It pays to be nice to your employees, new study shows

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Want the best results out of your employees? Then be nice to them.

New research from Binghamton University, State University at New York finds that showing compassion to subordinates almost always pays off, especially when combined with the enforcement of clear goals and benchmarks.

"Being benevolent is important because it can change the perception your followers have of you," said Chou-Yu Tsai, an assistant professor of management at Binghamton University's School of Management. "If you feel that your leader or boss actually cares about you, you may feel more serious about the work you do for them."

Tsai and his fellow researchers wanted to determine how both the presence and lack of benevolence affects the job performance of followers.

Tsai partnered with Binghamton University colleagues Shelley Dionne, professor and associate dean of the School of Management, and Francis Yammarino, distinguished professor, as well as An-Chih Wang of China Europe International Business School, Seth Spain of Concordia University, Hsiao-Chi Ling of Kainan University, Min-Ping Huang of Yuan Ze University, Li-Fang Chou of National Cheng Kung University and Bor-Shiuan Cheng of National Taiwan University for the research.

They surveyed nearly 1,000 members of the Taiwanese military and almost 200 adults working full-time in the United States, and looked at the subordinate performance that resulted from three different leadership styles:

- Authoritarianism-dominant leadership: Leaders who assert absolute authority and control, focused mostly on completing tasks at all costs with little consideration of the well-being of subordinates
- Benevolence-dominant leadership: Leaders whose primary concern is the personal or familial well-being of subordinates. These leaders want followers to feel supported and have strong social ties.
- Classical paternalistic leadership: A leadership style that combines both authoritarianism and benevolence, with a strong

focus on both task completion and the well-being of subordinates.

The researchers found that authoritarianism-dominant leadership almost always had negative results on job performance, while benevolence-dominant leadership almost always had a positive impact on job performance. In other words, showing no compassion to your employees doesn't bode well for their job performance, while showing compassion motivated them to be better workers.

They also found that classical paternalistic leadership, which combines both benevolence and authoritarianism, had just as strong an effect on subordinate performance as benevolent-dominant leadership. Tsai said the reason for this phenomenon may extend all the way back to childhood.

"The parent and child relationship is the first leader-follower relationship that people experience. It can become a bit of a prototype of what we expect out of leadership going forward, and the paternalistic leadership style kind of resembles that of a parent," Tsai said.

"The findings imply that showing personal and familial support for employees is a critical part of the leader-follower relationship. While the importance of establishing structure and setting expectations is important for leaders, and arguably parents, help and guidance from the leader in developing social ties and support networks for a follower can be a powerful factor in their job performance," Dionne said.

Because of the difference in work cultures between U.S. employees and members of the Taiwanese military, researchers were surprised that the results were consistent across both groups.

"The consistency in the results across different cultures and different job

types is fascinating. It suggests that the effectiveness of paternalistic leadership may be more broad-based than previously thought, and it may be all about how people respond to leaders and not about where they live or the type of work they do," Yammarino said.

Tsai said his main takeaway for managers is to put just as much or even more of an emphasis on the well-being of your employees as you do on hitting targets and goals.

"Subordinates and employees are not tools or machines that you can just use. They are human beings and deserve to be treated with respect," said Tsai. "Make sure you are focusing on their well-being and helping them find the support they need, while also being clear about what your expectations and priorities are. This is a work-based version of 'tough love' often seen in parent-child relationships."

The study, "Benevolence-dominant, authoritarianism-dominant and classical paternalistic leadership: Testing their relationships with subordinate performance," was published in The *Leadership Quarterly*.

More information: An-Chih Wang et al, Benevolence-dominant, authoritarianism-dominant, and classical paternalistic leadership: Testing their relationships with subordinate performance, *The Leadership Quarterly* (2018). DOI: 10.1016/j.leaqua.2018.06.002

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