

Bad bosses inspire employees to sabotage customers

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Credit: Geoff LMV

When faced with rude customers, people in the service sector sometimes exact revenge – but they're much more likely to do so if their boss mistreats them as well, according to a new study by Professor Daniel Skarlicki and Associate Professor Danielle van Jaarsveld of UBC's Sauder School of Business.

"Research shows that the customer mistreatment of front-line employees is becoming increasingly common," said Skarlicki. "Our study finds that in call centres these employees can react by hanging up on customers or misdirecting their calls. But they're more likely to strike back if they feel their boss is unfair."

According to Skarlicki, a boss's conduct is a significant factor in determining how employees perceive the company they work for because he or she is the "face" of the organization. Their management style has a direct impact on how their employees conduct themselves.

"Supervisors of front-line service workers can be their own worst enemy," said Skarlicki. "They think their job is about supervising, scheduling and facilitating. But really, they should see treating their employees with respect and dignity as an integral part of their job description – anything south of that will cause trouble."

The researchers surveyed 579 call centre [employees](#) in North America and South Korea to assess how often they engaged in sabotage as a result of customer abuse. They compared this information to the participants' reports of [unfair treatment](#) by bosses. They found those who reported not placing strong importance on their moral identity were more likely to sabotage rude customers when they also reported experiencing unjust treatment at the hand of their [boss](#).

"Managers should strongly consider the proverb 'do unto others as you would have them do unto you,' but in this case, it's 'as you would have

done unto your customers.' Ultimately bad treatment begets bad treatment, and when service quality erodes, it affects the bottom line."

More information: "Extending the Multifoci Perspective: The Role of Supervisor Justice and Moral Identity in the Relationship Between Customer Justice and Customer-Directed Sabotage." *J Appl Psychol.* 2015 Jun 8. www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/26052713

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