APPLYING THE NORMATIVE CONFLICT MODEL
TO ORGANIZATIONAL DEVIANCE

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ABSTRACT

In this study, we extend the normative conflict model of group dissent (Packer, 2008) to identify the conditions that give rise to constructive versus destructive organizational deviance. Our results show that normative conflict, the perception of a discrepancy between the current norms in a group and other, better standards for behavior, can drive both constructive and destructive deviance. However, we found that the type of deviance expressed depends on the affective commitment of the employee. Highly-committed employees respond to normative conflict with constructive deviance, whereas employees with low commitment respond with destructive deviance. We discuss these findings with respect to the difficulties that organizations face in appropriately managing constructive and destructive deviance.

INTRODUCTION

In this study, we extend the normative conflict model of group dissent (Packer, 2008) to identify the A wide body of research indicates that deviance from organizational rules is quite common and oftentimes has harmful effects on individual employees and the overall organization (e.g., Bennett & Robinson, 2000; Berry, Ones, & Sackett, 2007). Most research in this area has focused on harmful, self-interested deviance in organizations. Recently, however, researchers have begun to examine constructive deviance, which involves volitional rule-breaking behavior conducted with honorable intentions to benefit the organization or its stakeholders (e.g., Morrison, 2006; Spreitzer & Sonenshein, 2004; Vardi & Weitz, 2004; Warren, 2003). To date, most research in this area has focused on conceptually distinguishing between constructive and destructive deviance; empirical research on constructive deviance is quite limited (e.g., Dahling, Chau, Mayer, & Gregory, in press; Galperin & Burke, 2006). Moreover, little is known about the situational conditions that elicit constructive rather than destructive deviance (Morrison, 2006).

This article seeks to further our understanding of the contexts that elicit different forms of deviance. We apply a new theoretical perspective from the social psychology literature, the normative conflict model (Packer, 2008), to develop and test hypotheses concerning conflict with organizational rules and commitment to the organization. Our results represent an important step forward in understanding when beneficial constructive deviance versus costly destructive deviance is likely to occur. To preface our ultimate hypotheses, we suggest that the same experience of normative conflict with organizational rules can lead to either constructive or destructive deviance, but that the type of deviance that will ultimately occur is dependent upon the employee's level of affective commitment.

DISTINGUISHING CONSTRUCTIVE DEVIANCE FROM DESTRUCTIVE DEVIANCE

Past research has defined destructively-deviant behavior as "voluntary behavior that violates significant organizational norms and in doing so threatens the well-being of an organization, its members, or both" (Robinson & Bennett, 1995, p. 556). Examples of destructive deviance in the workplace include behaviors such as stealing, leaving early, wasting resources, verbally abusing coworkers, and gossiping (Robinson & Bennett, 1995). All of these behaviors are carried out intentionally by the employee as a way of acting out against the organization. Empirical studies have also found a variety of determinants of destructive

deviance such as personality variables, organizational justice perceptions, and organization-based self-esteem (Berry, Ones, & Sackett, 2007, Ferris, Brown, & Heller, 2009).

Within the last 10 years, researchers have increasingly acknowledged that some forms of deviance are conducted with honorable intentions. For example, Warren (2003) constructed a typology that distinguished between constructive and destructive deviance based on whether or not the deviance is consistent with broad, societal hyper-norms for desirable behavior. Along similar lines, Spreitzer and Sonenshein (2004) defined constructive deviance in terms of volitional rule-breaking that is conducted with honorable intentions. Importantly, constructive deviance has been conceptually distinguished from other positive behaviors such as whistle-blowing, organizational citizenship behaviors, corporate social responsibility, and creativity/innovation (Applebaum, Iaconi, & Matousek, 2007; Spreitzer & Sonenshein, 2004).

Although several authors have offered examples of particular types or categories of constructive deviance (e.g., Galperin, 2003), one of the more established forms is pro-social rule breaking (PSRB; Morrison, 2006). Morrison developed this construct, which she defined as "the intentional violation of a formal organizational policy, regulation, or prohibition with the primary intention of promoting the welfare of the organization or one of its stakeholders" (Morrison, 2006, pgs. 7-8). Morrison subsequently elaborated on the construct to identify three different types of PSRB: PSRB to improve efficiency, PSRB to assist co-workers with work, and PSRB to assist customers. Following this initial work on PSRB, subsequent research has elaborated on the correlates and consequences of PSRB in organizations (Bryant, Davis, Hancock, & Vardaman, 2010; Dahling et al., in press; Mayer, Caldwell, Ford, Uhl-Bien, & Gresock, 2007). We consequently opted to focus on PSRB in this study because it has attracted more research attention and has a reliable and valid measure that has been shown to be empirically divergent from counterproductive work behavior (CWB), OCBs, and task performance (Dahling et al., in press).

