

When job insecurity leads to sabotage

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Credit: University of Michigan

Fear over job security leads to lower productivity and disengagement at work. When people are nervous and upset, they check out.

New research by Sue Ashford, professor of management and organizations at the Ross School of Business at the University of Michigan, highlights the rationalizations workers facing job loss can use to justify misbehavior, and how managers can prevent it.

Ashford and colleagues found that employees who feel insecure in their

jobs, in certain conditions, can take it even further when acting out their frustrations and anxiety. Instead of just slacking off they can do actual harm to the company—swiping supplies, fudging expense reports, bad-mouthing people and other engaging in other costly behaviors.

But it doesn't have to be that way. The research shows there are ways for employers to intervene.

"There are a number of things that happen at the top of an organization that cause job insecurity down the line and people, of course, get upset," Ashford said. "Sometimes, under the right conditions, this can lead to moral disengagement. This is a process of mental rationalization that makes it OK to do something we wouldn't normally do. It's re-framing an action in a way so that it no longer seems immoral."

Their study, "Deviance and Exit: The Organizational Costs of Job Insecurity and Moral Disengagement," focused on employees of Chinese companies over several months to gauge their level of job insecurity and subsequent behavior. Employees from a state-owned enterprise during a time of reform—and uncertainty for workers—were surveyed, along with those from nine companies in the private sector.

They found that job uncertainty, coupled with two other factors, leads to higher chances of [moral disengagement](#) and bad acts—if an employee has:

- A bad relationship with his or her immediate boss
- Attractive alternative job prospects

"That extra psychological step to justify immoral behavior happens when these things converge," Ashford said. "There's [job insecurity](#), you have a bad boss, and you see other job prospects. It can make you feel like you're not valued and that's how the rationalizations start. An implicit

contract you had with the organization is broken and things you wouldn't normally do can feel right."

But Ashford says there are concrete steps companies can take—especially during times of uncertainty—to prevent employees from disengaging.

First, make sure managers are considerate and reach out to team members during times of distress, she says. Make sure they listen to concerns and show understanding for the stress they feel.

"When people feel they're being mistreated they can justify a lot of behaviors," Ashford said. "If you have a good relationship with your boss, even if you might be upset with the organization, it's a lot harder to do that."

Second, while you can't control everyone's outside job opportunities, you can make a special effort to reach out to people who seem to have good prospects, she says. That's a time to make people feel valued and find ways to make it worth their while to stay.

"Good managers know who on their team has good [job prospects](#) and those are also usually the people the company really needs," Ashford said. "It's incumbent on you to show them that the grass isn't always greener."

Provided by University of Michigan

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