

When 'Don't Worry' Leads to Worry

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When a company makes a commitment to avoid layoffs, it would be reasonable to expect that workers would feel more secure about their future. It turns out that's not true for everyone. In research presented at the American Sociological Association, Song Yang of the University of Arkansas reports a surprising finding - African American workers become more pessimistic about their job security in organizations with a layoff prevention program.

"A commitment to prevent layoffs should ease insecurity," Yang said. "Yet in the presence of such programs, the disparity between black and white workers expands. Black workers' anxiety increases while white workers' anxiety slightly decreases."

Yang used a unique employer-employee database, a combination of two national datasets, the 2002 General Social Survey and the 2002 National Organization Survey. By combining the two, he obtained a dataset of 488 cases of both employer data, such as layoff prevention commitment and organization demographics, and employee data for black and white workers that included perception of job insecurity.

Yang tested the effects of various factors on black workers' sense of job security when employers commit to preventing layoffs. He discovered that a history of negative work experiences, a low level of education and employment in a low-skilled job did not explain the increased gap in job insecurity for black workers as compared with white workers.

"Instead, the presence or absence of one human resource policy - a

commitment to avoid layoff - is a significant determinant of black workers' perception of high job insecurity," Yang wrote.

While the results are clear, the survey data Yang used cannot explain why. Using lessons from human resources theory, Yang suggests explanations that could guide future research.

According to similarity-attraction theory, the fact that most managers are white means that there is less psychological barrier for white workers to interpret policies and programs in a positive light.

"In contrast, black workers, being outsiders and long-term targets of various workplace inequalities, may come to interpret policies and programs with suspicion and uncertainty," Yang wrote, also suggesting that the way information is conveyed may have an impact on how workers hear it.

"If employers use human-resource-friendly policies to reduce anxiety, they need to be aware that not all will hear the policy in the same way," Yang said. "It's important not just to put programs in place, but to be aware of how people receive them."

For example, an informal method of conveying the commitment can create a significant racial gap.

"The informal word-of-mouth passing [of] a message via social activities inevitably produces tremendous obstacles to black workers, who are outsiders to the white workers' groups," Yang wrote.

Yang suggested that future research could look at the effect of making formal commitments through a company handbook versus informal discussions in the workplace.

Yang is an assistant professor of sociology in the J. William Fulbright College of Arts and Sciences at the University of Arkansas. His presentation is titled "Perceived Job Insecurity of White and Black Workers: An Expanded Gap in Organizations with Layoff Prevention Commitment."

Source: University of Arkansas

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