

When the boss's ethical behavior breaks bad

February 12 2016, by Russell Johnson, Andy Henion



Bosses who act ethically are more likely to become mentally exhausted and, ironically, lash out at employees, finds new research by Russell Johnson, Michigan State University business professor. Credit: Michigan State University

Is your boss ethical? Does he or she do what's right, as opposed to what's profitable?

If so, they may turn downright abusive the next day.

New research on leader behavior by Russell Johnson, associate professor of management at Michigan State University, suggests ethical conduct leads to mental exhaustion and the "moral licensing" to lash out at employees.

The study, online in the *Journal of Applied Psychology*, is called "When ethical leader behavior breaks bad: How [ethical behavior](#) can turn abusive via ego depletion and moral licensing." Moral licensing is a phenomenon in which people, after doing something good, feel they have earned the right to act in a negative manner.

"Ironically, when leaders felt mentally fatigued and morally licensed after displays of ethical behavior, they were more likely to be abusive toward their subordinates on the next day," said Johnson, an expert on the psychology of the workplace.

Johnson and MSU students Szu-Han Lin and Jingjing Ma surveyed 172 supervisors over a several-day period in various industries including retail, education, manufacturing and health care. The goal: examine the consequences of ethical behavior for the leaders who exhibited it.

Johnson said it's not easy to be ethical, as it turns out. "Being ethical means leaders often have to suppress their own self-interest (they must do 'what's right' as opposed to 'what's profitable'), and they have to monitor not only the performance outcomes of subordinates but also the means (to ensure that ethical/appropriate practices were followed)."

Ethical behavior led to [mental fatigue](#) and moral licensing, and this led to leaders being more abusive to their workers. The abuse included ridiculing, insulting and expressing anger toward employees, giving them the silent treatment and reminding them of past mistakes or failures.

To combat mental fatigue, Johnson said managers should build in time for breaks during the workday; get sufficient sleep; eat healthy and exercise; and unplug from work outside of the office (which includes [shutting off the smart phone at night](#)).

Dealing with moral licensing is trickier, as there is not much research on the subject. However, Johnson suggested companies could consider formally requiring ethical behavior. "If such behavior is required, then it's more difficult for people to feel they've earned credit for performing something that is mandatory," he said. "A sense of moral license is more likely when people feel they voluntarily or freely exhibited the behavior."

Ethical behavior could also be formally rewarded with social praise or money. But the praise or bonus should come relatively soon after the ethical behavior in order to counteract the moral licensing, Johnson said.

Provided by Michigan State University

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