

Study explores how to reduce bad behavior at work

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People who can self-reflect and regulate their moral behavior are more likely to bounce back after a failure rather than deviate from their 'moral

compass' and misbehave, according to new research.

It is well known that people do not always act in accordance with their own standards regards what is right and wrong. Moral disengagement is a psychological concept that helps explain how people may routinize misbehavior, rule-breaking and wrongdoing without feeling guilty or seeing the need to make amends.

Moral disengagement can become a powerful, progressive and transformative process through which self-sanctions are gradually diminished until misbehavior is normalized and can be routinely performed with little concern for the consequences.

Published in the journal *Group & Organization Management*, this new study led by the University of East Anglia (UEA) in the UK and International Telematic University UNINETTUNO, Italy, focuses on how to reduce the power of [moral disengagement](#).

The researchers investigated the role of moral self-efficacy—a set of beliefs which individuals have about their capabilities to both self-reflect and self-regulate [moral behavior](#).

The first dimension refers to beliefs about a person's own ability to self-reflect on past moral failures and anticipate how to do better going forward. The second refers to beliefs in their capabilities to self-regulate moral behavior and do the right thing when tempted or under pressure.

The authors say the results show both moral self-efficacy dimensions lessen the possibility of misbehavior and wrongdoing becoming routine at work.

"Although self-efficacious individuals are in general more self-regulated and motivated to behave in line with their standards, this does not mean

they are morally infallible," said Dr. Roberta Fida, of UEA's Norwich Business School.

"However, we show that highly morally efficacious individuals are more likely to 'bounce back' after a failure, and learn from their mistakes, rather than routinise misbehavior and repeatedly deviate from their moral compass. Rather, they have the resources to restore their [moral compass](#), to mindfully re-engage morally and are therefore less likely to continue justifying and engaging in wrongdoing.

"For individuals with low moral self-efficacy, moral disengagement normalizes wrongdoings, so they can be routinely performed with little anguish. They are less aware of the internal and social forces that work in interrelated ways to disengage their [moral standards](#) and bypass their moral control system, making it difficult to mitigate or stop the process to prevent the thoughtless routinization of their misconduct."

Dr. Marinella Paciello, of UNINETTUNO University, said: "The results of this research broaden our understanding of how to prevent the routinization of wrongdoing at work by helping people develop and strengthen their moral self-efficacy.

"Organizations should create opportunities to reflect on the complexities of moral decision making, the mechanisms often at play in the justification of [wrongdoing](#) and the capabilities needed to master moral challenges."

The study was conducted with the support of the Italian National Institute for Insurance against Accidents at Work (INAIL). It involved 1308 Italian employees, who were surveyed three times over a three month period. They were asked to rate how often they had engaged in different behaviors, their level of agreement with a set of statements about different moral [disengagement](#) mechanisms and their perceived

capabilities to master moral challenges and reflect on their own moral failures.

'Withstanding Moral Disengagement: Moral Self-Efficacy as Moderator in Counterproductive Behavior Routinization' is published in *Group & Organization Management* on February 24.

More information: Withstanding Moral Disengagement: Moral Self-Efficacy as Moderator in Counterproductive Behavior Routinization, *Group & Organization Management*, 2022.

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