

# Supervisors' abuse, regardless of intent, can make employees behave poorly

October 8 2014

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Kevin Eschleman is assistant professor of psychology at SF State. Credit: Kevin Eschleman

Employees who are verbally abused by supervisors are more likely to "act out" at work, doing everything from taking a too-long lunch break to stealing, according to a new study led by a San Francisco State University organizational psychologist.

Even if the [abuse](#) is meant to be motivational—like when a football coach berates his team or a drill sergeant shames her cadets—the abused employees are still more likely to engage in counter-productive work behaviors, said Kevin Eschleman, assistant professor of psychology at SF State.

The fallout from this abuse is not limited to the supervisor and employee and can in fact affect an entire company if it leads to lost work time or theft, Eschleman warned. "We didn't just focus on how these workers felt or whether they started to dislike their jobs more. We looked at consequences that actually affect the bottom line of an organization," he said.

The study included work data from 268 full-time employees selected from an online survey of more than 80,000 people. The employees held a variety of jobs and had an average of nine years at their positions. In the first wave of the survey, workers were asked how often their supervisors "put them down" or ridiculed them. The researchers also asked the employees whether they thought the abuse happened because the supervisors were trying to harm them or hurt their feelings, or because the supervisors meant the abuse as motivational or a way to "light a fire" under people.

A month later, Eschleman and his colleagues asked the employees whether they had participated in any counterproductive behaviors at work, like making fun of a supervisor or slacking off on the job. The researchers were somewhat surprised that even motivational abuse caused the same behavioral backlash in employees. Workers may see any kind of abuse as "a violation of how they expect to be treated," Eschleman said.

So-called tough love can be common in professions such as the military and medicine, where abuse by supervisors might be seen as part of the

[work](#) culture. "If you have an organization where the culture accepts that type of behavior," Eschleman suggested, "you're probably not going to feel as violated when it occurs."

Yet the overall results of the study suggest that abuse will not lead to a more productive workplace. "I think there are a lot of supervisors who believe that this could be an effective way to lead," Eschleman said, "but I don't necessarily think that's the case for a lot of people. In general, a lot of people are going to respond negatively."

The researchers found that employees aim these counterproductive behaviors both at the supervisors and at the organization as a whole. "Supervisors are often the face of a company, and so their behavior really kind of implies the company's values," Eschleman explained. "So it's not just that they would target the person who's treating them poorly or abusively, but that they're going to target the organization that's allowing that to happen."

Although abused [employees](#) were more likely to engage in such behaviors, Eschleman said it is not clear why the workers act out. "We used to think it must be retaliation, but I think more recently researchers and organizations have begun to recognize that it is not always done with ill intent," he added. "It could be more of a release or venting, and I think it is a form of coping sometimes."

**More information:** "Perceived intent of supervisor as a moderator of the relationships between abusive supervision and counterproductive work behaviors" by Eschleman; Nathan A. Bowling and Gary Burns of Wright State University; and Jesse S. Michel of Auburn University was published in the December 2014 issue of the journal *Work & Stress*.

Provided by San Francisco State University

Citation: Supervisors' abuse, regardless of intent, can make employees behave poorly (2014, October 8) retrieved 27 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2014-10-supervisors-abuse-intent-employees-poorly.html>

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