

# The Effect of Status Loss Perception on Employees' Work Behavior

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## Abstract

With the current economic globalization and the intensifying competition between organizations, employees working environment full of uncertainty and complexity, the status loss is a common phenomenon in the organization, employees are not just passively accepted status loss, can also be active to explain the cause of the event, to positive subjective construction status loss events. Thus, status loss perception may generate positive or negative responses through the attribution process. This study aims to comprehensively reveal the influence path of perceived status loss on employees' attitude and behavior, and under which conditions the perceived status loss will promote employees' positive behavior, so as to provide a theoretical basis for the proposal of management strategies. The empirical results show that status loss perception has effect on employees' innovation behavior and job withdrawal behavior through the mediating effect of promoting demand and relative deprivation, respectively. The results extend the research on the influence of status loss perception on employee work behavior and reveal the mechanism of status loss perception on employee behavior.

## Keywords

Status Loss Perception; Behavior; Withdrawal Behavior.

## 1. Introduction

Status refers to the "relative social position or rank" held by an individual in an organization or group, such as individual rank, rank, job title, etc. As the most important motivating factor for human beings (Hogan et al., 1991; Loch et al., 2000) [1-2], status has always been one of the focuses of academic attention. A survey conducted by Marr et al. (2019) showed that 67% of respondents had seen at least one manager lose his or her status in their career [3]. Under the trend of meritocracy and transparency in organizations, status loss is a common phenomenon in organizations (e.g., taking responsibility for costly mistakes, being denied promotion), but little is known about individual behavior after status loss (Djurdjevic et al., 2017) [4]. People gain advantages and benefits when they have status, but how do they react when they lose status? According to the affective event theory, status is an important source of employees' emotional experience. Studies have found that status loss, as a negative work experience, can significantly predict the negative emotions such as anger, anxiety and resentment of employees with status loss, and reduce performance and task execution ability. Scholars have further proposed that if people's response to status loss impinges on their performance, a vicious cycle may occur, in which their status is further reduced and their chances of regaining status in the future are reduced (Marr & Thau, 2014) [5]. In contrast, many individuals who experience status loss events are able to recover from status loss events rather than abandon themselves, which is worth thinking about. Therefore, it is necessary to consider the underlying cognitive and behavioral driving mechanisms of status loss. In fact, there are considerable individual

differences in resilience in response to negative life events (Hobfoll,1989) [6]. Employee not only passively accept the objective status loss, but also actively explain the causes of the event and actively construct the subjective status loss event. According to attribution theory, when employees perceive status loss, they will make attributions to status loss. Attribution style will have a different impact on the subsequent behavior of employees. Employees may not only generate relative deprivation through external attribution, but also generate promotion needs through internal attribution. Therefore, this paper aims to comprehensively reveal the positive and negative influence paths of status loss perception on employee work behavior through attribution theory, in order to provide some enlightenment for human resource management practice.

## **2. Theoretical Basis and Research Hypothesis**

### **2.1. Theoretical Basis**

#### **2.1.1. Status Loss Perception**

Status loss refers to the reduction of an employee's status in a team or organization. Status loss can be divided into objective and subjective types. The loss of objective status is the result of changes in objective status. Organizational scholars use measures such as the introduction of new technologies, changes in the hiring or promotion criteria of enterprises, or changes in new leaders and the market strategy of enterprises (Thornton & Ocasio, 1999) [7]. These changes make some skills, traits, or backgrounds more important than others, and can result in a loss of status for individuals who are not newly valued. Subjective status loss is the result of individual self-perception, that is, individuals subjectively believe that their performance, influence or prestige in the organization/team decline, which belongs to the category of subjective assessment. The perception of status loss is susceptible to changes induced by specific events in daily life. Previous studies have shown that environmental changes, task characteristics, leadership changes, team member changes, individual efforts and personal characteristics, and other internal and external factors may evoke changes in status perception of individuals and team members (Lin, 1999; Goar & Sell, 2005) [8-9]. Whether or not subjective perceptions are correct, people will act more on the basis of subjective perceptions, which have the potential to capture a combination of attribution and all contributing factors. Therefore, when studying individual behavior from a micro perspective, the concept of status loss perception can more accurately describe the status change that individuals feel subjectively at that time. This study focuses on individual behavior from a micro perspective and mainly studies the impact of perceived status loss on employees' work attitude and behavior, so it adopts the concept of perceived status loss.