Although this emerging body of research has defined and distinguished PSRB as a unique construct, very little research has elaborated on the conditions under which it is likely to occur. Some related research on normative conflict in social psychological settings may provide insights into understanding when and why constructive versus destructive deviance occurs in organizational settings.

THE NORMATIVE CONFLICT MODEL OF GROUP DEVIANCE

In social psychology research, the Normative Conflict Model theorizes about the conditions in which members might dissent and break the rules for the good of a social group (Packer, 2008). The model focuses specifically on the actions members engage in while in informal group settings. To explain constructive dissent, Packer suggested that varying levels of identification and normative conflict can predict group members' behaviors.

Packer proposed that the level of normative conflict experienced by group members predicts what course of action they are most likely to take. Normative conflict occurs when there is a perceived discrepancy between current norms in a group and other standards for behavior that a person might have (Packer, 2008). For example, a group member might experience normative conflict when he/she perceives a group norm as harmful, dangerous, counterproductive, immoral, or irritating.

Group members' actions as a response to normative conflict are predicted to vary based on their level of identification with the group. Identification is included in the model because research has shown that the level of identification a person has with the group determines how he/she will act towards group members and the group as whole. Highly-identified group members have been found to be more likely to be invested in the well-being of the group even over their own self-interest (Haslam et al., 2006). In contrast, group members who do not identify with the group are more likely to disengage by acting out in order to distance oneself from the group. Some group members might even decide to exit the group entirely (Packer, 2008).

The normative conflict model uses the interaction of identification and normative conflict to predict group members' deviant behavior. Packer (2008) proposed that employees who perceive high normative conflict and are highly identified with their groups will engage in *dissent*, which he defined as "nonconformist reactions motivated by a desire to change group norms and initiate improvement within

a group (pg. 54). Group members are expected to be more "other-focused" in this condition and will put the success of the group ahead of their own self-interests.

In contrast, if an employee experiences high normative conflict and low identification with a group, Packer (2008) suggested that the employee is most likely to disengage. Packer described disengagement as "non-normative responses motivated by a desire to distance oneself from a group or perhaps even exit it entirely" (pg. 54). Packer suggested that disengagement could involve neglecting group-related obligations or attempting to cognitively or behaviorally withdraw from the group.

Under conditions of low normative conflict, the model proposes that people are likely to conform to rules across both high and low levels of identification. Packer (2008) suggested that people might passively non-conform when normative conflict is low and identification is also low, but this condition involves indifference to norms rather than active deviance from them. Consequently, our focus in this study is limited to conditions of high normative conflict that could elicit volitional deviance.

To date, research on the normative conflict model has focused on applying the model to informal social groups (Packer, 2009; Packer & Chasteen, 2010). For example, Packer and Chasteen (2010) conducted a set of studies testing the model in informal groups of college students. One of their studies assessed college students' levels of identification to their university and then asked them to think about possible negative consequences to a pro-alcohol norm at their school. It was found that the students who were the most highly identified with the university were the ones who were willing to dissent and make their concerns known to the rest of the group (Packer & Chasteen, 2010). Even though support for the normative conflict model has been found in social group contexts, there has been limited research about whether this model can be applied to formal organizational settings.

INTEGRATING NORMATIVE CONFLICT THEORY WITH ORGANIZATIONAL DEVIANCE RESEARCH

We see clear parallels between the constructs in Packer's (2008) normative conflict model and those in the organizational deviance literature. These parallels may allow us to use this framework to predict when constructive versus destructive deviance is likely to occur. Dissent, which is proposed to occur under conditions of high normative conflict and high identification, is quite similar to existing conceptualizations of constructive deviance (Morrison, 2006; Spreitzer & Sonenshein, 2004). Constructive deviance and dissent both involve deviation from group rules in the interest of benefitting or improving the group. In contrast, disengagement, which is proposed to occur under conditions of high normative conflict and low identification, is most similar to destructive deviance. Destructive deviance and disengagement both involve deviation from group rules to benefit the self or disengage from the organization.

