

Workplace sabotage fueled by envy, unleashed by disengagement: research

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University of British Columbia research shows that managers should keep team members connected and engaged to avoid workplace sabotage. Co-authored by UBC Sauder School of Business Prof. Karl Aquino, the study reveals that envious employees are more likely to undermine peers if they feel disconnected from others.

"We often hear that people who feel envious of their colleagues try to bring them down by spreading negative rumours, withholding useful information, or secretly sabotaging their work," says Prof. Aquino, who conducted the study with colleagues from the University of Minnesota, Clemson University in South Carolina and Georgia State University.

However, Aquino says envy is only the fuel for sabotage. "The match is not struck unless employees experience what [psychologists](#) call 'moral disengagement' – a way of thinking that allows people to rationalize or justify harming others."

The researchers explain that moral disengagement is most likely to occur when an envious co-worker feels disconnected from others in the workplace. Their paper, "A Social Context Model of Envy and Social Undermining," will appear in a forthcoming issue of the *Academy of Management Journal*.

To obtain data, the research team conducted two field studies. They first used a sample of 160 employees from a mid-west American hospital to test whether a person's lack of identification with colleagues increases

their likelihood to act on envy. The employees were asked to complete two separate surveys eight months apart. During the first survey, participants were asked to rate their reactions – positive or negative – to a series of statements regarding envy, affinity with colleagues and comfort with subversive acts. After eight months, the respondents were surveyed again, this time about their actual undermining activities.

When the results of the surveys were compared, it showed people experiencing feelings of envy were significantly more likely to report committing sabotage when experiencing weak relationships with co-workers. Conversely, envious participants reported low sabotage incident rates when they felt they were more strongly connected to their workmates.

"The working world typically necessitates that people develop strong connections with co-workers in order to thrive. To stray from this path ultimately puts success at risk, so most suffer from envy in silence," says the study's lead author, Prof. Michelle Duffy of the University of Minnesota. "However, from our research it seems that when someone sees themselves as a lone wolf, they are less inhibited and more likely to lash out."

In a second study, the researchers explored how the working environment can influence employees to undermine one another. Taking part in this experiment were 247 business students enrolled in a class at a mid-western American university. Randomly divided into numerous workgroups, the students completed a series of questionnaires throughout the semester. The students were asked to rate their level of envy, connections with their group members and incidences of sabotage committed by themselves and others.

The results show that students who reported feelings of envy and low levels of identification with their workgroups were significantly more

likely to report committing acts of sabotage when they belonged to groups which reported high rates of sabotage as a whole. The researchers point to this result as an indication that if a workplace seems to be permitting [sabotage](#), those who are inclined toward subversive behaviour will be more likely to follow through.

"Our study shows that [envy](#) on its own is not necessarily a negative thing in the workplace. However, managers would be well advised to consider teambuilding strategies to ensure all of their employees are engaged in the group dynamic," says Duffy. "It is also important that those in charge don't give incidents of co-worker undermining a free pass, because once it starts the tendency is for it to spread."

Provided by University of British Columbia

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