

Research explores impacts of abusive supervision

8 February 2018, by Brittany Magelssen

A recent Naveen Jindal School of Management study examined the damaging impact abusive supervision has in the workplace including the ways employees respond with retaliatory behavior, which lowers productivity.

Abusive supervision refers to subordinates' perceptions of supervisors engaging in the sustained hostile verbal and nonverbal behaviors, excluding physical contact. It can affect employees' well-being, health and work performance.

Research has shown that abusive supervision affects more than 13 percent of U.S. workers. Costs incurred by corporations because of absenteeism, [health care costs](#) and lost productivity has been estimated at \$23.8 billion annually.

"Abusive supervision in the workplace is quite a prevalent phenomenon, and employees should not have to suffer from this," said Dr. Junfeng Wu, assistant professor of Organizations, Strategy and International Management.

"Our study shows that there are certain costs associated with [abusive supervisors](#) and even the leaders who engage in abusive supervision do not benefit from it," he said. "We want to convey this important message to organization leaders in order to have them stop these kinds of behaviors."

The study, published online in the *Journal of Business Ethics*, used a statistical technique called meta-analysis. It combines the results of findings from 79 previous studies to get a systematic understanding of the relationship between abusive supervision and subordinates' retaliatory responses.

The researchers found that even though the immediate source of injustice is the supervisor, abused employees perceive injustice from both their supervisor and organization so extend their

scope of retaliation to both.

"It will cause problems for the managers who engage in abusive supervision and, overall, it will threaten the well-being of the organization because the employees will engage in organizational deviance, such as arriving to work late or having low productivity," Wu said.

He and his co-authors also found that those who experience abusive supervision tend to emulate such abusive behaviors and even bully their co-workers.

"Employees see their leader as a role model in the workplace and they tend to follow suit," Wu said. "This is a social learning effect."

Impacts of Cultural Values

The researchers also explored whether the impact of abusive supervision on employees' perceptions of justice and deviant behavior differ based on [cultural values](#).

Power distance is a national cultural value that captures the extent to which people tolerate power differences in interpersonal relationships.

In countries with lower power distance, such as the U.S. and much of Europe, people tend to feel that power should be equally distributed. Deviance to both the [supervisor](#) and to the organization is stronger in lower power distance countries.

In countries with higher power distance, such as China and Japan, people tend to have more tolerance for the inequalities of power distributions.

"That does not mean that leaders can engage in abusive supervision," Wu said. "Employees still feel it is unjust and they engage in deviance behavior as well. It's just not as strong."

International Implications

Wu said the cross-cultural aspects of this study have important implications for international companies.

For example, if a manager from a higher power distance country is assigned to work in a lower power distance country, he should be aware that employees will not tolerate abusive supervision behaviors due to their lower [power distance](#) orientation values.

The study recommends that organizations use leadership development programs, coach supervisors and pay more attention to [employee](#) feedback. Wu said these may help reduce the occurrence of abusive [supervision](#) in the workplace.

More information: Haesang Park et al. Abusive Supervision and Employee Deviance: A Multifoci Justice Perspective, *Journal of Business Ethics* (2017). [DOI: 10.1007/s10551-017-3749-2](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-017-3749-2)

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