

Kissing up to the boss can increase employees' bad behavior in the workplace, study shows

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Kissing up to the boss at work may help boost employees' careers but it also depletes the employees' self-control resources, leaving them more

susceptible to behaving badly in the workplace, a new study has found.

"There's a personal cost to ingratiating yourself with your boss," said Anthony Klotz, an associate professor of management in the College of Business at Oregon State University and the lead author of the paper.

"When your energy is depleted, it may nudge you into slack-off territory."

The findings were published recently in the *Journal of Applied Psychology*.

Ingratiation is just one of many behaviors employees use to create and maintain their desired image in the [workplace](#). Past research has shown that successful use of these behaviors, known collectively as impression management tactics, can have benefits for employees, including stronger performance evaluations.

"Generally, impression management in the workplace is about wanting to be liked and appearing capable," said co-author Lawrence Houston III, an assistant professor of management in OSU's College of Business.

Klotz, Houston and their co-authors examined how 75 professionals in China used two supervisor-focused impression management tactics—ingratiation and self-promotion—over two work weeks.

Ingratiation, or kissing up, generally includes flattery, conforming with the supervisor's opinion and doing favors. Self-promotion refers to taking credit for success, boasting about performance and highlighting connections to other important people.

The study participants—mid-level managers in a large, publicly traded software company—completed daily diary surveys of their workplace experiences and also took a survey measuring their political skill, which

is the set of social abilities that helps them effectively understand others at work, influence others in ways that enhance their own objectives and navigate social situations with confidence.

The researchers found that the extent to which employees engaged in ingratiation varied widely from day to day. They also found that the more employees engaged in kissing up, the more their self-control resources were depleted by the end of the day.

It makes sense that ingratiation is depleting, because successfully kissing up requires the appearance of sincerity and that requires self-control, Klotz said.

The depleted employees were more likely to engage in workplace deviance such as incivility to a co-worker, skipping a meeting or surfing the internet rather than working. There was no evidence of a similar link between self-promotion and resource depletion, the researchers said.

"It's also important to note that the depleting effects of ingratiation are immediate, but the workplace benefits of those acts tend to build over the long term," Houston said.

The researchers also found that ingratiation was less depleting for employees with high levels of political skill. Those with relatively high political skill were less prone to engage in deviance after performing [impression management](#) than their peers lower in political skill, signaling that political skill can act as a buffer against the depleting effects of ingratiation.

The study's findings suggest that employees should be mindful of the potential effects of ingratiation and the power of political skill in helping them manage appropriate and less-depleting ingratiation, Klotz said.

"Also, if you're feeling depleted you may want to take steps to restore yourself—take a walk, talk to a friend, eat a snack," he said. "That's typically better than the allowing the depletion to manifest in other ways, like skipping a meeting or being rude to a co-worker."

Workplace leaders should also be mindful that ingratiation comes at a cost to employees and their response to an [employee](#)'s action can play a role in determining what that cost is, Houston said.

"Leaders can respond to their employees' ingratiation efforts in ways that are resource depleting or in ways that are more resource giving," he said. "Positive reinforcement is resource giving, and it's free."

More information: Anthony C. Klotz et al, Good actors but bad apples: Deviant consequences of daily impression management at work., *Journal of Applied Psychology* (2018). DOI: [10.1037/apl0000335](https://doi.org/10.1037/apl0000335)

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