

Q&A: The rise of younger, less experienced bosses in the workplace

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If you're older than your boss, you're not alone.

Supervisors are traditionally associated with higher [status](#) markers such

as age, education and tenure than their subordinates. But it's increasingly common to see those dynamics reversed. This is called status incongruence, and it's the focus of a [new study](#) from the University of Washington that was recently published in the *Journal of Applied Psychology*.

Co-author Jessica Huisi Li, assistant professor of management and organization in the UW Foster School of Business, spoke with UW News about how status incongruence impacts [employee](#) perceptions of the promotion system.

What is the meaning of the term status incongruence, and what trends have been happening in this area recently?

Jessica Huisi Li: We have some traditional status markers, such as age, education and tenure in an organization, which are traditionally associated with bosses. Status incongruence means that subordinates have higher status markers relative to their bosses—meaning the subordinates are older, more educated or have a longer tenure.

Status incongruence happens because organizations are relying less on seniority-based promotion systems. They want to promote people who are capable. They want to encourage meritocracy, where status is based on ability, so we're seeing more and more bosses who are younger than their employees. People are also retiring later due to [financial difficulties](#) so we're seeing more [older employees](#) in the workplace compared to previous decades.

This phenomenon of status incongruence is increasingly prevalent. In 2020, 40% of workers in the United States had a boss younger than them. This number has gone up from 38% in 2014 and 34% in 2012.

Managers are also 45 years old on average, which is younger than 50% of their direct reports.

What did you learn about employee response to status incongruence?

JL: In this paper, we look at one possible consequence of the situation: employees perceiving the promotion system as unfair. That's very important because it influences people's work attitudes and behaviors. If they perceive the system as unfair, they will not work with the same energy and excitement. They're also more likely to quit.

Whether people see status incongruence as unfair really depends on the supervisor's competence. We find that when the supervisor is highly capable and perceived as such, then status incongruence doesn't matter that much.

When a supervisor isn't highly capable, you would think people would see the promotion system as unfair. What we found instead is that people will use the supervisor's status markers—such as age, education and tenure—to persuade themselves and justify the system as fair. In this way, status incongruence has a stronger effect on employees when a supervisor is less competent.

It's not a rational process. It's not that people truly believe these status markers make leaders deserving of a supervisory position. It's a process we call system justification. This theory is that when people are in a flawed system, they feel a psychological discomfort about acknowledging it as flawed. People will try to find any reason to justify the situation as fair. When employees don't have other employment alternatives, then their motivation to justify the current situation is even stronger.

When you give people power or give people alternatives, they suddenly become very clear-minded. They can see that their leader is not capable and that having a certain age, education or tenure doesn't make this person a leader.

What are the major ways this influences the workplace?

JL: Organizations sometimes create and manage teams that are incongruent in status. Those organizations must proactively convey to employees that their leader—although they lack traditional status markers—is capable of the task.

This will help employees see the promotion system as fair, which creates stronger motivation and makes employees less likely to quit their jobs. If leaders lack those traditional status markers in relation to their direct reports, they must show their employees that they were promoted based on merit. If [managers](#) can do this, status incongruence shouldn't be a problem.

If the manager is incapable of doing the work, maybe having those traditional markers will help a bit—but we don't want to encourage companies to hire and promote incapable leaders.

We also see this as a kind of warning to employees whose lack of alternatives make them very reliant on the system. This is especially relevant nowadays when the economy is weakening workers' power. In this case, employees are more likely to justify a flawed system. That is to their own disadvantage. It's better for their career long-term if they try to channel the energy into increasing their competence and marketability so that they can find jobs elsewhere.

More information: Huisi (Jessica) Li et al, My boss is younger, less educated, and shorter tenured: When and why status (in)congruence influences promotion system justification., *Journal of Applied Psychology* (2023). [DOI: 10.1037/apl0001086](https://doi.org/10.1037/apl0001086)

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