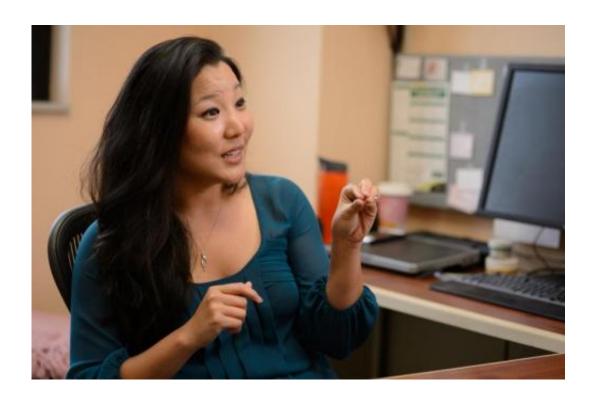# Abusive leadership infects entire team

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Bosses who are verbally abusive to individual workers can infect the entire work team with hostility, finds a study led by Crystal Farh from Michigan State University. Credit: Michigan State University

Supervisors who are abusive to individual employees can actually throw the entire work team into conflict, hurting productivity, finds new research led by a Michigan State University business scholar.

The study, conducted in China and the United States, suggests the toxic effect of nonphysical abuse by a supervisor is much broader than

believed. Published online in the *Journal of Applied Psychology*, it's one of the first studies to examine the effect of bad bosses in employee teams. Teams are increasingly popular in the business world.

Lead investigator Crystal Farh said supervisors who belittle and ridicule [workers](link) not only negatively affect those workers' attitudes and behaviors, but also cause team members to act in a similar hostile manner toward one another.

"That's the most disturbing finding," Farh said, "because it's not just about individual victims now, it's about creating a context where everybody suffers, regardless of whether you were individually abused or not."

Farh, assistant professor of management in MSU's Broad College of Business, said the findings could likely be explained by social learning theory, in which people learn and then model behavior based on observing others, in this case the boss. Previous research has shown that workers emulate supervisors' positive behaviors, she said, so it only makes sense they would follow [negative behaviors](link) as well.

For the study, Farh and Zhijun Chen from the University of Western Australia studied 51 teams of employees from 10 firms in China. Average team size was about six workers and the teams performed a variety of functions including customer service, technical support and research and development.

The study looked at nonphysical abuse such as verbal mistreatment and demeaning emails. Employees who directly experienced such abuse felt devalued and contributed less to the team. At the same time, the entire team "descended into conflicts," Farh said, which also reduced worker contributions.

"Teams characterized by relationship conflict," Farh said, "are hostile toward other members, mistreat them, speak to them rudely and experience negative emotions toward them."

The study was replicated in a controlled laboratory setting in the United States, with nearly 300 people participating.

The findings have implications for companies faced with rehabilitating a team of employees following abusive supervision. In the past, companies may have simply targeted abused employees with efforts to restore their self-esteem. While that's still important, Farh said, efforts should also be made to fix the team's interpersonal relationships by re-establishing trust and harmony.

Provided by Michigan State University