

Workplace status matters—but not in the way you think

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Are employees more likely to help co-workers above them or beneath them in the corporate pecking order?

A new study suggests that may be the wrong question to ask. Researchers found that [workers](#) are most likely to help colleagues who are moderately distant from themselves in [status](#)—both above and below them.

The results offer a new way to think about how status affects workplace

relationships, said Robert Lount, co-author of the study and an associate professor of management and human resources at The Ohio State University's Fisher College of Business.

"A lot of attention has been focused on the direction of the relationship—which employee is above or below the other in the hierarchy and how that affects their work together. But status distance may be more important in some circumstances than whether your colleague is above or below you," he said.

"The sweet spot for helping seems to be those who are moderately distant from you in status."

The study was led by Sarah Doyle, a doctoral student at the Fisher College of Business. It appears online in the journal *Academy of Management Discoveries* and will be published in a future print edition.

The study didn't examine why colleagues who were moderately distant in status were most likely to help each other. But Doyle said it may be related to how workers perceive their own status within the company.

"Someone near you in status poses more of a threat. The help you provide could help them pass you in status, or make it more difficult for you to pass them," Doyle said.

Those who are far above or below you in status could require a lot more time and effort to help, which could hurt your own job performance.

Those colleagues who are moderately distant don't pose much of a threat and offer the best opportunity for workers to demonstrate their willingness to cooperate with their teammates.

The researchers conducted two separate studies—one in a real

workplace—and both reached similar conclusions.

In the first study, 267 undergraduate students read a work scenario in which they imagined they were part of a 15-person workgroup in a large sales organization.

Participants were told that one of their group members was close to securing a large account, but was running short on time. The participants were asked if they would be willing to provide help, knowing that helping was optional.

The crucial point was that participants were told that the person asking for help was either similar to them in status (small status distance), very dissimilar (large status distance) or neither similar nor dissimilar (moderate social distance).

Results showed that participants were most likely to say they would help a team member who was moderately different from them in status.

The real-world study was conducted in a large Midwestern customer call center. Employees were asked to try to make sales during their calls with customers. A list of how employees ranked in terms of sales was emailed to workers each month. That means employees always knew how their status compared to the other members of their team.

While they each worked separately in cubicles, they were encouraged to help each other. Often, they would put customers on hold and ask their teammates for help with answering a question.

"There were plenty of opportunities for collaboration and to give each other assistance," Lount said.

For the study, 170 employees completed an online survey asking a

variety of questions. Included was a question asking each employee to list co-workers who regularly came to them for help and co-workers whom they regularly went to seeking help.

A helping relationship was included in the study if two employees both agreed that the assistance did occur.

In this real-world office, the finding of the first study was confirmed: Workers were most helpful to teammates who were just the right distance away as far as status goes - not too close and not too far.

Lount said the results don't mean that most people regularly refuse requests for assistance from their co-workers.

"We found that people are generally willing to lend a hand. It is not a story of withholding assistance. It is more about who are you most likely to go out of your way to help."

There are certainly situations in the office where who is above the other in status will matter when it comes to offering assistance, he said. But especially when it comes to informal helping, status difference will be key.

What can managers do with these results? Lount suggests that the findings might be useful when assigning people to train new [employees](#).

"You might want to avoid assigning the most recently hired employee to train the newcomer," he said. "If that relative newcomer is worried about his or her status in the organization, they may be less than helpful with this new person who could surpass them," he said.

"Someone who is moderately successful, but not the top performer on the team, might be the most willing to help."

Doyle noted that while many organizations consider whether to flatten or expand hierarchies at their firms, this study suggests the question may often be more complex than assumed.

"Managers have to consider how status distance plays a role in how well their corporate hierarchies work," she said.

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