Workplace safety can worsen under bullying bosses, study finds

July 29 2019

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A new Portland State University study suggests that bullying bosses aren't just bad for employee morale and well-being—they can also be bad for workplace safety.

Liu-Qin Yang, an associate professor of industrial-organizational psychology in PSU's College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, and her co-authors surveyed airline pilots and manufacturing technicians and found that employees' safety behavior can be worsened when they're treated in ways that detract from their bonds to a work group.

The study was published in the *Journal of Applied Psychology*.

Yang said that bosses' behaviors can strengthen or weaken employees' sense of belonging to the work group by supporting or undermining their status within the group. Poor treatment from a boss can make employees feel that they're not valued by a group. As a result, they can become more self-centered, leading them to occasionally forget to comply with safety rules or overlook opportunities to promote a safer work environment.

Yang said this was especially true among employees who were more uncertain about their social standing within the group.

"When people are less sure about their strengths and weaknesses and their status within a group, they become more sensitive," she said. "They're more likely to respond negatively to their boss' bullying behaviors."

Yang said workplace safety is a critical issue—and more so in an environment where one employee's failure to behave safely can create circumstances where other people are likely to be injured.

"Organizations need to understand how important it is to curb leaders' bad behavior and to create positive team dynamics, so that there will be fewer negative safety consequences for employees or customers," she said. "It's really critical to manage such leader behavior, support victimized employees and prevent such issues."

Among the study's recommendations:

- Implement training programs that can improve leaders' skills in interacting with their employees, so as to provide feedback and discipline in ways that are neither offensive nor threatening.
- Promote a more civil and engaged work environment that strengthens social bonds between employees and creates a buffer against the negative consequences of their boss' bad behaviors
- Implement transparent performance evaluation processes so employees have less uncertainty about their social status in the workplace

More information: Liu-Qin Yang et al. Abusive supervision, thwarted belongingness, and workplace safety: A group engagement perspective., *Journal of Applied Psychology* (2019). DOI: 10.1037/apl0000436

Provided by Portland State University