

Study: Authentic leaders can address workplace bullying

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When it comes to addressing workplace bullying, the solution might rest in training bosses to be more in tune with how their management styles impact colleagues, according to a recent study by Western Ph.D. Nursing student Edmund Walsh.

Along with Nursing professor Carol Wong, Walsh led a study to assess the relationship between a manager's 'authentic [leadership skills](#)' and [workplace bullying](#) among experienced registered [nurses](#). The random sample of 478 nurses from Alberta, Nova Scotia and Ontario showed a direct effect between a manager's [leadership](#) awareness and the prevalence of bullying in the workplace.

With the nurses themselves, Walsh's study found workplace bullying impacted their physical and mental health in a negative way, led to high job stress and even higher levels of burnout. But the impacts went beyond the nurses.

While found in most professions, the negative impacts of workplace bullying can radiate up and down the health-care system. In terms of the organization, [workplace bullying](#) was associated with decreased productivity. For patients, it was

shown to cause a decrease in quality of care.

"I don't want to give the impression this is every day in the (nursing) profession," said Walsh, who worked two years as [nurse](#) in general surgery/orthopedic surgery after graduating from Memorial University. "But more work needs to be done in considering the negative consequences. Could the amount of bullying be lower? For sure."

Walsh, who will present his research next month at the International Nursing Administration Research Conference in Georgia, said his findings may inform strategies to address bullying, as well as the hiring, training and evaluation of managers.

One of those strategies endorsed by the study is the concept of authentic leadership.

At its core, Walsh explained, authentic leadership is a back-to-basic approach to leadership that emphasizes building legitimacy through honest relationships with followers. Generally, authentic leaders have a self-awareness of their own strengths, weaknesses and values; an openness to opposing viewpoints and fair-minded consideration of them; a willingness to share their own thoughts and beliefs; and a positive ethical foundation.

Authentic leadership is a growing area of study in academic research on leadership.

Walsh continued, "Does my manager know his/her strengths and weaknesses and how they impact other people? Do they know how they are perceived by others? When making decisions, do they take everyone's opinion into account or are they just seeking the opinion of those who are like minded? Do they act in congruence with moral and ethical values or are they swayed by the organization or a senior leader?"

Walsh's study was not meant as an indictment of nursing, but as an opportunity to explore the

possibilities of improving the profession.

"We know a lot about the consequences – we know it leads to a lot of things. What we need to know is, what leads to the bullying? What increases or decreases that?" he said. "We can study the effects all day, but unless we know what causing it, there can't be meaningful policy changes."

Walsh sees the possibility of including workplace bully awareness, as well as authentic leadership training, into nursing education.

"Workplace bullying is incongruent with nursing as a caring profession. More action is necessary to ensure nurses can go to work without fear of being subjected to negative behaviours," he said. "Managers are well-positioned to positively influence nursing workplaces. Leading in an authentic way may help create a work environment where bullying behaviours are unsustainable."

Provided by University of Western Ontario

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