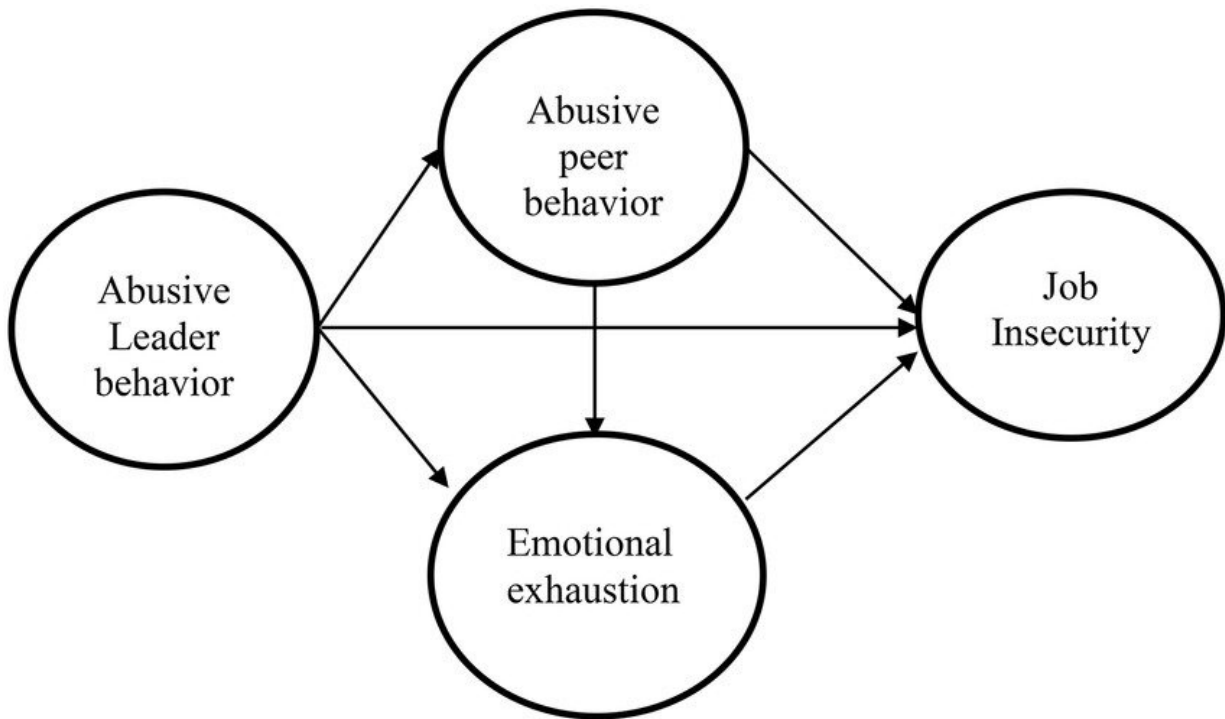


Horrible bosses cause 'race to the bottom,' study finds

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Research framework. Credit: *Frontiers in Psychology* (2022). DOI: 10.3389/fpsyg.2022.947258

A new study has found that hostile behaviors from "abusive" bosses can lead to co-workers adopting similar behavior, leading to a toxic atmosphere of insecurity and exhaustion in the workplace.

The study, carried out by Anglia Ruskin University (ARU) in the UK as well as researchers in Pakistan, China and the United States, surveyed 323 [employees](#) about their experiences of abusive behavior from superiors and peers, and also their job security and level of emotional exhaustion.

Examples of hostile behavior in the workplace considered by the researchers included use of inappropriate language, [sexual harassment](#), outbursts, humiliation and misuse of power.

Researchers uncovered a significant association between abusive leader behavior and abusive behavior from co-workers. Of the 323 people involved in the study, 68% who had experienced hostile behavior from a leader had also witnessed interpersonal aggression from the general workforce.

The study also reported an association between experiencing hostile behavior from leaders and emotional exhaustion and [job insecurity](#), suggesting that mistreatment from peers can damage employees' confidence in their job and their role within an organization.

Of those who had experienced hostile behavior from a leader, 35% had faced abusive peer behavior themselves, 52% had suffered emotional exhaustion and 77% had concerns about job security.

Co-author Dr. Nadeem Khalid, Senior Lecturer in Entrepreneurship and Strategy at ARU, says that "it's clear from our study that hostile behavior at the top of a workplace is not only likely to be damaging to individuals in terms of their emotional exhaustion and job security, it is also likely to encourage other employees to act in unethical ways, creating a toxic environment across the entire organization."

"This mirroring of negative behavior may have its roots in the reciprocal

relationship between leaders and employees. An employee who is mistreated may feel the only way to get ahead in their job is to treat others as they have been treated themselves—this may not always be intentional but it results in a race to the bottom among employees and damages job security and leads to stress and exhaustion."

"Previous studies have shown that abusive behavior from leaders is associated with a lack of commitment from employees, and has a negative effect on emotional well-being. Our study suggests that the situation could be exacerbated by the negative behavior of general workers as well as the leader."

The research was published in *Frontiers in Psychology*.

More information: Miao Li et al, Impact of abusive leader behavior on employee job insecurity: A mediating roles of emotional exhaustion and abusive peer behavior, *Frontiers in Psychology* (2022). [DOI: 10.3389/fpsyg.2022.947258](https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.947258)

Provided by Anglia Ruskin University

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