Packer's (2008) concept of identification also greatly overlaps with the construct of affective commitment in organizational research (e.g., Meyer & Allen, 1997). Affective commitment refers to the employee's emotional attachment to, identification with, and involvement in the organization (Meyer & Allen, 1991). In the normative conflict model, high levels of identification result in group members being motivated to attain a positive identity for a group (Packer, 2008). Affective commitment has been found to show similar effects with employees in organizations. For example, employees high in affective commitment have been shown to exert more effort on behalf of the organization and are more committed to a high level of performance and organizational effectiveness (Meyer & Allen, 1991). Similarly, research shows that workers are more willing to show initiative when they care about, identify with, and feel involved with their work (Den Hartog & Belschak, 2007). This shows a similar connection between identification and affective commitment in that people with high levels of either variable value the ability to change their group or workplace.

Recent work by Gutierrez, Howard-Grenville, & Scully (2010) provides an integrative example that illustrates how the normative conflict model is applicable to organizations. They studied Catholic Church-members' reactions to the massive accusations of sexual abuse of minors by priests. They found that many members of the church left the organization after being disgusted by the fact that the Catholic Church had some knowledge of what was occurring and did nothing to stop the crimes. There were other members, however, who decided to form a group dedicated to changing the way the Church

operated. Members of this organization prided themselves on remaining committed to spirituality while aiming to change elements of the Church's structure (Gutierrez et al., 2010). It was found that the Catholics who were strongly identified were the ones who encouraged the group to focus on what could be done to positively change the church and improve the system of government in order to prevent similar types of problems in the future. Those who weakly identified with the group were those who withdrew or began behaving contrary to the interests of the Church.

These events support the propositions of the normative conflict model. A high level of conflict was presented in an organization (exposed child abuse crimes by priests) and levels of commitment to the organization influenced the actions that members decided to take. Those with high conflict and low identification decided to exit the organization or destructively deviate against it. High levels of conflict and high levels of commitment led to members deciding to remain within their religious group and take actions to change the organization for the better. It was found that highly-identified members were the most likely to engage in constructively-deviant change efforts when conditions threatened their organization (Gutierrez, et al., 2010).

SUMMARY AND HYPOTHESES

Consistent with the normative conflict model (Packer, 2008, 2009; Packer & Chasteen, 2010), we propose that high normative conflict will interact with affective commitment to predict both constructive deviance (dissent) and destructive deviance (disengagement). Constructive deviance will be most likely when both normative conflict perceptions and affective commitment are high because these employees have the emotional investment to want to respond to normative conflict with efforts to better the organization. Destructive deviance will be most likely when normative conflict perceptions are high and affective commitment is low because these employees are more interested in their own self-interests than those of the organization. Accordingly, we pose the following two hypotheses:

> Hypothesis 1. Affective commitment will moderate the relationship between normative conflict perceptions and destructive deviance (CWB). Specifically, the relationship between normative conflict and CWB will be strongest when affective commitment is low.
> Hypothesis 2. Affective commitment moderates the relationship between normative conflict perceptions and constructive deviance (PSRB). Specifically, the relationship between normative conflict and PSRB will be strongest when affective commitment is high.

METHODS

Sample and Procedure

Our participants were recruited from a college in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States to complete a self-report survey in exchange for credit in undergraduate Psychology courses. The survey was administered over a computer in a supervised lab setting. The restrictions for the study limited the sample to employed participants who were 18 years of age or older. A total of 150 responses were collected, but three responses had to be discarded due to excessively-missing data (2.0%).

The final sample consisted of 147 usable responses. The mean age of participants was 20.32 (SD = 2.61). The sample was 73.5% female and 26.5% male. A total of 13.6% of participants identified as Hispanic or Latino/a. With respect to race, the sample was 1.4% American Indian or Native Alaskan, 10.3% Asian American, 11.0% African American, 2.1% Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, 73.8% Caucasian, and 1.4% of other racial groups. The most common industries reported were accommodation and food services (22.4%), educational services (19.7%), retail trade (15.6%), and health care and social assistance (12.2%).

Measures

Affective commitment. We used Meyer and Allen's (1997) eight-item measure of affective commitment to the organization. Responses were made on a five-point scale ranging from 1 = "strongly disagree" to 5 = "strongly agree". Sample items from this measure include, "I really feel as if this organization's problems are my own" and "I do not feel a strong sense of belonging to my organization" (reverse-

scored). In this study, we found that coefficient alpha was .85 for the measure; Meyer and Allen reported similar reliabilities ranging from .77-.88.

