Intergenerational Employees Gap and Negative Workplace Gossip: Autoethnography on Buddhist Mindful Leadership

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Abstrak: Menciptakan lingkungan kerja yang sehat dengan kesenjangan generasi merupakan masalah utama bagi hampir semua institusi organisasi. Perbedaan cara pandang motivasi kerja dan gaya kolaborasi kerja menimbulkan gesekan konflik psikologis. Artikel ini menggunakan perspektif psikologi sosial dengan metode autoetnografi, sebuah catatan refleksi penulis selama menjadi manajer di sebuah institusi pendidikan tinggi. Artikel tersebut merangkum kehidupan kerja dari perspektif kepemimpinan: Pertama, kesenjangan antar generasi menyebabkan munculnya gosip negatif di tempat kerja, sehingga menurunkan performa kerja dan mempengaruhi pengambilan keputusan sebagai manajer agar tidak terjebak dalam perspektif subjektif berbasis gosip. Kedua, pemimpin menggunakan metode membangun jarak untuk meminimalisir gosip antar rekan kerja dan staf dengan menggunakan etika *Vipassana* dan Buddhisme dan etika filosofi Jawa dengan *Mbisu*, seperti halnya meditasi menjaga jarak pikiran. Strategi ini dilakukan dengan tidak menanggapi gosip negatif yang tidak berhubungan dengan pekerjaan. Ketiga, kepemimpinan berkesadaran dapat menciptakan iklim kerja yang memperkecil kesenjangan generasi namun memiliki kelemahan yaitu stigma negatif terhadap pemimpin itu sendiri, yang dianggap tidak mampu membaur dengan budaya komunal, serta iklim kerja pragmatis berdasarkan tugas dan fungsinya, sehingga pemimpin tidak dapat menginstruksikan pekerjaan di luar tugas pokoknya.

Kata Kunci: Kesenjangan Generasi Pekerja; Kepemimpinan Berkesadaran; Gosip Negatif Pekerjaan

Abstract. *Creating healthy work environments with a generational gap is a primary problem for almost all organizational institutions. Differences in the perspective of work motivation and work collaboration style cause psychological conflict frictions. This article uses the perspective of social psychology with the autoethnographic method, a record of the author's reflection while a manager in a higher education institution. The article summarizes work-life from a leadership perspective: First, the gap between generations causes the emergence of negative workplace gossip, which reduces job performance and affects decision-making as a manager so as not to get stuck in a like-dislike perspective. Second, the leader uses the method of building distance to minimize gossip between colleagues and staff by using the Vipassana ethic of mindfulness and the Javanese philosophical ethos with the Mbisu Practice or Noble Silence in Buddhism. Leaders limitedly discuss the subjective view on the character of colleagues, only related to decision-making relationships. This strategy is carried out by not responding to negatively indicated gossip unrelated to work. Third, mindful leadership can create a working climate that reduces the generation gap but has weaknesses, namely a negative stigma on the leader himself, who is considered unable to blend into a communal culture, as well as a pragmatic work climate based on duties and functions so that leaders cannot instruct work outside their primary duties.*

Keywords*: Intergenerational Employees Gap; Mindful Leadership; Negative Workplace Gossip*

INTRODUCTION

This article explains the correlation between the gap between generations in the university work environment, which encourages the emergence of negative workplace gossip, thereby reducing the quality of healthy work between employees.

Have we ever spent hours meeting in work situations in productive hours, but the discussion is about the mischief of one of our colleagues? Usually, the conversation is led by someone who is a crucial figure in the matter or just repeating the gossip of a third party called, "he said," then the meeting that should be productive becomes the material for talking about someone who could be a member of the meeting is not involved in the incident.

Then, whether the above habits have been considered standard in worldwide systems, this article uses the Autoethnography approach, my record as an ethnography during my tenure as a manager in a college institution. Before joining my place of work, I also had time to work in Singapore and several international projects across the country. My reflection is the same: it is not a matter where your place works, but a matter of habitus in human interaction, of talking about others as part of our daily lives.

There are two points of view that I can see from this perspective; firstly, often, the communal life in Indonesia causes other people's affairs to be part of what we perceive is very important to be discussed in the professional sphere, so that gossip is part of the daily life sociologically reinvented as a form of attention or affection to anyone we think is essential to discuss in a gossip chat. Secondly, gossip has been dealt with as a negotiating room for technical executives' inability to take policies that they consider unfair by leaders, so gossip was dealt with as coping workers' mechanisms in adapting to conditions that they think are not ideal as a work environment. Personal fatigue is also part of a personal coping mechanism that makes gossip a means of spreading day-to-day fatigue. Thirdly, in Indonesian communal culture, the workplace is often called "we are your second family," causing the boundary between what is called family and the professional sphere to fade.

