

Sensory Processing Sensitivity as a Management Resource and Vulnerability: Toward a Conceptual Framework for Supporting Highly Sensitive Employees and Leaders

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Abstract

Sensory Processing Sensitivity (SPS) is a trait defined by deeper cognitive processing, heightened awareness of stimuli, stronger emotional responsiveness, and sensitivity to context (Aron & Aron, 1997; Greven et al., 2019). While well-studied in psychology, its management implications remain fragmented. This conceptual paper synthesizes interdisciplinary evidence on highly sensitive employees and leaders, framing SPS as both organizational resource and vulnerability.

Outcomes depend on the interaction between sensitivity profiles and workplace conditions. SPS facets reflecting emotional reactivity and overstimulation are linked to burnout, emotional exhaustion, and occupational stress (Evers et al., 2008; Golonka & Gulla, 2021). Facet-level findings show a differentiated pattern: aesthetic sensitivity (AES) is positively associated with proactive work behavior (personal initiative and task proactivity), low sensory threshold (LST) is negatively associated with personal initiative in one sample, and ease of excitation (EOE) is unrelated to proactivity (Schmitt, 2022). Narrower HSP-related traits predict motivation to lead in arts and arts management contexts, indicating context-specific rather than general leadership potential (Farstad & Arnulf, 2024).

Organizational context is critical. Supportive leadership, psychological safety, meaningful work, and positive relationships can amplify SPS benefits, whereas excessive workload, conflict, and overstimulation amplify costs (Vander Elst et al., 2019; Onesti et al., 2024). The paper proposes a framework linking SPS dimensions, workplace conditions, managerial practices, and outcomes, positioning SPS as valuable human capital for leadership, well-being, and performance.

Keywords: Sensory Processing Sensitivity, Highly Sensitive Persons, Differential Susceptibility, Leadership, Employee Well-Being, Organizational Behavior, Human Capital