#### **2.1.2. Attribution Theory**

Attribution theory is concerned with people's understanding of their own behavior and that of others (Fiske and Taylor, 1984) [10]. According to attribution theory, people try to understand their surroundings and improve their ability to predict future events by explaining the causal relationship between behavior and situation attribution (Kelley, 1972) [11]. After the perception of external events, people try to understand the surrounding environment by explaining the causal relationship between behaviors and events. "Internal attribution" and "external attribution" are two typical attributions. Attributions also influence subsequent behaviors, motivation and cognition (Weiner, 1985) [12]. This study focuses on the attribution of causes of status loss.

## 2.2. Research Hypothesis

### 2.2.1. The Effect of Status Loss Perception on the Promoting Demand and Relative Deprivation

Status is an integral part of self-perception, and people strive to maintain and enhance positive self-views (Sedikides and Strube, 1997) [13]. Loss of status creates self-perception threats. The higher the degree of status loss perception, the stronger the sense of self-threat, the more will trigger the individual's status loss attribution process. According to the theory of position characteristics (status characteristic theory), characteristic factors include ascribed status and precocious factors. Precocious factors include congenital factors such as age, sex, race, son's succession to father's position, and acquired opportunity factors such as the order of entry into the organization. These factors are strongly uncontrollable and unchangeable for individual employees. Self-induced elements represent certain elements that can be changed by objective effort, such as performance, ability, professionalism, etc. There are many unsolicited status changes in organizations. These include the introduction of new technologies, changes in the hiring or promotion criteria of enterprises, or changes in the marketing strategies of new leaders or enterprises. These changes make some skills, characteristics, or backgrounds more important than others. Thus, status loss can be caused either by a lack of effort in one's own capacity or by other environmental factors outside oneself. If employees attribute the loss of status to their own lack of effort, they will take it as a signal to increase their work effort and form a demand for promotion. It is found that individuals with disadvantaged status characteristics actively acquire, utilize or display advantageous status characteristics through their efforts, which will help them overcome the obstacles brought by their perceived disadvantage characteristics. For example, Neeley's (2013) study showed that achievement is an effective way to offset the negative effects of perceived status loss in some situations but not in others. Similarly, Marr et al. (2019) found that after status loss, when an individual shows self-control (e.g., persistence, steadiness and restraint), it is helpful for internal stakeholders to make a more positive evaluation of their legitimacy and reduce the challenge to their authority [3,14]. However, employees may also attribute status loss from a less positive perspective, believing that status loss is caused by factors outside the control of the individual and separated from the individual's effort, thus forming external attribution. Individuals who ascribe their perceived status decline to external attribution, compared with their own costs, feel that their status loss is unfair and difficult to change, and they are more afraid that their actual work performance will not match their good self-perception. Relative deprivation theory suggests that employees' negative response to work will depend on the degree to which the individual needs the rewards of the work, feels entitled to those rewards, and assesses the fairness of the work being done. Individuals who attribute the perception of status loss externally believe that status loss is unfair to them compared with their own costs, which leads to a sense of relative deprivation. Based on this, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H1a: The perception of status loss has a positive impact on the demand for promotion.

H1b: Perception of status loss has a positive effect on relative deprivation.

### 2.2.2. The Effect of Promoting Demand and Relative Deprivation on Employee Behavior

Individuals who make internal attribution of status loss perception tend to regard status loss as caused by personal effort and insufficient ability, and regard it as a signal to increase work effort and form a demand for promotion. Furthermore, promotion needs strengthen employees' interest in the task itself, their involvement in the task and their focus on the mastery of skills. Neeley (2013) proposed that in the case of perceived status loss, people are likely to use a feature valued in the work environment to improve their ability [14]. For example, if an organization's core competence shifts from engineering to marketing, which weakens the perceived status of engineers, engineers who perceive a loss of status at this point may enter a

