

# An abusive boss today might mean a better boss tomorrow

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Russell Johnson, assistant professor in the Department of Management in Michigan State University's Broad College of Business. Credit: G.L. Kohuth

When bosses yell at you, your day can be ruined. It can also ruin theirs, though, and lead to major behavioral changes that flip their attitudes at work.

New research from Michigan State University published in *Journal of Applied Psychology* took prior workplace studies, which focused primarily on the impact abusive bosses have on their employees, and

refocused the lens to see how the bosses respond to their own abusive behavior.

"Based on prior research, it wasn't clear whether supervisors even realized when they were abusive toward others," said Russ Johnson, associate professor of management and lead author of the study.

"However, some bosses realize when they have been abusive toward their subordinates and feel guilty about it. This motivates them to repair the relationship by engaging in more appropriate and effective leader behaviors."

Johnson's research was built around the theory of moral cleansing, and how supervisors keep their moral compass, or their conscience, clean.

"People often act as though they have a moral ledger or bank account, such that doing good deeds adds credit whereas bad deeds withdraws credit. When there is a shortfall of credits, they are motivated to engage in [good deeds](#) to restore a balance," Johnson said. "Abusive behavior weakens leaders' moral credit. To try to compensate for their wrongdoings, they show behavior to make reparations and amends toward abused staff."

To collect data on workplace dynamics and moral cleansing, Johnson and his colleagues conducted separate surveys for supervisors and direct reports at different times of the day. The surveys asked bosses to evaluate their own abusive behavior, and then asked employees about their bosses' willingness and determination to make reparations.

"In addition to feeling guilty after engaging in their own abusive behavior, the supervisors felt as though they lost 'moral credit.' To build that credit back up, they showed types of sympathetic, supportive and reparative behaviors toward their employees," Johnson said.

Additionally, Johnson explained that leaders who worked in a place where moral and ethical values were salient or top-of-mind, supervisors would be more attentive to their own behavior and experience guilt when they act abusively. This is because supervisors who work in such ethical environments would be more sensitive of their own abusive behavior and more likely to engage in cleansing behaviors following abusive acts.

Johnson said that if a workforce goal is to create healthy workplaces and to reduce abusive supervisory [behavior](#), then the focus should be on supervisors and understanding why they engage in such acts and how it affects them. Only then can we start to create contexts that discourage such abuse from happening, he said.

To help combat abusive bosses, Johnson said that engaging employees and their supervisors in constructive conversations could open doors to a more empathetic environment where bosses would be more aware of their actions, and subsequently feel the guilt that elicits a moral cleanse.

"The positive takeaway is that our research suggests that some supervisors realize when they have been abusive toward their subordinates and feel guilty about it, which motivates them to repair the relationship by engaging in more appropriate and effective task and person-oriented leader behaviors," he said.

Provided by Michigan State University

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