

Management without morals can lead to employees' unethical behavior, study finds

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Matthew J. Quade, Ph.D., associate professor of management, Baylor University's Hankamer School of Business. Credit: Robert Rogers (Baylor Marketing & Communications)

An organization that projects an ethical face but whose managers fail to

respond to internal ethical situations sends mixed messages to its employees, which can lead to a lack of employees' moral courage and an increase in unethical behavior, according to a study led by a Baylor University researcher.

The study, "Management Without Morals: Construct Development and Initial Testing of Amoral Management," is published in the journal *Human Relations*. The research comprises three survey-based studies of 1,034 full- and part-time workers to answer the question of, "What happens when leaders do not respond to the ethical components of business situations?"

"I believe the key surprise finding is that in an ethical environment—or one that is thought to be ethical—amoral management is even more problematic for employees," said the study's lead researcher Matthew J. Quade, Ph.D., associate professor of management in Baylor University's Hankamer School of Business. "The amoral manager's lack of an ethical message is particularly ambiguous in an environment that is otherwise offering clear messages about ethical expectations for organizational members."

The study was split into sample groups in which the participants took surveys indicating their assessment of amoral management in their workplace. Study results revealed that "amoral management had a significant effect when ethical environment was high but had a weaker effect on moral courage when ethical environment was low."

"Despite being problematic, amoral management is believed to be quite common in organizations," Quade said. "The ill effects of amoral managers are made even worse when they operate in organizations that are thought to be ethical from the perspective of employees."

Defining amoral management

Although an amoral manager can be unethical, Quade said the researchers define an "amoral manager" as different from an "unethical manager."

"Amoral management—which is when a leader consistently does not respond to ethical situations—has a detrimental influence on employees," Quade said. "Employees who work for amoral managers have less moral courage, which results in their engaging in higher levels of [unethical behavior](#)."

Moral courage, he said, is needed when the person recognizes there is an objective danger in acting morally and it helps him/her to endure through the danger.

Examples of moral courage include a willingness to correct co-workers; adherence to policies or procedures, even in the face of peer pressure to do otherwise; and a willingness to do the right thing, even at a personal cost.

Lack of moral courage can lead to unethical behaviors such as employees discussing [confidential information](#) with unauthorized people, falsifying receipts to get greater reimbursements, damaging work property, taking property from work without permission, misusing company assets and resources; and saying or doing hurtful things to others purposefully.

"It is imperative for managers to be vocal about their expectations when it comes to ethics," Quade said. "When they fail to engage in situations that have ethical implications, employees suffer."

Preventing amoral management in the workplace

Amoral management could have damaging long-term effects on an otherwise ethical workplace environment. The study indicates that organizations can prevent amoral management by being proactive in their ethical training and setting of expectations for employees.

Key steps in preventing amoral management include:

- Organizations should realize that ethical environments alone do not prevent employees from behaving unethically. They need to be supported with leaders who engage when circumstances with ethical implications arise.
- When it comes to ethics, employees need consistent messages from their direct supervisors and the broader organization.
- Organizations should train supervisors to consistently and clearly engage employees regarding the ethical expectations of the organization and to address circumstances that have ethical implications.

The researchers conclude that "by introducing an amoral management measure, future research will be able to test the theoretical assumptions made by previous researchers and help managers recognize why leaders may default to amoral management and whether this leadership approach is effective or ineffective."

More information: Matthew J Quade et al. Management without morals: Construct development and initial testing of amoral management, *Human Relations* (2020). [DOI: 10.1177/0018726720972784](https://doi.org/10.1177/0018726720972784)

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