

Having a bad boss makes you a worse employee, study finds

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If your boss stomps and yells, criticizes you, and then proceeds to take the credit for your work—even it is an isolated incident—it can take a profound toll on employee well-being and performance. But despite the

many years of research, the precise mechanisms through which bad leadership impacts employees' performance remain a subject of interest.

In a [new study](#), first published online Oct. 30 in *Group & Organization Management*, an international group of researchers, led by Stevens Institute of Technology and University of Illinois Chicago, offer a novel explanation of the cognitive factors through which abusive leadership degrades [employee](#) performance—and helps explain why some employees are more vulnerable than others to the negative impact of abusive bosses.

"Thankfully, abusive supervision isn't too common, but when it happens it leaves employees far less likely to take the initiative and work to improve [business practices](#)," said Howie Xu, an author of the study and an assistant professor of management at Stevens. "We wanted to understand the cognitive factors behind that effect—and ask how companies can shield their employees from the negative impact of bad bosses."

Xu's team surveyed employees and supervisors from 42 different South Korean companies, along with hundreds of US students, to explore the ways in which abusive supervision impacts "taking-charge" behavior by employees. Subjects were then ranked according to whether they actively seek positive opportunities for promotion and advancement or take a more preventative approach that prioritizes safety and job security.

"We theorized that both the drive to obtain rewards (promotion, bonuses) and the drive to avoid punishments (maintain job security) would shape the way employees respond to abusive bosses," Xu explained.

But that's not what Xu and his team found. Rather, they found that

employees who prioritize [career advancement](#) are strongly affected by abusive leadership while employees who prioritized job security remained just as likely to take charge after experiencing abusive supervision. Employees who prioritize advancement tend to hunker down and reduce taking-charge behavior after experiencing abusive supervision.

"That's a very surprising finding," Xu said. "We found clear evidence that the signal from abusive leadership is much more salient to employees who care about advancement than it is to employees who care about security."

One possible explanation, Xu explained, is that ambitious employees may perceive an abusive [boss](#) as having direct control over whether they will receive bonuses or opportunities for promotion. By contrast, bad bosses may be seen as having less [direct control](#) over firing decisions, which often require ratification by HR teams or more senior managers.

That's an important finding, because it suggests that organizations seeking to mitigate the impact of bad leadership should focus on empowering employees and making them feel valued and appreciated, rather than simply reassuring them their jobs are safe. "If a leader slips into abusive behavior, our research suggests that they should not only apologize, but also work to reassure employees of their value to the organization," Xu said.

Unexpectedly, the variation in employee response to abusive supervision was broadly constant across both the Korean and US populations. "We think of these countries as culturally distinct, but there was no real difference in how employees responded to abusive bosses," Xu said. "That might reflect the effect of globalization—or might be a sign that this is a universal trait that exists across many different cultures."

Researchers from Texas Tech University, Hunan University and Seoul National University also contributed to the paper.

More information: Ui Young Sun et al, What Does Leaders' Abuse Mean to Me? Psychological Empowerment as the Key Mechanism Explaining the Relationship Between Abusive Supervision and Taking Charge, *Group & Organization Management* (2023). [DOI: 10.1177/10596011231204387](https://doi.org/10.1177/10596011231204387)

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