

Offering employees a helping hand can backfire

October 25 2018, by Patrick Monahan



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When a coworker or employee is struggling, is it better to offer help on the job or just a shoulder to cry on? A new study led by San Francisco State University researchers shows that the two forms of support do

roughly the same thing—but that sometimes, it's best not to address the situation at all.

"We found it's half and half. Sometimes offering [support](#) makes things worse, sometimes it makes it better," said Michael Mathieu, who led the study as a psychology graduate student at San Francisco State along with Associate Professor of Psychology Kevin Eschleman.

Rather than conducting an experiment of their own, Mathieu and Eschleman pulled together information from the vast scientific literature on the topic. That meant tracking down 142 studies over the course of eight months and translating them all into the same scientific terms to be compared and statistically analyzed in one batch. The team ended up using a wide variety of measurements, from job satisfaction to job performance and even stressors like "role overload" (when an employee's workload is too large to handle).

Offering job-related support—such as new equipment or career counseling—turned out to perform roughly the same role as providing [emotional support](#), like listening to a coworker's problems, the researchers found. They also discovered that simply making support available is often better than overtly discussing it: Extending a helping hand was just as likely to make the situation worse as improve it, while simply making job resources available had a more consistently positive effect. "That finding might be because not all support is good support," Mathieu explained. For instance, reaching out to offer help to a coworker could end up insulting them.

Other results came as less of a surprise. For example, support coming from a superior has a bigger impact than when it comes from a coworker. The researchers published their results on Oct. 18 in the *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology*.

An important next step will be to figure out just when support ends up falling flat and when it can help a coworker succeed. For now, Mathieu's message for employers is to take the time to think about whether offering a hand would be helpful at all. "Before providing support, think about whether it's needed and whether it's wanted," he said. "If it's not, maybe step back and don't provide that."

More information: Michael Mathieu et al, Meta-analytic and multiwave comparison of emotional support and instrumental support in the workplace., *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology* (2018). [DOI: 10.1037/ocp0000135](https://doi.org/10.1037/ocp0000135)

Provided by San Francisco State University

Citation: Offering employees a helping hand can backfire (2018, October 25) retrieved 3 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2018-10-employees-backfire.html>

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