

Crying wolf: Who benefits and when?

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A crisis at work can bring out the best in colleagues, often inspiring more cooperation and self-sacrifice. A new study from Indiana University and the University of Guelph has found that the benefits are not shared equally, with higher-ranking group members having the most to gain by perceived threats to the group.

"Sociologists have known for a long time that groups tend to come together when they face adversity," said social psychologist Stephen Benard, assistant professor in the Department of Sociology at IU Bloomington. "What our research highlights is that there is a downside to our tendency to stick together when things are tough—powerful [group members](#) can exploit that tendency to distract us from competing with them."

The study, "Who cries wolf, and when? Manipulation of perceived threats to preserve rank in cooperative groups," was published in the online journal *Plos One* in September. Pat Barclay, assistant professor in the Department of Psychology at University of Guelph in Canada is the co-author.

Benard and Barclay tested their theories by creating three-person groups and having them play a cooperative group game in which people could pay money to increase the perception of threat to their group. They found that people with higher-ranking positions paid more to manipulate the threat and the action helped maintain their privileged positions.

"With this approach, we find people in high-ranking positions are more

likely to manipulate apparent threats when their position is precarious, compared to when it is secure," Benard said.

But this doesn't mean the next crisis at work is a ploy by the boss to boost her job security. Social science predictions involve the average person, in general, not specific people or situations.

"When groups face potential threats, it's important to judge those threats carefully," Benard said. "On one hand, you want to be alert to the fact that other group members might have an incentive to exaggerate the [threat](#). On the other hand, it's also important not to underestimate threats that could be real.

More information: www.plosone.org/article/info:d...journal.pone.0073863

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