Normative conflict perceptions. We assessed participants' perceptions of normative conflict at work using a 12-item measure that we developed for this study, which is reported in full in the Appendix. Responses were made on a five-point scale ranging from 1 = "strongly disagree" to 5 = "strongly agree." An exploratory factor analysis (Thompson, 2004) indicated that all 12 items loaded strongly on a single factor that explained 61.45% of the variability in scores, with communalities ranging from .47-.78. The measure exhibited good reliability with α = .94 in this study.

Pro-social rule breaking. PSRB was measured using the 13-item scale developed and validated by Dahling et al. (in press). This measure assesses three different types of PSRB: to improve efficiency, to assist co-workers, and to assist customers. All three subscales correlated strongly with each other (r = .70-.73, all p < .001), so we followed Dahling et al.'s practice to calculate an overall scale score from all 13 items. Sample items from the measure include "I ignore organizational rules to 'cut the red tape' and be a more effective worker" and "I assist other employees with their work by breaking organizational rules." For the full measure, we found that α = .94; similarly, Dahling et al. reported alpha coefficients ranging from .93-.97 across three studies.

Counterproductive work behavior. CWB was measured using Bennett and Robinson's (2000) 12-item measure of organizationally-directed destructive deviance. Sample items from the measure include "Put little effort into your work" and "Taken property from work without permission." Responses were made on a five-point scale ranging from 1 = "Never" to 5 = "Very Often." We found that α = .88 in this study; Bennett and Robinson reported that α = .81.

RESULTS

Table 1 reports the means, standard deviations, and correlations between the study variables and demographics. We began by conducting a CFA on all of our measures (affective commitment, normative conflict, PSRB, and CWB) to confirm our expected four-factor structure. Results indicated that this model fit the data reasonably well ($\chi^2_{(849)}$ = 1236.84, p < .001; CFI = .90; TLI = .90; RMSEA = .05; SRMR = .07), suggesting that all four measures were assessing distinct constructs.

Table 1
Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations between Study Variables

	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Gender	--	--	--						
2. Age	20.32	2.61	.12	--					
3. Tenure (months)	19.97	18.28	.16	.27**	--				
4. Normative conflict	2.30	0.85	-.12	.05	.02	--			
5. Affective commitment	2.99	0.72	.14	.13	.16*	-.44**	--		
6. PSRB	2.09	0.74	-.29**	.02	-.02	.35**	-.14	--	
7. CWB	1.55	0.53	-.07	-.07	-.07	.47**	-.27**	.35**	--

Note: ** p < .01; * p < .05

PSRB = Pro-social rule breaking; CWB = Counter-productive work behavior

As shown in Table 1, normative conflict was positively related to both PSRB and CWB. We tested both of our hypotheses about the moderating effect of affective commitment using moderated multiple regression (Aiken & West, 1991); the results of these analyses are shown in Table 2. Hypothesis 1 stated that affective commitment would moderate the relationship between normative conflict perceptions and CWB such that CWB would be most likely when affective commitment was low, and least likely when affective commitment was high. Consistent with our expectations, we found support for the hypothesized interaction on CWB (β = -.20, p < .01). Figure 1 shows the shape of this interaction. As expected, there is a significant, positive relationship between normative conflict and CWB when affective commitment is low (t = 5.68, p < .001), in support of our theory. The relationship between normative conflict and CWB when affective commitment is high was not significant (t = 0.95, p = .35).

Table 2
Results of Hypothesis Tests using Moderated Multiple Regression

Step	Predictor	Destructive Deviance (CWB; H1)			Constructive Deviance (PSRB; H2)		
		β	*SE*	ΔR^2	β	*SE*	ΔR^2
1	Normative Conflict	.39**	.05	.23**	.41**	.08	.12**
	Affective Commitment	-.12	.06	--	.06	.09	--
2	Normative Conflict x Affective Commitment	-.20**	.07	.04**	.23**	.11	.05**

