

Feelings of ethical superiority can lead to workplace ostracism, social undermining: study

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Matthew Quade, Ph.D., assistant professor of management in Baylor University's Hankamer School of Business. Credit: Baylor University Marketing & Communications

Do you consider yourself more ethical than your coworker?

Caution! Your feelings of ethical superiority can cause a chain reaction that is detrimental to you, your coworker and your organization, according to Baylor University management research.

A new study published in the *Journal of Business Ethics* suggests that your feelings of ethical superiority can lead you to have negative emotions toward a "less ethical" coworker. Those negative emotions can be amplified if you also believe you do not perform as well as that coworker. And, furthermore, those negative emotions can lead to your mistreatment and/or ostracism (social exclusion) of that less ethical, higher-performing coworker.

"One way to think of this is that it is - and should be - concerning to us to believe that we are more ethical than our coworkers, especially if we do not perform as well as they do," said lead author Matthew Quade, Ph.D., assistant professor of management in Baylor University's Hankamer School of Business and an expert on workplace ethics and ostracism.

The research, Quade said, can help managers create better atmospheres and improve the bottom line.

"The managerial implication is that we need to create environments where ethics and [performance](#) are both rewarded," he said.

A total of 741 people, among them 310 employees ("focal employees") and an equal number of their coworkers ("comparison coworkers"), were surveyed for the study. Focal employees compared themselves with their coworkers based on two areas: perceived ethics and performance. Then they rated their levels of negative emotions (i.e., feelings of contempt, tension or disgust) toward those same comparison coworkers.

Results show that employees who believe they are more ethical than similar coworkers (i.e., those that hold similar positions, have similar education background and similar tenure in the organization) feel negative emotions (i.e., contempt, disgust, stress, repulsion) when thinking about those coworkers. These negative emotions about the coworker are amplified when the employees also believe they do not perform as well as those same coworkers.

In turn, the comparison coworkers rated how often they experienced social undermining (i.e., insults, spreading of rumors, belittling of ideas) and ostracism (i.e., ignored, avoided, shut out of conversations) from the focal [employee](#).

Results also show that the [negative emotions](#) that the "more ethical, lower performing" employees experience may result in them behaving in unethical ways directed at their coworkers. Specifically, they become more likely to socially undermine and ostracize those "less ethical, higher performing" [coworkers](#). All the study's results exist regardless of gender and any positive emotion the employees may experience as a result of believing they are more ethical.

Ultimately, such workplace scenarios pose a conundrum for managers, Quade said. On one hand, there is the ethical worker who doesn't perform as well. On the other hand, there's the less ethical worker who hits all the goals.

Who gets rewarded?

"If high performance is the result of questionable or unethical behavior, that combination should not be celebrated," the researchers wrote.

"Instead, organizations should be cautious when rewarding and promoting performance within organizations, ensuring that they also consider the way the job is done from an ethical standpoint."

The ideal situation, the study reveals, is when high ethics and high performance are the norm - and employees are rewarded.

"Enhancing the [ethical behavior](#) of all employees should be an emphasis to attempt to remove some of the disparity that tends to exist between employees when it comes to their moral behavior at work," the researchers wrote.

"'If Only My Coworker Was More Ethical': When Ethical and Performance Comparisons Lead to Negative Emotions, Social Undermining, and Ostracism," is published in the *Journal of Business Ethics*.

More information: Matthew J. Quade et al. "If Only My Coworker Was More Ethical": When Ethical and Performance Comparisons Lead to Negative Emotions, Social Undermining, and Ostracism, *Journal of Business Ethics* (2018). [DOI: 10.1007/s10551-018-3841-2](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-018-3841-2)

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