

Disabilities can negatively impact supervisor-subordinate relationship

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Differences in age, gender, and race can negatively affect the relationship between a supervisor and a subordinate, but so, too, can disabilities, according to a new Rutgers study.

David Dwertmann, an assistant professor of management at the Rutgers School of Business–Camden, says there is growing incongruence between supervisors and their subordinates in terms of health issues and disabilities.

"While we know that subordinates with disabilities are at risk of forming weak ties with their supervisors due to lower performance expectations, there has been no research to suggest the effects of a supervisor's disability on his or her relationship with employees," Dwertmann says.

Through his own research, Dwertmann posits that supervisors with disabilities have poor relationships with their employees because they are also unfairly stigmatized. Employees may perceive supervisors with disabilities as less productive, less competent, and even less admired. Interestingly, he says, the supervisor's higher status does not protect that individual from stigmatization.

"If we think about a manager or a leader, we usually think of someone with a high skill level who has positive characteristics and we therefore have high expectations of the person, but disabilities are often stigmatized and associated with low expectations or no expectations at all," says Dwertmann. "This large gap in expectations is more salient and may therefore cause more detrimental effects if the supervisor has a disability compared to the subordinate."

"Ironically, the leader may struggle the most from a health issue, but he or she is also able to create an inclusive climate within the work group which prevents those stereotypes," he explains.

The Rutgers–Camden scholar says it comes down to a question of whether diversity is seen as negative and a cause of problems, or as a beneficial resource which leads to more diverse knowledge and experiences.

Dwertmann says his findings are particularly interesting in light of growing trends in population aging.

"As we know, aging and [health issues](#) are correlated, so the older you get, the more likely you are to develop a disability," he says. "We also know that as you get older, you have more seniority within a company and managers and [supervisors](#) tend to be older. Thus, it's likely that people who are in a leadership role develop or have a disability."

Dwertmann examined the supervisor/subordinate dynamic for different disability scenarios in a study of 1,253 employees from 54 work-units working for a large federal agency in Germany.

"I don't think the results would be much different in the private sector and the U.S. because we're looking at very basic human interaction," he says. "There may be slight differences, but I assume that the findings would be similar and perhaps even stronger in the [private sector](#) with a more competitive culture."

He says he is seeking out research opportunities with U.S. companies to investigate these assumptions.

"We also know little so far on how to foster inclusive climates in order to prevent negative and foster positive diversity effects," Dwertmann explains.

Dwertmann reported his findings in the research paper, "Status Matters: The Asymmetric Effects of Supervisor-Subordinate Disability Incongruence and Climate for Inclusion," which he co-wrote with Stephan Boehm, an assistant professor at the University of St. Gallen in Switzerland. It has been accepted for publication in an upcoming edition of the *Academy of Management Journal*.

Provided by Rutgers University

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