Note: ** p < .01. CWB = counterproductive work behavior; PSRB = pro-social rule breaking; H = hypothesis.
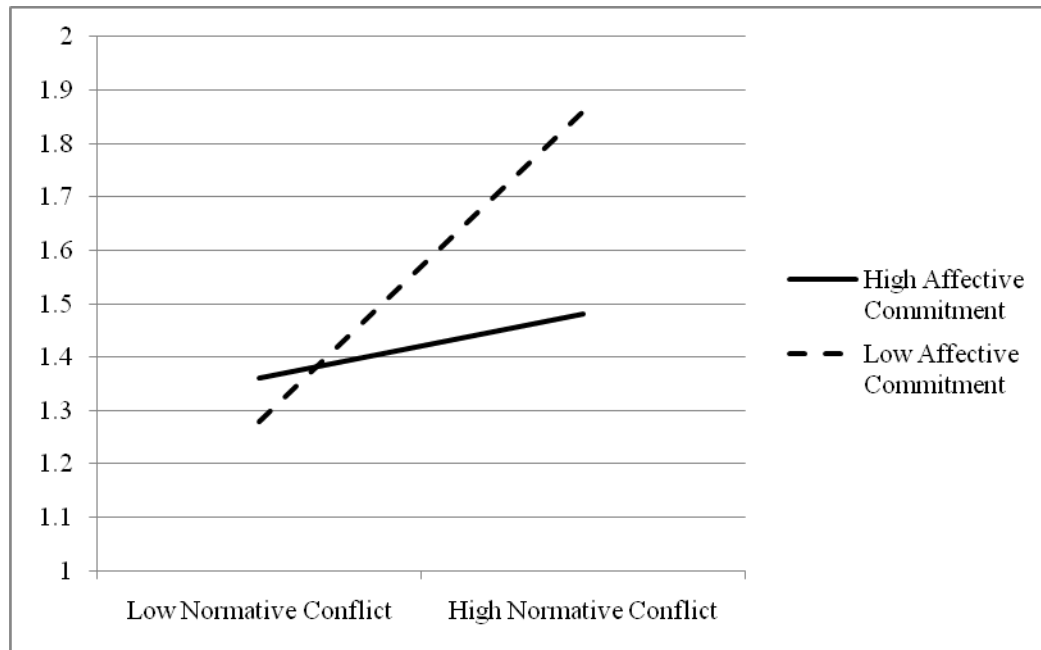

Figure 1. Interaction of normative conflict and affective commitment on organizationally-directed destructive deviance.

Hypothesis 2 stated that that affective commitment would moderate the relationship between normative conflict perceptions and PSRB such that PSRB would be most likely when affective commitment was high, and least likely when affective commitment was low. Again, we found a

statistically-significant interaction of normative conflict and affective commitment on PSRB (β = .23, *p* < .01), which we plotted in Figure 2. Consistent with Hypothesis 2, there is a significant, positive relationship between normative conflict and PSRB when affective commitment is high (*t* = 4.60, *p* < .001). However, we did not observe a significant relationship between normative conflict and PSRB when affective commitment is low (*t* = 0.99, *p* = .32). Thus, the results supported both hypotheses, indicating that perceptions of normative conflict can shape different types of organizational deviance depending on the level of affective commitment felt by the employee.
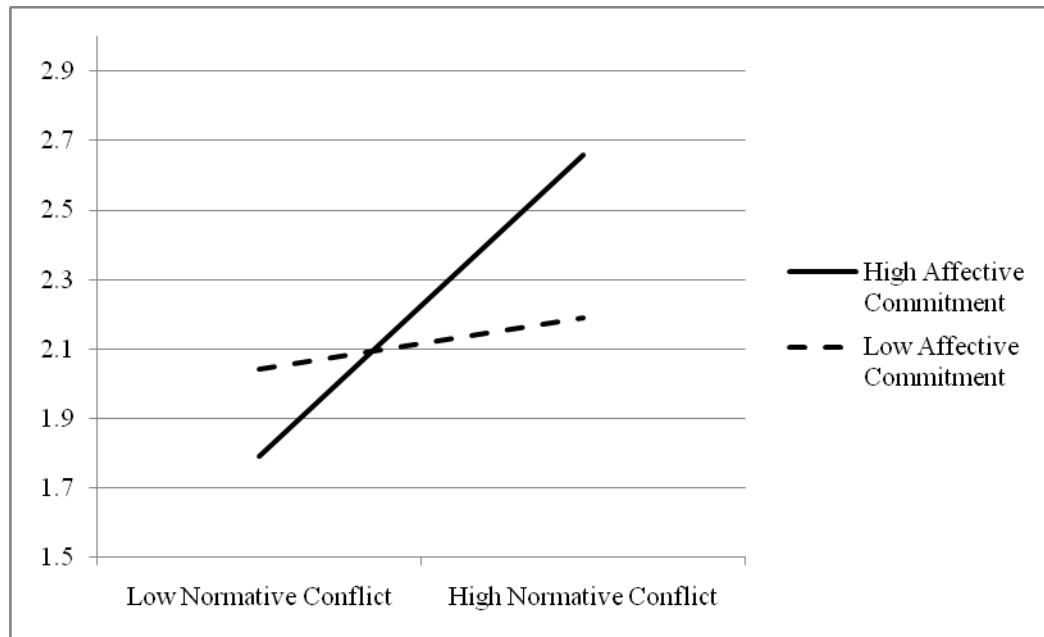