mode of learning rather than inhibition. At the same time, increasing demand can encourage individuals to change their status loss dilemma through efforts and pursuit, motivate employees to acquire innovation-related knowledge and skills through active learning, find innovative and more efficient working methods and procedures, and stimulate employees to invest in and work hard on innovative activities. These new and better ways of doing things reflect the innovative behavior of employees in the workplace. In contrast, for individuals who make external attributions of status loss perception, they tend to think that their status is unfair to them compared with their own efforts, which leads to a sense of relative deprivation. According to the theory of relative deprivation, the greater the gap between status and expectation (that is, the greater the sense of relative deprivation), the more negative the working attitude of employees will be, such as the greater the disappointment. They counteract this feeling of deprivation either by avoiding the loss of more resources or by obtaining other resources as compensation, and withdrawal is one of the ways. Withdrawal behaviors such as doing private things and daydreaming in working time can reduce their emotional attachment to work and make them escape from work for a short time, which is conducive to releasing pressure and relieving anxiety. In addition, many withdrawal behaviors are generally not easy to be found by others, especially by leaders, which means that withdrawal behaviors are not costly and promote employees' withdrawal behaviors. Based on this, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H2a: Promotion Demand has a positive impact on employees' innovative behavior.

H2b: Relative Deprivation has a positive impact on employees' work withdrawal behavior.

### **2.2.3. The Mediating Role of Promotion Demand and Relative Deprivation**

Employees' attribution of status loss is the key link between employees' perception of status loss and their behavioral response. A series of recent empirical studies suggest that status perception is indeed important for getting more information. Loss of status is a threat to people (Pettit et al., 2010; Scheepers et al., 2010) [15-16], the stronger the perception of status loss, the higher the threat to the self-esteem of the individual, which prompts the individual to attribute status loss. Individuals who make external attribution of status loss attribute the cause of status loss to external factors beyond their control, and tend to adopt self-abandonment and withdrawal coping style in order to avoid further status loss in subsequent work. Corresponding, staff awareness about status loss in internal attribution, tend to see status loss as is caused by individual effort and ability is insufficient, will increase as a hard signal, form ascending demand, individual to move through the efforts and the pursuit of change personal status loss, raising demand is driving the individual performance than general desired behavior, take positive actions to achieve success and honor. Will be incentives to increase time, energy, money and resources assigned to their task to reduce the sense of threat, can enhance organizational commitment and reducing the pressure of work and motivate employees to innovation of investment and effort degree, stimulate active learning to obtain the relevant knowledge and skills, and improve the degree of employees to work hard and, such as strive for the top, show their strengths and so on. Based on this, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H3a: Promotion needs have a mediating effect on the perception of status loss and innovation behavior.

H3b: Relative deprivation has a mediating effect on the perception of status loss and employees' work withdrawal behavior

### 3. Study

#### 3.1. Data

In April 2021, this study distributed electronic questionnaires to 402 employees in 9 enterprises, covering industries such as consulting, financial services, industrial design and manufacturing. To reduce homology bias, we collected information from two sources in two stages. We divided the employee survey into two stages to avoid homologous variance. In the first phase, individual employees filled out information about their demographics and whether they had experienced status loss events, perceived status loss, need for promotion, and relative deprivation variables. In the second stage, employees filled in questionnaires including employee innovation behavior, work withdrawal behavior and status improvement opportunity variables. The interval between the two separate phases is 2-4 weeks. In order to obtain truthful answers, we promise the respondents confidentiality. Each respondent will be paid 15 yuan for the completed questionnaire. After eliminating incomplete matching and unqualified questionnaires, 319 employee questionnaires from 9 enterprises were finally obtained (effective recovery rate was 69%). From the sample composition of the valid questionnaire, the gender structure of the employees is 45.5% male and 54.5% female. The age distribution is normal, and the majority of the employees are 26-30 years old. 78.7% of the employees have a bachelor's degree or above, and the overall educational level is relatively high.

