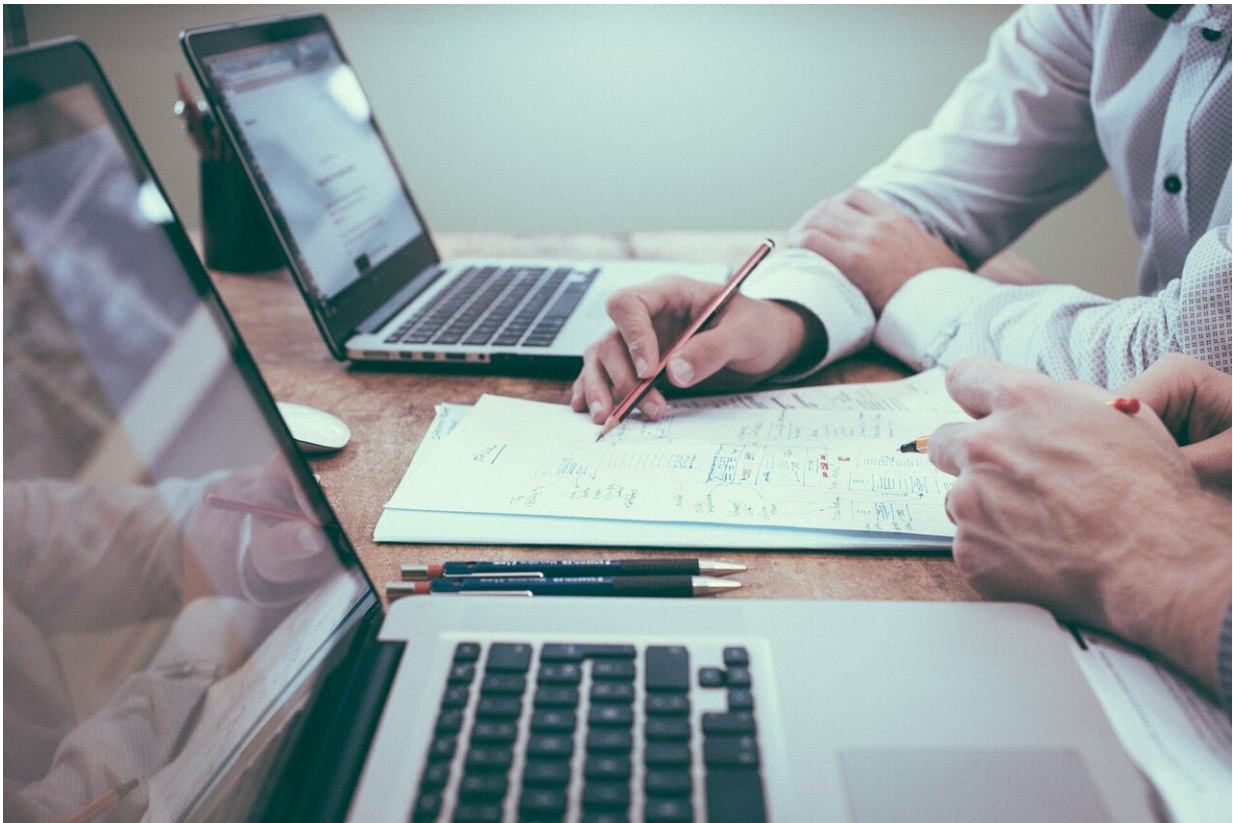


How making an accusation makes you seem more trustworthy

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Making an accusation about unethical business practices undermines trust in the accused and enhances trust in the accuser, but only if the accusation is made in good faith, according to new research led by

Jessica Kennedy, assistant professor of management at the Owen Graduate School of Management.

Accusations are common in the workplace, but up until now, there has not been much research on the consequences for making one, she said. "When we started this paper, we thought that people who call out [unethical behavior](#) and groups tend to be viewed negatively by others," she said. "If you look at the portrayals of whistleblowers in the media, those are the most salient examples. But we thought that there might actually be some benefits to upholding ethical norms in groups and we wanted to explore what those benefits were."

The series of studies, titled, "Building Trust by Tearing Others Down: When accusing others of unethical behavior engenders [trust](#)" was recently published in *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*. Maurice Schweitzer at the Wharton School co-authored the paper.

The researchers conducted several experiments focused on ordinary ethical questions that arise in the workplace, such as using a toxic ingredient in a product or lying about business performance. The key findings are:

- Making an accusation engenders cognitive trust from observers. People who witness an accusation report feeling as though the accuser is more trustworthy afterwards.
- Making an accusation also engenders behavioral trust from observers. People who witness an accusation are more likely to reward accusers.
- But hypocrisy undercuts that additional trust. Observers who perceive that an accusation is insincere will not trust the accuser more.
- Likewise, an accusation later revealed to be false reverses any

trust gains. The intentions of the accused don't seem to matter. Regardless of whether the accused meant well or not, the accuser always comes out ahead.

Kennedy said it was important to note that this research is narrowly focused on accusations pertaining to common business misconduct, and that different trust dynamics may develop in situations such as whistleblowing, which reveals extraordinary business misconduct to parties outside the organization, or when the accusations are related to wrongs done to the accuser. "These data should not be interpreted to suggest that accusing someone of, say, sexual harassment would have the same result as the scenarios we tested."

She said this research is important because it pinpoints a number of ways that accusations impact [interpersonal relationships](#) and perceptions in the workplace—for better and worse. And, she said, it can help managers tease out instances where an employee may opportunistically make an accusation in an effort to burnish their reputation as an ethical person.

"Politicians seem to do this a lot, possibly because it works as long as they don't look hypocritical," she said. Likewise, in the workplace, "it's often good to call out unethical behavior, but we also need to be aware of the potential for accusers to impression-manage and ask ourselves, should we trust these people?"

More information: Jessica A. Kennedy et al. Building trust by tearing others down: When accusing others of unethical behavior engenders trust, *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes* (2018). [DOI: 10.1016/j.obhdp.2018.10.001](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.obhdp.2018.10.001)

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