

Imagine that: How you envision others says a lot about you in real life

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Quick, come up with an imaginary co-worker.

Did you imagine someone who is positive, confident, and resourceful? Who rises to the occasion in times of trouble? If so, then chances are that you also display those traits in your own life, a new study finds.

University of Nebraska-Lincoln researchers have found that study participants who conjured positive imaginary co-workers contributed more in the actual workplace, both in job performance and going above and beyond their job descriptions to help others.

The results showed that your perceptions of others – even ones that are made up – says a lot about what kind of person you really are, said Peter Harms, UNL assistant professor of management and the study's lead author. Imagining coworkers instead of reporting on how you perceive your actual coworkers produces more accurate ratings of having a positive worldview, he said, because it strips away the unique relational baggage that one may have with the people they know.

"When you make up imaginary peers, they are completely a product of how you see the world," Harms said. "Because of that we can gain better insight into your perceptual biases. That tells us a lot about how you see the world, how you interpret events and what your expectations of others are."

The study consisted of hundreds of working adults in a range of fields,

Harms said. It specifically targeted their "psychological capital," a cluster of personality characteristics associated with the ability to overcome obstacles and the tendency to actively pursue one's goals. After asking participants to conjure up imaginary workers in a series of hypothetical situations, they were then asked to make ratings of the individuals they imagined on a wide range of characteristics.

Those who envisioned workers as engaging in proactive behaviors or readily rebounding from failures were actually happier and more productive in their real-life work, the researchers found.

Researchers have long acknowledged the benefits of having a positive mindset, but getting an accurate assessment has always been difficult because people are typically unwilling or unable to make accurate self-appraisals, Harms said.

Through the use of projective storytelling, the UNL researchers were able to predict real-life work outcomes above and beyond other established measures.

"We've known that workplace relations are a self-fulfilling prophecy for some time," Harms said. "If a manager believes that their workers are lazy and incompetent, they will elicit those patterns in their employees.

"It's hard to be motivated and enthusiastic for someone you know doesn't think of you very highly. But most people don't want to disappoint someone who sincerely believes in them."

Provided by University of Nebraska-Lincoln

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