#### 3.2. Measure

The questionnaire included variables such as demographic characteristics, experience of status loss events, perception of status loss, need for promotion, employee innovative behavior, work withdrawal behavior, and status improvement opportunities. Likert 5-point scale was used for all variables except demographic characteristics. The perception of status loss was measured using the questionnaire developed by Liu Dong et al. (2017), which contained 11 items, such as: "This event once made me depressed". The questionnaire developed by Hornung et al. (2010) was used to measure the need for improvement, which included five items, such as "I try my best to participate in personally challenging work tasks"[17]. The measurement of relative deprivation is based on the questionnaire developed by Tropp and Wright et al. (1999), which consists of three items, such as "I think I am worse off than others". Scott and Bruce's (2002) scale are used to measure the innovative behavior of employees [18]. In this scale, innovative behavior is regarded as a process, which consists of six items: problem establishment, idea generation, seeking innovation support and implementation of innovation plan. Work withdrawal behavior was measured using the scale of Lehman et al. (1992), with a total of 10 items, such as "unwilling to put enough effort into work". Previous studies have pointed out that demographic characteristics such as gender, age and organizational tenure will affect employees' innovative behavior and withdrawal behavior. In order to reduce the interference of other unrelated variables, we controlled gender, age, educational background variables and organizational tenure.

### 4. Analysis of Empirical Results

#### 4.1. The Reliability Analysis

Reliability refers to the degree to which the scale is not disturbed by random errors when measuring a construct. At present, scholars generally use Cronbach's  $\alpha$  coefficient to evaluate the reliability of the scale. The larger the value of  $\alpha$  coefficient, the higher the reliability of the scale. SPSS 19.0 statistical software was used to analyze the reliability of each scale. The reliability  $\alpha$  value of the perceived status Loss scale was 0.796, the need for Improvement scale was 0.700, the relative deprivation scale was 0.727, the employee Innovation Behavior scale

was 0.761, and the work withdrawal behavior was 0.856. According to the reliability analysis results, reliability  $\alpha$  value of each scale is higher than the critical value of 0.7, indicating that the scale has good reliability. Therefore, the scale adopted in this paper has good reliability.

### 4.2. Descriptive Statistical Analysis

Table 1 lists the mean and standard deviation of variables and the correlation coefficients among independent variables, dependent variables and control variables. It can be seen from Table 1 that perceived status loss is significantly positively correlated with innovative behavior ( $r=0.237, p<0.01$ ) and work withdrawal behavior ( $r=-0.162, p<0.01$ ). The perception of status loss was positively correlated with the need for promotion ( $r=0.267, p<0.01$ ), and was positively correlated with the sense of relative deprivation ( $r=0.185, p<0.01$ ). Improvement needs were significantly positively correlated with innovative behaviors ( $r=0.601, p<0.01$ ), and relative deprivation was significantly correlated with job withdrawal behaviors ( $r=0.336, p<0.01$ ). This provides preliminary support for subsequent hypothesis testing.

**Table 1.** Descriptive Statistical Analysis

	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
<b>1 Gen</b>	2.53	0.52								
<b>2 Age</b>	2.49	1.21	-0.116*							
<b>3 Edu</b>	1.98	0.81	0.158**	-						
				0.214**						
<b>4 Organizational Tenure</b>	1.94	0.84	-	0.377**	-					
			0.294**		0.259**					
<b>5 Status Loss Perception</b>	3.63	0.83	-	0.137*	-0.017	0.265**				
			0.149**							
<b>6 Relative Deprivation</b>	3.15	0.86	0.022	-0.014	0.035	-0.107	0.185**			
<b>7 Promotion Demand</b>	3.98	0.61	-0.125*	0.071	-0.006	0.175**	0.267**	-		
								0.160**		
<b>8 Innovation Behavior</b>	3.76	0.56	-0.065	-0.109	-0.048	0.270**	0.237**	-	0.601**	
								0.219**		
<b>9 Withdraw Behavior</b>	2.25	0.7	-0.091	0.121*	0	-0.049	-	0.336**	-0.390*	-
							0.162**			0.352**

