

Employee surveys may miss out on uncovering toxic leadership practices: Study

September 18 2023



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Standardized and overly simplistic questionnaires are only scratching the surface of what employees think of their leaders, according to new research from Binghamton University's School of Management (SOM),

and negative behavior may be slipping through the cracks.

As a result, the research finds, organizations may be missing out on critical information that could be keeping toxic leaders in positions of power.

"Instead of capturing actual leader behaviors, ratings might simply reflect whether a person likes their leader," said Mengying Li, a Leadership and Organization Science doctoral student who conducted the research with Assistant Professor Bryan Acton. "People may just generally experience more of the positive stuff and are less likely to recall specifically negative leadership behaviors, especially if they're overall happy in their workplace."

Employee questionnaires have long proven useful in most leadership studies, but the SOM researchers found participants in such surveys often rely on their long-term memory to rank harmful leadership practices. They turn to their broad perceptions of how a manager performs the job, and critical leadership missteps may be overlooked if such negative encounters are few and far between.

[Li's and Acton's paper](#) was part of a larger set of studies involving fellow SOM faculty and other researchers, all supported by a grant from the U.S. Army Research Institute. Li recently presented the research to the Academy of Management, which placed it on its "Best Papers" list out of about 3,000 submissions.

The research uncovered a need for more critical thinking when companies assess leadership performance, Acton and Li said. Their findings could be used to help organizations and companies, even the military, make decisions about promotions or salary increases, which could affect employee turnover or whether leaders who engage in toxic management practices remain in their roles.

"There's a big difference between how people perceive a leader to be doing and how effective that leader truly is in that role," said Acton, whose expertise centers on [organizational behavior](#) and leadership. "If we are promoting the wrong people, keeping bad [leaders](#) in their positions and making [important decisions](#) based on an overly simplistic approach to leadership studies, that could be a problem."

To uncover how memory impacts the perception of toxic versus ethical leadership practices, the SOM researchers began by soliciting feedback from 200 participants whose occupations ranged from sales, accounting, web development and engineering.

Participants were questioned about negative leadership scenarios such as "my manager publicly belittles subordinates" or "my manager has explosive outbursts" as part of the research. In response, about 10 percent reported experiencing negative sentiments toward their supervisor.

Most participants described something positive, such as saying their supervisor gives back to their community, for example.

Since they didn't seem to dwell on any specific negative incidents, Li said, that could mean employees depended on generalized impressions of their supervisor to form their opinions.

If there's one key takeaway for managers at companies, Acton said, it's that analyzing individual leader behaviors and asking employees to answer more pointed questions in these surveys are more likely to allow for meaningful improvements in leadership.

"We need to think more critically about the way we measure negative forms of leadership because people are saying bad [leadership](#) is not happening," Acton said. "If I'm perceiving the leader as good, does that

mean the leader is actually doing well? We should be careful about the conclusions we draw based on a person's perception of a leader."

More information: Mengying Li et al, Emotional Tone Embedded in Leadership Items and Memory Processing, *Academy of Management Proceedings* (2023). [DOI: 10.5465/AMPROC.2023.187bp](https://doi.org/10.5465/AMPROC.2023.187bp)

Provided by Binghamton University

Citation: Employee surveys may miss out on uncovering toxic leadership practices: Study (2023, September 18) retrieved 28 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2023-09-employee-surveys-uncovering-toxic-leadership.html>

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