

When bosses are abusive, how employees interpret their motives makes a difference

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A new UBC Sauder School of Business study shows that depending on how employees understand their boss' motivation, employees can feel anger or guilt, and consequently, react differently to abusive supervision.

Former Apple CEO Steve Jobs was a famously harsh corporate leader, one who pushed his employees to extremes to achieve the company's lofty aims.

But while many aspiring leaders still believe that the "tough love" approach is effective, a new study from UBC Sauder shows that, even when abusive leadership is meant to push employees to new heights, it can land them in deep lows in the long term.

Abusive supervision—which includes behaviors like yelling at employees, giving them the silent treatment, or putting them down in front of their coworkers—has long been linked with psychological distress, increased turnover and decreased performance.

But a key question hadn't been properly examined: do employees respond differently when their supervisor's abuse is motivated by different reasons?

For the study, titled *The Whiplash Effect: The (Moderating) Role of Attributed Motives in Emotional and Behavioral Reactions to Abusive Supervision*, researchers conducted three studies on three continents.

For the first, which involved 1,000 soldiers and officers in the Chinese military, subordinates filled out surveys about the supervision they experienced, the emotions they felt, and how they responded.

The second was a laboratory experiment that involved 156 students and employees at a large American university. There, participants were given different roles as subordinates in a consulting firm, and were subjected to different forms of supervision—some abusive and some non-abusive—and were given hints about their supervisors' motivations.

They were also given the opportunity to participate in deviant behaviors

against the supervisor, or engage in more positive "organizational citizenship behaviors," or OCBs (helpful actions that go beyond an [employee](#)'s contract, such as assisting a co-worker with a project, or participating in workplace charity drives).

A third study had 325 employees and supervisors at a Swedish luxury car company fill out daily surveys for three weeks—for the subordinates, about the abusive supervision they experienced and the emotions they felt, and for the supervisors, about the OCBs and deviant behaviors they observed.

Across all three studies, the researchers found that when employees think their supervisors' abusive actions are motivated by a desire to inflict harm, they are more likely to feel angry.

When subordinates believe their leaders are prodding employees to improve performance, however, they are more likely to feel guilt.

"When you feel like your supervisor is pushing you really hard, it's abusive, and you feel angry. But when they want to motivate you and improve your performance, employees have a strong feeling of guilt," explains UBC Sauder Assistant Professor Lingtao Yu (he, him, his), who named the study after the Oscar-winning film *Whiplash*, which follows an abusive band teacher and a student he's pushing to extremes.

"They think, 'Maybe there is a gap between what I do and what they expect. Maybe there's room for me to improve.'"

Those different emotions, in turn, lead to different behaviors. Employees who feel their bosses are "out to get them" are more likely to engage in devious or destructive behaviors and less likely to engage in more positive organizational citizenship behaviors, or OCBs.

Those who feel their leaders are pushing them to do better are less likely to act deviously and more drawn to positive corporate behaviors.

"People feel there's something they've done, or that they haven't done enough, so it's not entirely attributed to the other person. They may take some responsibility," explains Professor Yu, who coauthored the study with University of Minnesota Professor Michelle Duffy.

"So, guilt will actually trigger more prosocial behaviors, because the employee wants to do something to rebuild the relationship with the supervisor."

The findings are especially important given that, according to previous research, a third of U.S. employees are estimated to experience abusive supervision, and 45 percent of Europeans can recall an instance when they were either the target of supervisory abuse or observed it.

The study also found people's feelings of guilt don't last, so Professor Yu emphasizes that while the results-driven form of abusive [supervision](#) can sometimes have short-term benefits, in the long run it simply doesn't pay—especially since abusive leadership can cost companies millions in lawsuits, health expenses, and productivity loss.

"Even if you have [good intentions](#), you still want to be more mindful about your leadership behavior—and there are many other tools you can use to stimulate your employees' performance," he says. "Abusive leadership should not be the one you choose."

More information: Lingtao Yu et al, The whiplash effect: The (moderating) role of attributed motives in emotional and behavioral reactions to abusive supervision., *Journal of Applied Psychology* (2020). [DOI: 10.1037/apl0000810](https://doi.org/10.1037/apl0000810)

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