Note: \* $P<0.05$ , \*\* $P<0.01$

### 4.3. Hypothesis Testing

Table 2 shows the path estimation results for the hypothetical mediation model. As shown in Table 2, the path from the perception of status loss to the demand for promotion is significant (the path coefficient is  $\gamma_1=0.191, p<0.000$ ). The path coefficient from improving demand to employee innovation behavior was also significant ( $\beta_1=0.644, p<0.000$ ). The results of path analysis show that the perception of status loss has a significant positive impact on promotion demand, and promotion demand also has a significant positive impact on employee innovation behavior. Therefore, Hypotheses 1a and 2a are supported. In addition, the path coefficient of status loss perception on relative deprivation was significant ( $\gamma_2=0.188, p<0.05$ ). At the same time, the path coefficient of employee withdrawal behavior from relative deprivation was also significant ( $\beta_2=0.361, p<0.000$ ). The results of path analysis show that the perception of status loss has a significant positive impact on the relative deprivation, and the relative deprivation also has a significant positive impact on the withdrawal behavior of employees. Therefore, hypotheses 1b and 2b are supported.

**Table 2. Hypothesis Testing**

	EST.	S.T.	Z	P	Bootstrapping			
					LLCI 95% ULCI	LLCI 90% ULCI	LLCI 95% ULCI	LLCI 90% ULCI
<b>SL→PD</b>	0.191	0.041	4.633	0.000	0.136	0.259	0.135	0.259
<b>SL→RD</b>	0.188	0.074	2.534	0.011	0.053	0.300	0.053	0.301
<b>PD→IB</b>	0.644	0.085	7.601	0.000	0.545	0.733	0.538	0.733
<b>RD→WB</b>	0.361	0.070	5.167	0.000	0.241	0.424	0.241	0.432
<b>SL→IB Direct Effect</b>	-0.010	0.043	-0.235	0.815	-0.005	0.218	-0.005	0.254
<b>SL→WB Direct Effect</b>	-0.331	0.061	7.254	0.000	-0.425	-0.220	-0.425	-0.220
<b>PD Mediation Effect</b>	0.123	0.027	4.479	0.000	0.080	0.153	0.080	0.153
<b>RD Mediation Effect</b>	0.068	0.022	3.051	0.002	0.020	0.076	0.020	0.084

Note: SL = Status Loss Perception; PD = Promotion Demand; BD= Relative Deprivation; IB= Innovation Behavior; WB=Withdraw Behavior.

Hypotheses 3a and 3b propose that the need for promotion/relative deprivation has a positive mediating effect on the process of status loss perception affecting employees' innovation/ withdrawal behavior. According to the suggestions of Shrout and Bolger (2002) [19], Bootstrapping method was used to further verify the significance of the mediating effect, and to test whether the 95% confidence interval and 90% confidence interval contained 0. If 0 was not included, the mediating effect was significant. On the contrary, if the confidence interval contains 0, it means that the mediating effect is not significant. The indirect effect of perceived status loss on employees' innovative behavior through improving demand is 0.123, and the confidence interval of perceived status loss of perceived status loss and innovative behavior of employees at 95% confidence level is (BC95%CI = [0.080, 0.153]), excluding 0. Its indicates that the need for promotion has a significant mediating effect between perceived status loss and employee innovation behavior. At the same time, the confidence interval at 95% confidence level (BC95%CI = [-0.005, 0.218]) of the direct impact of perceived status loss on employees' innovative behavior contains 0, which means that the direct effect of perceived status loss on employees' innovative behavior is not significant. Therefore, promotion demand has a positive and complete mediating effect between perceived status loss and employee innovation behavior. Hypothesis 3a is supported. The indirect effect of perceived status loss on employee withdrawal behavior through relative deprivation was 0.068. The confidence interval of perceived relative deprivation on perceived status loss and employee withdrawal behavior at 95% confidence level was (BC95%CI = [0.020, 0.076]), excluding 0. These results indicate that relative deprivation has a significant mediating effect between perceived status loss and withdrawal behavior. At the same time, the confidence interval at 95% confidence level (BC95%CI = [-0.435, -0.220]) of the direct impact of perceived status loss on employees' withdrawal behavior does not include 0, which means that perceived status loss has a significant direct effect on employees' withdrawal behavior. Therefore, relative deprivation has a positive and incomplete mediating effect between perceived status loss and employee withdrawal behavior, which is supported by hypothesis 3b.

