

Study finds bad bosses could turn you into a great boss

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Professor Shannon Taylor finds that some employees who are abused by their bosses resolve not to repeat that pattern with their own subordinates and become exceptional leaders of their teams. Credit: University of Central Florida

A new University of Central Florida study suggests abuse and mistreatment by those at the top of an organization do not necessarily lead to abusive behavior by lower-level leaders. When offered leadership

opportunities, prior victims of workplace abuse are more likely to treat their own subordinates better by learning from the bad behavior of their bosses.

UCF College of Business professors Shannon Taylor and Robert Folger, in collaboration with researchers at the University of Texas at El Paso, Suffolk University and Singapore Management University, recently published their findings in the *Journal of Applied Psychology*.

"Some employees who are abused by their bosses resolve not to repeat that pattern with their own subordinates and become exceptional leaders of their teams," Taylor said. "Our study sheds light on a silver lining of sorts for people who are subjected to [abuse](#) at work. Some managers who experience this abuse can reframe their experience so it doesn't reflect their [behavior](#) and actually makes them better leaders."

The study found those who relied on their morals and integrity to defy their manager's abusive approach felt encouraged to prevent it from moving beyond their bosses.

Through multiple experiments over several years, the researchers examined the differences in attitude and behavior of supervisors who had been abused by superiors and those who had not and, in turn, how each group treated their employees. They found that abused supervisors who purposefully distanced themselves from their manager expressed respect and kindness toward their own employees, despite the poor treatment they received from their own [boss](#).

"The lesson here isn't to hire more abusive managers, of course, but to try to encourage people who have been abused, among other things, to say, 'Look, I'm not like my boss,'" Taylor said. "You can take a stand—not just by reporting the bad behavior, but by actively rejecting this abusive leadership style."

Taylor said he doesn't expect workplace abuse to disappear, but he notes that companies are learning and trying to solve the problem through training and maintaining positive workplace climates.

More information: Shannon G. Taylor et al, Breaking the cycle of abusive supervision: How disidentification and moral identity help the trickle-down change course., *Journal of Applied Psychology* (2018).

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