEI	Malaysian Engineering International
ME	Malaysian Energy
HR	Human Resources Division



CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

I was jumbled with a concoction of negative feelings when during an organizational restructuring, I found myself placed in a division reporting to my previous subordinate. Just before the restructuring, I had been a valued employee, one that was acknowledged as the “in-house expert” in matters of training and development. Two months before the restructuring, I was transferred to head another unit, thus vacating my post to my subordinate who is now my supervising officer. I was furious with my organization for treating me in such a manner. Personally, I know that I have contributed a lot to my organization. My colleagues affirmed this. They seek my opinion on many workplace issues, especially on matters related to training and development. My organization was at that point considering some of my unit’s proposal on career development, accreditation of learning, training and development, and some other policy issues. Moreover, the management had never given any verbal or written, official or unofficial, indications of non-performance on my part.

While in this chaotic and confused condition, my sense of curiosity and fascination, along with my desire for understanding this experience, was immediately piqued when I chanced upon what Klunk (1999a) said:



Many professionals, recognized for their experience, knowledge, competence and commitment to their field, experience a contradiction when they realize that decision-makers ignore their contributions. An increasing number of professionals, regardless of gender, position, education, race or profession, agree that this experience devalues their contributions and demeans their sense of self. This experience, *workplace devaluation*, (emphasis in the original) cuts to the core of an individual's identity. (p. 158)

Background of the Study

In the workplace, each individual worker has a worth or value, a value determined by both a formal and an informal contract, explicitly and implicitly agreed upon by both the employer and employee. The formal contract specifies such things as the terms of employment, the job title, the job description, the line of authority, the pay, the benefits, and the rules of conduct. The informal is the unwritten "psychological contract" (Buren III, 2000; Rousseau, 1995; Schein, 1978) that underlies the employees' assumptions and expectations of the organization. The employee assumes that a job well done will bring with it recognition and appreciation.

Individual workers recognized and appreciated overtly by the management perceive themselves as valued employees. In contrast, employees that are not rewarded or not recognized perceive themselves as either unvalued or under-valued. On the other hand, valued employees feel devalued

when they are subjected to situations that symbolize that the organization is ignoring their contributions, commitment and competence.

The distinguishing feature that differentiates devalued employees from under-valued or un-valued employees is that the devalued employees perceive a reduction in their status and scope of work when compared to what it was before. Whereas, while under-valued or unvalued employees may feel alienated and unfairly treated; they do not experience a reduction in their status and scope of work.

The workplace has been studied from the time of the industrial revolution. Today, workplace issues such as drug abuse, workplace violence (Antai-Ontong, 1998), depression in the workplace, workplace harassment, gay and lesbians in the workplace (Besner and Spungin, 1998), workplace diversity (Cooke, 1999), workplace bullying (O'Moore, 1998), workplace equity (McGuire, 2000), workplace safety and health, workplace trauma caused by robbery, suicide, industrial accidents, natural disaster, unemployment, restructuring, mergers, and downsizing (Thompson, 1990) are being debated and researched. However, my searches through the academic libraries, the World Wide Web, and electronic libraries have turned up only one study on workplace devaluation.

This one study by Klunk (1999b) looked into workplace devaluation by investigating the experiences of four professionals who felt devalued by decision-makers who ignored their contributions, experience, knowledge, competence and commitment that had been acknowledged previously. There is

a need for a study of this relatively unexamined and under researched area of this nature to add on to the knowledge base of employees who were devalued by the decision makers in their organizations.

This study examined the situation of six managers¹ of Malaysian EduCare (MEC) – pseudonym – who, during an organizational restructuring, were transferred from their positions to assume a different posts within the same company or in a subsidiary company. The distinguishing characteristics of their transfer were:

- They were acknowledged as contributing, committed and competent members of the organization (i.e., valuable assets to the organization immediately before the transfer).
- They were transferred without being given any reasons.
- Their new jobs carried lower job scopes and responsibilities.
- Their new jobs commanded reduced positional power and influence.

Within the definition of workplace devaluation², these workers were devalued. The contention of this study is that “workplace devaluation” is a non-normative³ life event that, though experienced as a loss, triggers learning that results in the individual acquiring additional knowledge and skills and/or developing a transformed perspective and change in behavior.

¹ A manager is one who is held responsible and accountable for an operating unit of an organization.

² Workplace devaluation is the phenomenon in which workers are put in situations whereby their worth to the organization is deemed lower than what it was before. It occurs when their experience, commitment, competence and contributions to their organization are ignored.

³ A non-normative event “is defined as an event that is unanticipated and unplanned – one that most people do not expect to experience” (Merriam and Clark, 1991, p.216)

This chapter sets out the organizing perspective of the study, the research problem, the purpose of the study, the research questions and the significance of this study.

Organizing Perspective

Life Events

The whole of life is marked by a series of events such as getting married, having a child, attending university, living away from home, getting one's first job, buying a house, achieving a promotion, moving, caring for an older parent, enduring illness, retiring, and dying. Some events such as marriage and birth are commonly experienced; others such as promotion and relocation affect a person within a group setting while an event such as death is unique to the individual. These events shape us into the people whom we become and what we are as individuals throughout our lifetimes.

Life events consist of the normative or on-time and the non-normative or off-time type (Merriam and Clark, 1991; Neugarten, 1979; Pearlin, 1975). Normative life events are those that occur at the standard or expected time in people's lives. For example, adults are expected to marry, raise children and retire at around the same age group within a given social group. Non-normative life events are those unanticipated, unplanned and unexpected events that appear suddenly, which tend to shock and disrupt the normal flow of life.

Non-normative events can be categorized as pleasant or painful.

Pleasant non-normative events such as an unexpected promotion or meeting a long-lost school or college friend are joyous and wonderful experiences.

Painful non-normative events⁴ such as the untimely death of a family member, a diagnosis of breast cancer, or a dismissal from a job are unpleasant and sad.

Workplace devaluation would fall under the category of a painful, non-normative life event.

Process of a Painful Non-normative Life Event

Painful non-normative life events have been studied and adapted for use in different settings. Fink, Beak and Taddeo, cited in University of Sheffield (1990), developed a four-stage model derived from experiences of personal tragedies to help organizations implement change and assist members of the organization who perceived organizational change as personal crises. The stages are: 1) shock; 2) defensive retreat; 3) acknowledgement; and 4) adaptation and change. Marris, cited in University of Sheffield (1990), also developed a four-stage transition model: 1) denial/disbelief; 2) anger; 3) depression; and 4) integration. It was based on the stages people who were suffering from shocks or traumas (e.g., disability, bereavement, illness) go through in the recovery process. This model was adapted to ease the trauma often felt by executives who have to take over the projects when the consultants withdraw.

⁴ Painful non-normative events are unanticipated and unplanned events that caused a person to experience loss, which throws him or her into grieving.