As a young manager, I see many of my staff complaining about the exhaustion they are experiencing. Each other has informal times to either promise to chat at lunchtime or outside the campus for gossip. According to them, this part of the coping mechanism works at low salaries but is mentally sucked up by an unhealthy climate. I then asked what is called unhealthy from the point of view of my employees, the majority of whom are Generation Z. Their point of view when the gap between generations caused what they perceived as professionals in work was different from what they saw as professionalism. "I am tired of working here, low-wage, but why everyone is talking to each other, maybe we are just focusing on work, why in front looks so good but we see another face behind him," then it is not uncommon for one worker to resign and find a comfortable place. I see the two empirical cases above as

interrelated parts of the gap between generations and the presence of negative rumors leading to unhealthy work environments, high turnover rates, and the so-called "family" somewhat toxic work environments.

Several studies show that what I am experiencing as a manager in a higher education institution is also reflected in academic discussions. Wu et al. (2018) conducted a quantitative study of 403 workers' perceptions of negative rumors in their environment, promoting the occurrence of a decline in productivity in the workplace because of what is called negative in this study's viewpoint is related to when the work climate is dominated by rumors relating to a person's character, or because of the mental illness problems of their colleagues. The most significant risk is the emergence of mental health problems and high turnover rates that have a terrible impact on institutions that are becoming unstable. (Greenslade-Yeats, et.al, 2023; Wax and Asencio, 2020). Sitzman (2006) highlighted that one of the elements that played an essential role in reducing the presence of gossip was the role of a leader as a role model for his staff.

From this reflection, then based on my experience as a manager and at the same time as an ethnographer, I then sought to reflect on strategies for reducing the climate of negative gossip and bridging the gap between generations as an attempt to create a workplace - which is more ideal - although not entirely an ideal workplace without gossip at all, given that human interaction is a discretion. With an autoethnographic approach, the research source is my first viewpoint that becomes a reflective force while affirming a subjective bias from a researcher's point of view. I use mindful leadership to mitigate both; on the one hand, I ask which part of this strategy works and what is considered a failure.

METHOD

Autoethnography is a method that uses an approach between autobiography and ethnography (Lapadat, 2017). In his writings, Dutta (2018) refers to the autoethnographic method as a part of efforts to decline knowledge from the West, especially from a social psychology point of view, which conducts several instrumentation tests on informants as research objects, which incidentally is part of the grounded method to build a scientific opinion in academic realm.

In this article, I deliberately take this method as part of an exploration of personal experience and a cathartic medium that can give color to space in the social, psychological, or sociological dimension. This personal experience is story-telling in terms of critical reflection on the cultural and social context I experienced as a manager across generations, namely Boomers, Millennials to Z, who have different perceptions of what constitutes professionalism at work and what is perceived as a safe workspace. Ideal in their intergenerational point of view.

The research design uses several approaches: (1) personal narrative, which is the basis of a reflection of the researcher's point of

view involving social and cultural frameworks within the scope of the experience; (2) reflexivity in emotional narratives, is a strength in autoethnographic research that can color the different spaces. More fluid in the dimensions of ethnographic research.

Research informants are people around the author, and the research procedure is carried out by reconstructing personal experiences related to the issue while taking into account research rigor and drawing systematic conclusions in limiting subjectivity from a scientific point of view.

RESULTS

We are (not) family at work?: Intergenerational Employees Gap

"I think the root of the problem why we can't escape negative gossip at work is because of the perspective of boomers who can't distinguish between what's called a family and what's called a work environment; we're not family. Take your salary and go home." This is the word expressed by one of my colleagues, a Generation Z who has been working in a higher education institution for more than a year. Trying to mix up two very different relationships regarding what is known as family and what is referred to as a place of work causes an unhealthy situation, according to him.

I then tried to refer to some of my other staff during the quarterly evaluation. He is my most senior staff whose age is equivalent to my parents' age. He says, "Today's children are completely different, only focus on what they are doing, and do not want to be connected to much in other activities outside of work." In his perspective, there is a marked difference between what is called loyal from my staff's point of view and what is seen from my staff from Generation Z. The number of non-job description activities contained in the contract, according to Generation Z, is a violation of work, which is then narrated differently by Boomers as part of engagement between employees.

This battle between generations, then between groups, produces negative gossip that is different from one another. This gossip refers to negative information related to individuals, groups, or events in the work environment that have a negative impact causing, (1) damage to relations between colleagues where an atmosphere of distrust and mutual suspicion arises because each worker performs dramaturgy to look cute in front of, but not behind because the space for gossip production is always in the underground realm, (2) the emergence of violence as a result of cultural power for those who are socially excluded in interacting with fellow employees, (3) hinders communication that breaks through the boundaries of official channels in work causes miscommunication which leads to decreased productivity at work, (4) decreased mental health with many workers experiencing exposure to mental illness such as anxiety disorders, and causing high rates of resignation in institutions.

