Preventing toxic work environments through ethical leadership

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Dr. Gabi Eissa. Credit: San Diego State University

Recently published research from SDSU management professor, Dr. Gabi Eissa and University of Wisconsin—Eau Claire management professor, Dr. Rebecca Wyland, shows that "managers who demonstrate ethical leadership through two-way communication, positive reinforcement and emotional support not only mitigates this type of employee behavior, but also helps alleviate stress in the work environment."

Their research, published in *Applied Psychology: An International Review*, determined conflicts between the home and [work environment](#) causes stress for employees, who, in turn, engage in words and behavior meant to damage the reputation of their co-workers. "When family and life issues conflict with work situations, this can cause 'hindrance stress' which means job demands are viewed as obstacles to personal growth or goals," said Eissa. "Hindrance stress often depletes the [employee](#)'s ability to exercise [self-control](#) and they lash out with aggressive and undermining behavior toward their peers."

While it would be easy for supervisors to ignore the situation or to confront and punish employees for counter-productive behavior, their research shows that [ethical leadership](#) may prevent these types of outbursts from ever even happening.

"We define 'ethical leadership' as supervisors who demonstrate appropriate work conduct through their personal actions and those who engage employees by discussing their work-related worries and emotions," said Eissa. "Ethical leaders want to help employees respond positively to negative situations and they try to offer resources to help employees who may find themselves hitting a rough patch."

Eissa and Wyland surveyed 156 employees who worked at least 20 hours a week (focal employees) and one of their co-workers to determine how work-family conflict affected hindrance stress (can we define hindrance

stress?). They asked focal employees to measure work/family conflict stress, hindrance stress and the ethical leadership qualities of their management team. They then asked the co-workers a series of questions designed to measure social undermining activities.

"Once the data was merged, the results showed that hindrance stress—a specific type of stress—was a key factor that linked work-family conflict to social undermining," reported Eissa. "We also found less social undermining among employees in presence of ethical leadership as well as how and when work-family conflict led social undermining."

"Our conclusions may have implications for organizational policies, programs and training initiatives that are aimed at reducing work-family conflict and hindrance stress. This, of course, leads to less social undermining and a more positive, productive workplace," said Eissa. "Our findings may help organizations to understand the importance of having ethical leaders, but it takes commitment from their top leadership to make this a reality."

More information: Gabi Eissa et al, Work-Family Conflict and Hindrance Stress as Antecedents of Social Undermining: Does Ethical Leadership Matter?, *Applied Psychology* (2018). DOI: 10.1111/apps.12149

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