

'Transformational leadership' curbs bad attitudes towards change

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Katherine (Katy) DeCelles is an assistant professor of Organizational Behavior and Human Resource Management at the Rotman School of Management at the University of Toronto. Katy's research focuses on understanding why individuals behave morally in the organizational context. She is also interested in how organizations can more effectively engage with their stakeholders regarding social/ethical issues, and in issues relating to organizational and social change. Katy is currently working on a stream of research that examines how individuals' emotions relate to social/ethical change processes in organizations. Credit: Rotman School

It's no surprise that a cynical attitude towards the prospect of change makes change harder to implement.

But it's important to understand that cynicism happens at an individual and workplace-wide level and both must be addressed to get employee buy-in for change initiatives. What's more, leaders who can inspire their employees and make them feel confident in their work have the best chance of limiting the development of such disabling attitudes, says a study from the University of Toronto's Rotman School of Management.

"Having a leader who can do those things makes people want to change," says Katherine DeCelles, an assistant professor of [organizational behaviour](#) at the Rotman School. She led the study with Paul Tesluk of the University of Buffalo and Faye Taxman at Virginia's George Mason University.

Their conclusions were based on information collected through surveys with nearly 700 correctional officers at 14 different prisons in one mid-Atlantic U.S. state. Information on employee insubordination was also gathered.

Not only did researchers confirm that employee cynicism contributed to lower levels of commitment towards change, they also found that a more cynical climate in the workplace led to lower levels of individual commitment towards change, regardless of officers' personal attitudes. A poor climate could bolster individuals' negative attitudes too.

"The cynicism starts to become more of a norm, so it becomes much more entrenched," said Prof. DeCelles.

Cynicism was reduced, however, in workplaces with "transformational" leaders—people who helped employees see themselves as valuable and competent, and who successfully communicated their ideas about why

change was necessary and desirable for everybody.

Prisons are rarely used as subjects for organizational behaviour research, said Prof. DeCelles, who initiated the study after participating in a previous project about rehabilitation activities in U.S. correctional facilities.

However, their rigid, hierarchical structure made prisons ideal for studying the effects of [cynicism](#) towards change, she said. With nearly half a million employees, a 38% turnover rate, and two million inmates, the prison system also deserves to be studied because of the resources dedicated to it and the important role it plays in society.

"It really is a significant organization on so many different dimensions and yet we know very little about how it functions," said Prof. DeCelles.

The paper was published in a recent issue of *Organization Science*.

Provided by University of Toronto

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