## 5. Discuss

### 5.1. Conclusion

This study found that the perceived status loss has significant positive effects on employees' promotion needs and relative deprivation, promotion needs has significant positive effects on employees' innovative behavior, and relative deprivation has significant positive effects on employees' work withdrawal behavior. At the same time, the need for promotion has a mediating effect on the perception of status loss and innovation behavior, and the relative deprivation has a mediating effect on the perception of status loss and employees' work withdrawal behavior, which is consistent with our theoretical hypothesis. This indicates that when employees perceive status loss, they are likely to have the need for improvement and make innovative behavior, and they are also likely to have the relative deprivation and make work withdrawal behavior.

### 5.2. Significance

First, digital technology has challenged the skills and qualities of all walks of life. With the continuous development of electronic information, artificial intelligence, automation and other cutting-edge technologies, more and more jobs can be partially replaced by machines. For example, China currently has 150,000 certified public accountants, which is a very large scale. However, with the acceleration of accounting computerization and intelligent financial analysis, the ordinary functions of accounting can be replaced by machines. The rise of digital technology has prompted employees to re-evaluate their strengths and weaknesses and consider how to cope with the status loss caused by digital technology. This study provides a new perspective on how to help employees cope positively with status loss situations. Second, it explains the influence path of status loss perception on employees' positive and negative behaviors, and helps researchers to understand the role of status loss perception in employees' behaviors more deeply. Throughout the existing literature, scholars have mainly studied the effects of status loss on negative attitudes and job performance, such as anxiety, low organizational identity, and declining performance. According to the event system theory and attribution theory, we believe that the perception of status loss may stimulate both negative and positive behaviors. However, existing studies have not clearly revealed the effect and mechanism of the perception of status loss on positive behaviors, such as innovative behaviors. Therefore, this study introduced positive behavioral variables to explore the mediating effects of need for promotion and relative deprivation on the relationship between perceived status loss and employees' innovative behavior and withdrawal behavior, so as to comprehensively reveal the impact of perceived status loss. Thirdly, the research on the positive effect of status loss perception helps to change the thinking mode of managers. With the increasing proportion of status incentive in the motivation of knowledge workers, status loss events emerge one after another, and some problems and perplexities also arise in practice. For example, does status loss necessarily lead to negative behavior and performance? How to use status incentive to motivate employees' positive behavior and performance? How to grasp the status incentive in the concrete implementation strategy? This study may encourage managers to change their mindset from passively avoiding status loss to actively providing opportunities for status improvement. For example, through management decisions in recruitment, training and performance evaluation, the controllability of status loss can be enhanced, and positive behaviors of employees with status loss can be stimulated and performance improvement can be promoted.

### 5.3. Shortcomings and Prospects

Based on the attribution theory, this paper analyzes the effect and mechanism of perceived status loss on employees' innovative behavior and withdrawal behavior. At the same time, the



moderating effect of status improvement opportunity is studied. However, due to various limitations of subjective and objective conditions, there are still many shortcomings in this study. First, this study adopts a cross-sectional study design. The cross-sectional study reflects the influencing mechanism of status loss perception, attitude and behavior at the inter-individual level. The status loss perception is dynamic, and time plays an important role in the status loss perception. However, the cross-sectional study design does not reflect the changes within individuals. Existing studies have tried to use dynamic methods to study status perception, but such research is still in its infancy. Second, this study did not examine the impact of perceived status loss on various types of positive behaviors of employees. Positive behaviors of employees include various types, such as organizational citizenship behavior, innovation behavior, voice behavior, etc. This study only discusses the impact of perceived status loss on innovative behaviors of employees, and the impact of perceived status decline on these different types of positive behaviors may be different. This study may ignore the differences in the impact of different types of positive behaviors. Due to the above deficiencies in this paper, we will further supplement and improve it in the future. There are mainly the following aspects: First, the dynamic research and design system is used to explore the intra-individual change rules of status loss perception and employee behavior, so as to clearly reveal the causal relationship and change trend of the two; The second is to refine the research on the impact of perceived status loss on employees' positive behaviors, so as to help put forward specific countermeasures to stimulate different types of employees' positive behaviors. Third, further explore more mediating variables and situational moderating variables that affect the perception of status loss and employee behavior, so as to deepen and improve the theoretical understanding of the relationship between the two.

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