If we trace it, since when did the label "making the family a second family environment" become a culture of work in Indonesia? It is a job that takes much work to

do. As part of the millennial generation who was later given responsibility as a manager, I am on a fragile bridge between the family culture as part of the previous climate of relations between workers and Generation Z, who want more explicit work boundaries.

Mindful Leadership: What is it like?

As a manager, I get caught up in gossipy discourses among my staff. Sometimes, they are trapped in difficulties that hinder decision-making, especially when institutions are dealing with various institutions. My staff would say, "he cannot do it, because someone else will definitely do it, I do not like working with him." I face this statement daily, making it challenging to work professionally.

From a Buddhist perspective, I use the concept of Mindfulness, which means full awareness in making decisions. This concept comes from the value of "here and now," which requires the mind and inner being always to be present and now (Brown & Ryan, 2003). That means, as a leader, I must always focus on ongoing problems, not focus on stories that are primarily subjective about bad work experiences to other people. Neither does imagining a vision that is too utopian imagine, ideally a job. One case, for example, as an example of mindful leadership practices like this, is when solving insurance problems that contract employees cannot get. This discrimination stems from the employment regulations, which I am afraid I have to disagree with. To solve this problem, there are several points of view, namely first, focus on complaints about the staffing system and no solutions. Second, focus on solutions by trying to neutralize the perspective on subjectivity that comes from gossip. In addition, mindful leaders, in my view, must have an inclusive perspective on this difference in employee treatment, bearing in mind that several evaluations from permanent workers who have worked in institutions for decades and without rotation have better creativity than new contract employees.

Although translating mindful leadership is subjective, several characteristics must be present in developing mindful leadership. First, stable emotional intelligence means that a mindful leader is highly aware of thoughts, emotions, and reactions to the problem. In this case, "I have to be able to understand boundaries, what I can and cannot control." One of the elements of awareness is that we focus on our primary tasks as managers and do not try to control other people's thoughts to give a positive assessment of our work.

Second, it was difficult to implement high empathy and criticality when I was a millennial manager dealing with cross-generations where the Javanese culture held a high level of decency, causing young people to be often stigmatized as having no abilities like seniors holding control in leadership. Empathy may seem more manageable to apply to people who like or give us favorable judgments. However, it will be difficult for me to apply it to people who only like some of our activities, no matter how innovative and inclusive they are.

Third is building leadership that focuses on being mentally and emotionally present

when problems arise. Leaders who focus on problem-solving have an excellent impact on institutions and can reduce ownership to a status vulnerable to mental problems.

Then, what is done with the practice of noble silence in Javanese culture, namely by being completely silent when in an informal situation where colleagues discuss gossip that we are unsure whether what they are talking about is reality or just someone's subjective opinion. There were many hurdles I faced while trying to put this into practice.

> "After you studied to be a monk, and became a meditation teacher, now it's very difficult to gossip, very robotic," said my colleague.

In the statement above, I just replied with a smile and did not try to analyze what happened because, in mindful leadership, I have to practice listening as listening and speaking as speaking. It means I have to minimize the analysis in my head, whether he said that because he likes me or does not like me. I will usually only answer things unrelated to a person's personality. When there is a topic wholly filled with gossip, I control my mind by thinking about other work or other things so as not to get carried away in the gossip conversation.

In Javanese philosophy, humans are still learning as humans are trapped in emotions by responding to these emotions literally -too visible. From the perspective of Western psychology, being "silent" can be misinterpreted as passivity and defeat in behavior. Nevertheless, in Javanese culture, and in particular, this is closely related to Buddhism, silence also means victory because the mind is not shaken by gossip irrelevant to the problem's existing conditions.

Its connection with the practice of noble silence that I practiced while leading is not in line with the stigmatization of being a millennial, known as informality, and the culture of complaining about conditions. I realized this when I met friends of my generation who had changed jobs because they thought their workplace was very toxic and could not give them the right to live as workers with cognitive abilities.

> "I'm surprised, you can last 6 years in a conventional bureaucratic situation, that's very unusual for our friends who have resigned many times," my staff told me who was planning to resign.

The fundamental problem when placing the perspective of an ideal workplace with one that is not ideal is subjective and influenced by personal experience. My focus as a leader is not to tell my staff my grievances so they can empathize with what I am going through, and I can get excessive sympathy from them for the difficult situation I am going through. In mindful leadership, not throwing laundry -or the analogy of executive problems that we experience as leaders to our staff - is a way to build an ideal situation so that sense of problems and critical situations are still discussed in a limited scope, just like parents trying to save financial problems in children who are studying overseas, because of the assumption that when the child knows

financial problems and family problems, the child will not focus on his task of completing responsibilities.

