

Supervisors focused on others' needs get 'benefit of the doubt' from employees, study shows

August 9 2021



Credit: CC0 Public Domain

Like beauty, fairness is in the eye of the beholder. In the workplace, whether or not we believe that a supervisor has treated us fairly depends on a number of factors, including motive, according to new research from the University of Notre Dame.

Employees evaluate the [fairness](#) of an interaction with an authority figure based on what researcher Cindy Muir (Zapata), associate

professor of management at Notre Dame's Mendoza College of Business, describes as [justice](#) criteria or rules. These include relying on decision-making processes that grant employees voice and are consistent among employees, ethical and free of bias; treating [team members](#) with dignity, respect and decency; providing them with truthful explanations; and allocating benefits according to their contributions to the organization.

Muir is lead author of the study "It's not only what you do, but why you do it: How managerial motives influence employees' fairness judgments," forthcoming in the *Journal of Applied Psychology*.

"We found that prosocially motivated supervisors—or those who focus on their employees' needs—are more likely to adhere to justice rules than those motivated by [self-interest](#)," Muir said. "This implies that employees may only care about motives insofar as they impact justice. However, employees also care about and rely on their impressions of their supervisors' motives as they think about their fairness. Compared with supervisors who are considered to be self-interested, those perceived to be prosocially motivated are regarded as fairer, even after accounting for how much they adhere to traditional justice best practices. And when justice is low, employees will give them the benefit of the doubt."

In other words, if a typically prosocial [supervisor](#) has an off day and commits a fairness misstep, employees are less likely to judge them as unfair.

"We talk about objective justice standards as if they are an easy thing for supervisors to live up to at all times in all situations," Muir said. "But supervisors are fallible human beings who, inadvertently or not, are likely to end up falling short. They might make decisions without granting employees voice, they might gloss over or fail to explain their

decisions, or they might engage in curt interactions. Our work shows that prosocial motives can help buffer the typical downsides associated with these missteps. In one of our studies, the prosocial effect is so strong that it seems to substitute for high justice."

Muir, along with co-authors Elad Sherf from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and Joseph Liu from Florida Gulf Coast University, conducted five studies in which they surveyed employed people with and without direct reports and one experimental study in which they manipulated ratings of authority figures' motives for justice as well as their adherence to the fairness best practices. More than 1,000 people participated across all six studies.

The team found that because employees rely on supervisor motives to determine how fairly they are treated, they tend to consider the supervisor behavior and prosocial motives together, such that, as long as the supervisor is seen as prosocially motivated, lower justice behavior does not negatively impact fairness judgments as much as one would expect.

They expected to find a similar, but opposite effect for supervisors whose justice efforts were motivated by self-interest, but the results were surprising.

"We assumed self-interest coupled with low justice behavior would elicit a stronger response from employees, but it did not," Muir said. "People do respond negatively, but we assumed there would be more outrage, that there might be a sense among employees that things would never get better, but we find that the response is no different than what you would expect from either self-interest or low justice separately.

"If we want people to feel fairly treated, we tend to focus on ensuring that our rules, policies and procedures follow the objective standards or

[best practices](#) we know to be regarded as fair," Muir said. "Of course, our work does not contradict this approach, but it does suggest that focusing solely on this kind of objective criteria for justice misses an important component of what makes employees feel fairly treated."

It can be easy to focus on objective behaviors and to lose sight of the importance of the motives that drive those behaviors. However, the researchers point out, because of the importance of motives, if supervisors and their organizations care about employees' perceptions of fairness, there is value in making sure supervisors' motivations are prosocial and not self-interested.

More information: Study pre-print: [mendoza.nd.edu/wp-content/uplo...nalAccept1-28-21.pdf](https://mendoza.nd.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/2021-08-21-nd-accept1-28-21.pdf)

Provided by University of Notre Dame

Citation: Supervisors focused on others' needs get 'benefit of the doubt' from employees, study shows (2021, August 9) retrieved 11 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2021-08-supervisors-focused-benefit-employees.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.