Research links power and tendency to punish harshly

January 17 2013

Often, employees are shocked by what they think is a supervisor's severe reaction to a subordinate's seemingly minor transgression. The supervisors who punish them seem to be so absolutely sure that they are doing the right thing—they have a clear sense of purpose and there are no arguments to sway them.

New research by Scott Wiltermuth, a USC Marshall School of Business assistant professor of management and organization, and co-author Francis Flynn of the Stanford Graduate School of Business, found that providing a sense of power to someone instills a black-and-white sense of right and wrong (especially wrong). Once armed with this moral clarity, powerful people then perceive wrongdoing with much less ambiguity than people lacking this power, and punish apparent wrong-doers with more severity than people without power would.

The research alerts managers to some unforeseen challenges they will face as they come to hold more and more power, according to Wiltermuth. The research results appear in a forthcoming issue of the Academy of Management Journal.

"We noticed in our MBA classes that the students who seemed to feel most powerful had these absolute answers about what's right and what's wrong," said Wiltermuth.

"We found the same phenomenon when we made other people feel powerful, and we also found the resulting clarity led people to punish

questionable behavior more severely. That link between power and more severe punishment could cause a huge problem for managers. What a manager sees as appropriate punishment could be seen as absolutely draconian by other people."

Wiltermuth and Flynn set up four experiments in which they made some individuals feel powerful—giving them the ability to control resources and administer rewards or punishments. When presented with cases of transgressions, the powerful participants were more likely to say "yes, the behavior is immoral," "no, it is not immoral".

Very few powerful people answered with "it depends," which was a much more popular answer among the less powerful. Owing to this certainty, the participants made to feel powerful felt that the transgressions deserved harsher punishments.

Significantly, the researchers found that moral clarity was more clearly connected to delivering punishments than administering bonuses for good behavior. "Our findings do not imply that having this moral clarity leads people to obtain power. Rather, the findings imply that once you obtain power you become more likely to see things in black-and-white," he said.

These links between power, clarity and punishment can lead to organizational problems in the private and public sector, Wiltermuth warned. People without power could begin protesting a manager's decisions, which can erode the manager's—and the organization's—authority and ability to operate.

In the public sector, using the U.S. Congress as an example—Wiltermuth pointed to the dead certainty in which elected officials often make their case. "You ask yourself, 'How can they talk about these complex issues in such black and white terms?' The short attention spans of the media

and their constituencies may explain some of it, but it may also be that politicians are so powerful that they may actually see issues in black-and-white terms more than the rest of us do."

Wiltermuth is continuing his research into the relationships between managerial power and how it affects organizations. "I am now most interested in exploring how we can reduce this moral clarity and create a healthy sense of doubt."

Provided by USC Marshall School of Business

Citation: Research links power and tendency to punish harshly (2013, January 17) retrieved 27 April 2024 from https://phys.org/news/2013-01-links-power-tendency-harshly.html