That is not my job, and you do not perform because you are individualistic: the challenge against gossip through mindful leadership

What I felt the hardest when building a mindful climate at work was when a pragmatic way of thinking became the work ethic of the staff who copied and pasted what I was doing. Some things must be done informally to follow the job description in the contract. This is progress when children can focus on the work they are doing, but on the other hand, innovation is hampered by being pragmatic.

Another thing that also dramatically hinders the practice of mindful leadership is the stigma about ourselves which are considered individualists because we are unable to fulfill cultural expectations that a leader is expected to be able to participate in cultural activities that have taken place in the working system at the institution such as playing patterned football, bike rides together, as well as informal activities. Cultural activities are vulnerable to negative gossip traps, even though the context is outside working hours. However, there is a correlation when colleagues think I am familiar with it. Then, it can influence the management process, which must be neutral and inclusive of all parties.

Instead of being a bonding event, cultural activities are seen as a medium for implementing cultural power, which causes merit-based decision-making to decline.

In their study, Wibowo and Paramita (2022) stated that mindful leadership is often also interpreted as empathic leadership, where concerning communal culture, a leader must always be present in all formal and informal situations and attend official celebrations.

In this context, mindful leadership must also be criticized, considering that the context of communal Indonesian society has not been fully able to adopt a work culture that is only textual according to what must be applied on paper. However, from this article, at least a leader who tries to apply a mindful culture will have a good impact on himself and the institution he leads.

CONCLUSION

Indonesian culture, which is very communal, is reflected in work relations, which are prone to mixing informal issues, namely personal relations in the formal sphere, namely public space in institutions. A leader who has not been able to separate the boundaries between personal relationships and the professional duties of his leadership causes himself to be trapped in emotions that are vulnerable to mental problems. In this case, mindful leadership is an ethos that comes from Buddhism, rooted in meditation, where one must focus on the present and present object. As well as the ability to keep a distance from his own emotions. This means that emotional intelligence is needed in this practice. This article concludes that, with mindful practices, leaders can create a healthy atmosphere during the leadership process so that staff do not focus on negative gossip that reduces work

performance. Nevertheless, this practice also needs to be criticized for Indonesian culture, which is still very communal, and one of the job performances is the ability of leaders to adapt to a work culture that has lasted a long time in one of the institutions.

DISCUSSION

What is discussed in this article is based on a study conducted by Smith (2017), who states, literally, in the title of his book, The Toxic University: Zombie Leadership, Academic Rock Stars, and Neoliberal Ideology. The essence of the book that Smith wrote relates to the correlation in this article about how the neoliberalism system in the work environment at universities encourages competition that occurs not only at the executive leadership level but also among staff workers due to what Smith calls a "toxic work environment" namely conditions job insecurity and excessive workload which then turns gossip and informal resistance into coping mechanisms.

This article defines the intergenerational employee gap based on several literatures, namely regarding differences due to generation gaps in the work environment, which cause differences in behavior, understanding of values, work culture, communication patterns, and job expectations (Binczycki et al., 2023; Madero-Gomez et al., 2023). According to Jolliffe and Foster (2022), two fundamental roots cause this gap to become the most severe challenge for several organizations, namely, (1) contextualization of growth and development between generations causing differences in values and ethics in work, as well as career goals, (2) different communication styles causing miscommunication between generations to be prone to occur because the gap between generations influences the emergence of miscommunication in differentiating imperative language, command language, and informal small talk language in the work environment. From this root, this article believes that it causes the birth of negative gossip between workers, which causes decreased performance at work.

From the two elements above, this article then uses a Buddhist Mindful Leadership perspective, namely a reflective perspective from the author himself, a manager at one of the leading universities in Indonesia. This leadership is related to how the leader reflects the personal coping mechanism. In reducing bias during autoethnographic writing, this article narrows the space for dialogue based on theoretical reflection from experiences found during work. It uses narrative language as the primary language in autoethnographic studies to emphasize that the dominant element in writing is the author's point of view so that pure objectivity is seen from linking personal experiences to discussions in theory. The basis of this article follows what was written by Vu and Burton (2022) regarding the ethos of self-decentralization and moral reasoning in reducing gossip through Buddhist ethics, namely being mindful at work, even in a toxic environment. Therefore, in reducing bias, a narrative writing style is used to avoid articles

making moral judgments but is chronological in the events as reflected.

Of the limitations, the article suggests several studies be carried out to strengthen the relationship between the generation gap between workers and negative gossip through a positivistic methodological approach that can reach studies through surveys with large respondents to be used as a policy basis for improving work systems.

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