Figure 2. Interaction of Normative Conflict and Affective Commitment on Pro-Social Rule Breaking in Organizations. harming the organization.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to better understand the contexts in which employees engage in constructive versus destructive deviance in the workplace. While many empirical studies have identified variables that influence destructive deviance (e.g., Berry et al., 2007), far less research has explored the antecedents of constructive deviance. Our study found that when employees decide to engage in workplace deviance as a response to normative conflict, the type of deviance they commit is dependent on their level of affective commitment to the organization. If workers are committed to their organization and high normative conflict is experienced, employees are more likely to engage in constructive deviance that is intended to help the organization. If the level of affective commitment is low when experiencing high normative conflict, however, employees are more likely to destructively deviate with the intent of harming the organization.

This study was a preliminary test of the normative conflict model and its application to organizational deviance research. One limitation of this study is that the sample consisted of college students who are primarily in entry-level jobs that may not be characterized by the full range of constructive and destructive deviance that is possible in higher-level jobs characterized by greater empowerment. Future research should replicate our results with employees who have longer tenure and/or higher-level positions within their companies. In addition, data collection in our study used employee self report ratings. Future research should collect deviance criterion ratings from sources other than the focal employee, such as supervisors or co-workers.

Another direction for future research could be to determine other covariates that may drive constructive deviance in organizations. Perhaps individual differences, such as proactivity or conformity,

may influence employees' levels of constructive deviance. In addition, it would be interesting to see how often constructive deviance occurs in collectivist, Eastern cultures. On one hand, employees in collectivist cultures may engage in increased constructive rule breaking because subordination to the good of the group is emphasized in these cultural settings. On the other hand, because the collectivist culture values the group so highly, employees may be more hesitant to deviate from the group at all, even if their intent is to help the organization.

Even though this study was preliminary, it has important practical implications for organizations. Our results point to the importance of developing high levels of affective commitment in employees. Given that normative conflict is likely unavoidable in group settings (Packer, 2008), affective commitment may spell the difference between high rates of constructive versus destructive deviance in an organization. Therefore, by increasing affective commitment, businesses may be able to address and improve problems of destructive deviance.

Lastly, we caution that managers may see any rule breaking as destructive and automatically take action to punish employees to prevent it from happening in the future. Our study suggests, however, that managers should seek to understand whether this behavior is intended to help or hurt the organization. Constructive and destructive deviance have very different motivations, although they may appear to be facially similar. Consistent with Dahling et al. (in press), we found that PSRB and CWB had a moderate, positive relationship, suggesting that the same people may engage in both constructive and destructive deviance. Managers and researchers will benefit from identifying which type of deviance is occurring and addressing the situation appropriately (Galperin, 2003). If the deviance is committed with a destructive intent to hurt the organization, preventative action should be taken. If the deviance is constructively-motivated, however, the employee seeks only to help the overall organization, and the rule in question should be reassessed to see if it truly is harmful to the organization and should be adjusted. Managers can therefore draw strength from identifying differences in deviance and can use this awareness to help their organizations continually improve.

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APPENDIX

Normative Conflict Measure

1. This organization has rules or norms that lead to wasteful or counterproductive behavior.
2. This organization has rules or norms that are dangerous to follow.
3. This organization has rules or norms that encourage immoral or unethical behavior.
4. This organization could be so much better if it enacted different rules or norms.
5. This organization could be much more efficient if people could follow different rules or norms.
6. I am frequently irritated by the rules and norms of this organization.
7. I think this organization falls short of what it could be because of the rules and norms it enforces on employees.
8. The values of this organization are not accurately reflected in the rules and norms it sets.
9. I think this organization will never reach its true potential until it changes its practices.
10. I think that the rules and norms of this organization are valid and reasonable. (R)
11. The standards of this organization encourage the wrong sort of behavior from employees.
12. I am bothered by the problematic practices of this organization.