

How a boss can get too close with workers

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

The boss asks her longtime employee, with whom she has enjoyed a strong, professional working relationship, to complete a task related to their everyday business. The employee, based on their longstanding rapport, doesn't grasp the immediacy of the supervisor's request. The task doesn't get accomplished in time. Their business suffers.

This common incident resides at the line where the manager-employee

relationship crosses and brings with it pitfalls, and a recent study involving Washington University in St. Louis reveals where these potential problems exist and how to avoid them.

In a paper recently published in the *Journal of Applied Psychology*, three Asia-based co-authors, along with Zhenyu Liao, a postdoctoral fellow in organizational behavior in Olin Business School, studied the relationships of 73 pairs of managers and employees working for an IT company in northern China.

Over a 10-workday period, they captured reactions to 600 of what they call "dynamic, episodic transactions," that is, one-on-one interactions and work exchanges. Each of these interactions lasted more than two minutes: meetings, requests, feedback, advice, general conversations, etc.

Using a cellphone survey platform to record and assess these dealings within one hour afterward, the researchers were able to get instant responses from participants, on a 1- to 5-point scale. The workers answered questions regarding their direct managers such as:

- "How much did you receive from him/her regarding assigned meaningful tasks?"
- "At this moment, I feel an obligation to do whatever I can to do to help my leader achieve his/her goals," or
- "At this moment, I am enthusiastic about my job."



A survey question. Credit: Image courtesy of the co-authors

Liao said the study still shows that managers must continue to build strong relationships with their workers. "We don't want anyone to misunderstand," Liao said. "That bond is still vital to getting the best work from employees.

"Rather, in order to receive more responsiveness and more effort in the short term, a manager needs to provide more resources to her or his people—whether that's empowerment, feedback such as recognition and guidance, or more meaningful tasks," he said.

The research was featured Jan. 14 in Harvard Business Review.

More of what the research found:

- Bonding too closely can shift workers' attention to long-term mutual benefits, but create problems in the short term. It could cause employees to become less engaged shortly after daily interactions. The cellphone survey results found workers with whom managers are close displayed lower level of engagement in the work shortly after their face-to-face exchanges.
- As indicated in the anecdote in the opening paragraph, workers who are close to their managers sometimes can feel less compelled to answer a request or return a favor right away. Consequently, they might offer less work resources and get less work done in the next interaction. Therefore, if managers do not set a clear timeline for when the tasks should be done and expectations of work standards, it may well backfire—the [employee](#) will mismanage the time allotted and work inefficiently.
- Managers likewise need to find a common, level ground. The amount of resources that managers and employees "give and take" fluctuated substantially across their daily interactions. Such fluctuations also occur for employees who are close with their managers. This finding suggested that it was the best practice for managers to offer more information, more resources, more definition in a specific interaction; workers generally would feel obligated to respond with more work effort right way.

The employees—on average, 28.5 years old, at [work](#) nine months under the same manager, college educated (83.6 percent) and responsive to the cellphone survey (98.6 percent completion rate)—were compensated to reply by earning roughly \$1.58 USD for each valid cellphone response. They averaged 8.2 responses per participant.

More information: Zhenyu Liao et al. Give and take: An episodic

perspective on leader-member exchange., *Journal of Applied Psychology* (2018). [DOI: 10.1037/apl0000371](https://doi.org/10.1037/apl0000371)

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